

Manage Job Stress & Overwork for Mind-Body Health

Stress a new disease of the modern world: Why?

When recalling the days in school in the 60s and 70s, a thought came to mind; the word stress was not in the vocabulary of the students. "I am stressed" has now become a common expression amongst children and young adults in schools, colleges, and in the corporate world. In medical terms, stress is a real issue and not just a social expression. The fierce competition to excel and be ahead of the pack starts at the lower grades in India because available spots for the school are limited and the financial stakes for parents high in the private schools. The study time keeps getting longer with each passing school year, leaving no time for leisure, sports, activity, and adequate sleep. The competitive streak and stress does not let up and is a constant companion of the young adult at the workplace in the competitive private corporate world.

The private corporations, especially multinationals, demand the employees stay engaged 24/7, perpetually connected to their screens and smartphones. The precious little leisure time which young adults do get to Rest, Repair, and Rejuvenate gets squandered away engaged with the social media and late-night parties further compounding the stress with sleep loss (Social jet lag).

The culture of high tech and financial corporations celebrate the idea of overwork to the point of reverence, disregarding employee's physical, and mental health. The expression "I am so swamped." is the badge of honor for the hustling young workers who are in constant competition to get ahead. Unfortunately, most of these young employees never get an expert insight on the consequences of overwork and social jet lag in the long term productivity, mental and physical health.

Commercial fast and junk food and unbalanced lifestyle with feeding extending 14-16 hours, poor sleep and physical inactivity are the new normal for the modern city dweller. The health consequences of stress, overwork, and food lifestyle imbalance are sadly apparent as the average age of onset of Type2 diabetes has dropped to 35-40 years and that of heart attacks to 40-45 years amongst city dwellers of India.

Causes of Work-related stress

Humans, in general, revere the hard work, because productive hard work is uplifting. However, there is a difference between productive and creative hard work which makes one perceive the progress versus unproductive work with no feeling of accomplishment. Most people at heart are very much aware of the simple difference in the two situations. While most humans are aware of such paradox; they fail to gather the courage to change the course. The feeling of helplessness (not being in control) becomes the biggest reason for stress. Some common causes of work-related stress are:

- Long work hours which go late into the night with no leisure time to recuperate.

- Work overload with consistent time deadlines.
- Job insecurity
- Lack of autonomy, permeating the culture of subservience
- Intellectually unengaging, unchallenging work.
- Lack of support with poor communication and pervasive culture of exclusion.
- Imbalance of effort versus reward.
- A poor work environment that is unclean, noisy, and poorly lighted.
- Perpetual night shift work with no breaks- Night shift workers who eat late and sleep at ungodly hours day after day develop obesity, Metabolic syndrome (prediabetes), and Type2 diabetes within few months on the job.

How does one know he/ she is under stress

Harvard Medical school outlined the physical, mental, and social signs of being under stress or work pressure as follows:

- One turns to addictions such as alcohol and smoking.
- Productivity begins to drop --A student or an employee is under stress if he/she is not able to retain learned information, and has the feeling he/she is not making much progress. The research has shown that those who work over 70 hours/week do not get more work done as compared to those who work 55 hours. Compared to American work culture, the Europeans work culture believes in the value of shorter and smarter work hours to enhance productivity. The American multinationals carry the notoriety of overworking their foreign work visa employees for ungodly hours.
- A constant feeling of sleep deprivation and day time fatigue-The long workdays ending late night every day do not let the mind unwind for a deep rejuvenating sleep. The quality of sleep is further compromised if long workday ends with late dinner. Food in the stomach raises the core temperature of the body by a degree (in Ayurveda called Jathar Agni)for 2-3 hours. For deep rejuvenating sleep, the core temperature must come down by a degree. The late eaters invariably are poor sleepers. For the deep sleep at night, the evening meal should be consumed before 8 PM. The sleep hormone melatonin secretion begins at 9 PM, so scientifically the ideal time to sleep is 10-11 PM.
- Depression, irritability, anxiety, and mood disorders-These disorders are more common in the students and employees who put in more than 12-14 hours of studying or work every day with no time for good sleep and leisure activity or unwinding. The body requires 10-12 hours for rest, repair, and rejuvenate to sustain optimal physical and mental health.
- Excess of stress hormones--Overwork with no rest and lack of sleep increases the level of stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine (adrenalin) in the body. Adrenaline is a flight and fright hormone

which helps save a living being from a threatening situation. However, consistently high adrenaline level from overwork and insufficient sleep cause high blood pressure and faster heart rate. High adrenalin levels do not let an individual wind down for a restful deep sleep. The excess of cortisol and adrenalin together produce many adverse health effects such as:

