Stressed Out

Burnout does more than harm employees' health—it hurts your bottom line.

Interview by Donna M. Owens

As a longtime family physician, Dr. David Posen has often heard stories from patients who were frustrated, depressed or overwhelmed by their jobs.

"It made me want to call their employers and say, 'Stop killing this man or woman!' " says the counselor and stress expert based in Ontario, Canada. "The people are different, the details vary, but the theme is always the same: Workplaces are making people sick."

That premise drives the best-selling author's fourth book, *Is Work Killing You? A Doctor's Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress* (House of Anansi Press, 2013).

Posen recently talked to *HR Magazine* about the biology of stress and shared tips for preventing it. He also explained what he calls the top three workplace stressors: volume, velocity and abuse.

You've written a lot about stress. Why this latest book?

This is a book of advocacy. I didn't want to write just from the standpoint of how to cope with stress in the workplace—the goal is to stop making people sick in the first place.

It's great that companies have EAPs [employee assistance programs] that offer treatment to stressed-out employees, but how about addressing the issue from the front end instead of the back? The book is meant to encourage systemic changes.

David Posen

Are workplaces more stressful than in decades past?

Yes. Stress—not just in the workplace but overall—is a huge problem in the U.S. and Canada. It is costing the American economy hundreds of billions of dollars each year in lost productivity and health care expenses.

It started in the 1990s with the first wave of downsizing due to the global recession and new technology. Companies trimmed the fat, and the so-called lucky survivors were asked to do more with less.

Can you explain what you mean by calling "volume" a stressor?

Volume refers to the amount of work. In general, workloads have increased while the number of people available to do the work has decreased. When people are working longer hours, they have less time for self-care. They may miss meals, skip exercise and lose sleep.

Stress triggers an increase in the hormone cortisol. Over sustained periods, that makes people tired and less resilient in coping with further stress, causing difficulty with problem-solving and creative thinking.

Explain "velocity" in workplace terms.

That's the pace with which work has increased. Technology is one reason behind higher work velocity; another is increased expectations, some of which are unrealistic. You're expected to keep up. There are tighter deadlines. Meanwhile, bosses, colleagues, management and customers have become more impatient: "I sent you the e-mail 10 minutes ago. Why haven't I heard from you yet?"

If everyone's amping up the speed, pressure increases, as well. It's not sustainable.

You also indicate that workplace abuse is rampant.

That's the elephant in the room. Harassment and intimidation, especially by bosses, has become increasingly commonplace. People feel a sense of psychological and physical vulnerability when someone is intimidating, belittling or threatening them. It's hard to concentrate and do good work.

Besides referring people to EAPs, how can HR mitigate stress?

HR professionals must make a health case and a business case to upper management. They are the employee advocates in the best position to report on what's happening on the ground.
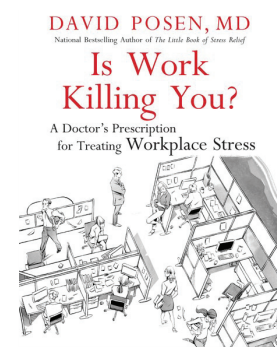
While that may be easier to do in an organization with 50 employees than in one with 5,000, HR people generally know if they're not getting the full value from workers due to stress. When you push people too hard, too fast and too long, you decrease efficiency. You kill their energy, spirit and morale. All of that affects the bottom line.

HR professionals may not be in a position to make organizationwide decisions, but they can give advice. They should be circumspect and diplomatic, and they must have the numbers to prove how workers are being affected by burnout. This isn't about benevolence; it's a business decision.

So how do you prevent stress?

It's a shared responsibility. Workplaces need to address and resolve sources of stress in the organization. Employees must learn coping strategies and good self-management, such as getting enough sleep, regular exercise and relaxation.

People can get help inside the organization if they feel safe enough to do so or outside it if they're concerned about confidentiality. If people are struggling, you have two options: Get them help now or pay later.

For instance, abuse doesn't typically happen in secret. Often, organizations know the perpetrators and turn a blind eye. My motto for workplace bullies is "Find them, fix them or fire them."

Is workplace stress ever helpful?

A certain amount can raise productivity. Athletes are an example: They want to have enough adrenaline flowing to spur them on, but not so much that their performance is compromised.

Every organization has a culture and personality. If the tone is one of healthy tension, that's good stress. But distress is what most people talk about at work.

A job doesn't have to be like a trip to a spa; however, when people are tired, they don't perform as well. It's important to address stress before it becomes excessive. HR

Donna M. Owens is a freelance writer based in Baltimore. Posen's book is available at http://shrmstore.shrm.org.

DAVID POSEN, MD
National Bestselling Author of *The Little Book of Stress Relief*

Is Work Killing You?

A Doctor's Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEOFF GEORGE