

## **Another Reason to Stress About Stress**

**By Phil Wyzik**

Most employers realize that it's to their advantage to assure that their workplace is free of health threats to their employees. Whether it's the fear of OSHA fines, high workers compensation claims, or lost productivity, it makes strong business sense to shape the work environment with an eye to health and safety. Can the same be said for psychological threats to health?

Just a few months ago, Mental Health America released a report following their two year project with the Faas Foundation about the psychological impacts of the nation's workplaces. "Mind the Workplace" gives a troubling message to employers and supervisors in large and small organizations alike. It makes the point that workplace stress has both negative health consequences for the employee but also negative business results for the enterprise.

Mental Health America began under a different name in 1909 and was started by a Yale graduate who probably suffered from bipolar illness, though that term wasn't around back then. Their mission is about helping all Americans experience health and wellness by living mentally healthier lives. After all, mental health is every bit as important as physical health.

"Mind the Workplace" reports their analysis of 17,000 surveys from workers in a wide variety of employment settings. A 20 question online tool was used to assess some of the possible causes of stress on the job and the influence this may have on the person's health.

Psychologists explain stress as a transactional process; it's about an individual coping with their environment. It's triggered when there is a perceived threat in that environment. Human beings seem hardwired for this because our survival as a species depended upon addressing threats successfully. For our ancestors, even if they only thought they saw a lion in the tall grass, it was critical that their mind and body reacted as if the predator was really there. For both our early brothers and sisters and for us today, stress is full-system response – body and mind – but the high-gear response to threats was designed to be short-term. Either the threat passed, or it killed them.

It turns out that US employees may perceive their workplace as a 'threat-place', a setting that's not fair, not focused on the right things, unsupportive and unhealthy emotionally. Consider a few of the MHA's results:

- 81% of employees think that job stress affects their relationships with family and friends, at least sometimes.
- 63% think that this stress produces unhealthy behaviors like drinking or crying.
- 63% think that their workplace is unhelpful or hostile such that they want to work alone.
- 66% don't trust their coworkers or team to support their work activities.
- 17% believe that their company appropriately deals with employees who don't do their job.

From a mental health point of view, environments of high stress are like psychological petri dishes; they are perfect places to grow nasty things. Depression, for example, can be linked to

someone's disconnection from meaningful relationships, work or values. Many people make all these connections at work. Similarly, substance abuse is often the first place people turn for inoculation from alienation and relief from toxic stress, the perception that pressures and problems will never let up.

Mental health problems can be a forerunner of physical health challenges, and vice versa. Today in the US, "diseases of despair" (suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse) are the 6<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death, according to a 2017 report from the Trust for America's Health.

While these workplace phenomena can have significant consequences for the employee and their family, the entire business suffers as well. The MHA report states that 71% of respondents spend time thinking about or actively looking for another job, and that same number speak poorly about their company to others. Job stress in the environment causes 79% to have concentration difficulties, at least sometimes. Thirty-five percent say they always miss 3-5 days of work per month due to workplace stress. This obviously hurts productivity, customer service and the bottom line.

To be fair, 17,000 respondents from a nation of roughly 250 million adults is not a telling sample. Still, the MHA document has parallels with work done by the Gallup organization and others over many decades that consistently shows a pattern of high disengagement in the US labor force.

Instead of being quick to dismiss "Mind the Workplace," employers might consider a few steps in their strategic human resource activities:

First, they can read the report at [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net) and arm themselves with more concepts relevant to promoting the psychological health and engagement of their staff. They might try to use all or some of the survey questions and compare their results to the ones in the report.

Second, they may continue to learn about employee engagement and the management practices that create those highly productive workers and teams. Such steps might not cost much but it's likely that changing the social environment of the workplace stands to bring substantial benefits to everyone. Even a cursory look at the famous Gallup Q12 framework teaches that giving employees clarity, proper tools, opportunities for growth, and some praise and appreciation stands to yield significant returns.

Third, while they may not be able to do anything about the job stress that comes with today's productivity standards, sales quotas, quality metrics or other business necessities, they can identify and ferret out avoidable stress like unfair practices, hostile supervisors, or behaviors that destroy teamwork. They do well to understand that programs like Employee Assistance services or health promotion features at work can do much to mitigate the unavoidable threats that come with work. The expectations of the employer don't have to be compromised, but an interpersonally toxic workplace is not the only way to achieve them.

*Phil Wyzik, MA, is CEO of Monadnock Family Services in Keene.*