- a) Lack of focus and concentration for a task.
- b) Insomnia or interrupted sleep
- c) Abdominal obesity- Wider waist circumference from an excess of intra-abdominal fat. The abdominal obesity puts the individual at high risk for Metabolic syndrome, High Blood pressure, Type2 diabetes, and Heart disease.
- d) Loss of Libido and Infertility in both males and females
- e) Anger, hostility, mood disorders, and depression

Simple strategies for promoting good mental and physical health(Workers and Organizations):

- Protect your sleep hours- One cannot make 14-18 hours days, their long term daily routine. It may be alright if this is done once or twice a week, allowing the body to catch up. The body is good at catching up deficit sleep but chronic lack of sleep day after day cannot be caught up. A meta-analysis from several scientific studies has shown that chronic lack of sleep as little as 1-2 hours of less sleep will cause an increase of 10-15 kg of body weight. Night shift workers are known to rapidly gain weight around their belly within six months of starting the night work routine. These workers have a high incidence of Type2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. In this respect, those who perpetually eat late and sleep late are no different from shift workers. They end up precisely with similar medical problems. The obesity, Type diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease epidemics are the result of self-induced night shift worker syndrome.
- Use your downtime (such as mealtime, commute time, etc.) to unwind, free from the distraction of screens and phones. Instead, connect with your surroundings – nature, people, relaxing book, good conversation, pleasant music, mindful eating, and relaxing to refresh the mind. It is heartwarming to see that design of new workplaces by the progressive startup companies in places like Chennai and Bangalore. They are paying attention to the ambiance of the workplace, making these open, pulling in nature, interactive and stress-free. The new generation of young corporate leaders must follow the lead to make workplaces healthy and more friendly to minimize stress and enhance productivity.
- Take small breaks from work- The proposed stress-free Work-Break balance is 52 consecutive minutes of work with 17 mins of a break. These 17 minutes of recess are to converse/ interact with colleagues, stroll outdoors, call family and friends for a pleasant leisurely chat (of course, cut off a negative conversation). The modern concept of open office spaces has taken this Work- Break philosophy into account. Take 5-7 minutes to stretch your back and neck, and sprint 200 steps in

your own desk space. Back ache, neck ache are the common musculoskeletal disorders amongst young workers who stare long hours into the screen without taking any breaks.

- Learn Time Management skills- Formulate and maintain a structured work schedule. Set priorities. Keep desk clean with paperwork or computer data in order. A desk piled up with paperwork or disorganized computer data is a sign of disorder, stress, and chaos.
- Create a robust social support system - Select one or two individuals amongst colleagues, friends, or family members, who you can trust for sincere advice and emotional support in time of need. (that requires that you have to drop your ego). That sheds the weight off the mind. If at the end of the day there is the peace of mind and good night sleep, you have achieved the goal of nipping the stress in the bud.
- Cultivate hobbies and interest - reading a book, playing a sport, listening to music, watching a relaxing movie, or show for leisure. Keep connected with family and friends. Loneliness is the most significant stress in itself.
- Practice the art of acceptance and not resistance- Resistance always prolongs the mental struggle. When we resist, we empower the other party. Fear of losing is usually behind opposing behavior. The attitude of acceptance and appreciation generates positive energy of peace, calm, influence, and happiness. To be able to exercise the power of acceptance, one has to cultivate self-esteem and self-confidence. That comes when one approves of his/her own behavior.
- Cultivate healthy eating, sleeping, and activity behaviors
(Refer to the section of Holistic Meal and Balanced Lifestyles on the website).

CORPORATE AND ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR MINIMIZING WORKPLACE STRESS:

- Create a healthy physical environment with proper ventilation, adequate lighting, minimal noise, and good sanitation.
- Promote a Culture of Inclusion and not that of exclusion, which is a significant workplace stressor.
- Remove the fear of mistakes to promote learning and good work ethics (Deming's philosophy). Fear is the most significant stressor.
- Promote job security via career development, on the job training and mentoring.
- Reward good work.
- Organize informal social gathering and recreational activities to break the barriers amongst management and staff. Encourage family participation.

- Allocate flexible hours considering family needs to cultivate staff loyalty.

References:

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