

There are countless clichés about stress, some of them disparaging. In reality, though, stress – physical or mental – is a potent factor in human performance, and nowhere is this better demonstrated than in workplace safety.

### What is Job Stress?

*Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary* defines stress as "the result produced when a structure, system, or organism is acted upon by forces that disrupt equilibrium or produce strain." Stress comes in two forms: *positive* and *negative*. Positive stress provides us with the energy and motivation to meet our daily challenges – both at home and at the workplace. In fact, some people would not consider this challenge a type of stress because, having met the challenge, we are satisfied and happy. However, as with most things, too much stress can have negative impacts. When the feeling of satisfaction turns into exhaustion, frustration, or dissatisfaction, we begin to see negative signs of stress.

**Negative job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.**

#### Consider the following statistics:

{According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)}

- ◆ 40% of job turnover is due to stress.
- ◆ 60 to 80% of accidents on the job are stress related and some, like the Three Mile Island and Exxon Valdez disasters, can affect untold thousands many miles away.

### Looking more closely at the role of stress in accidents...

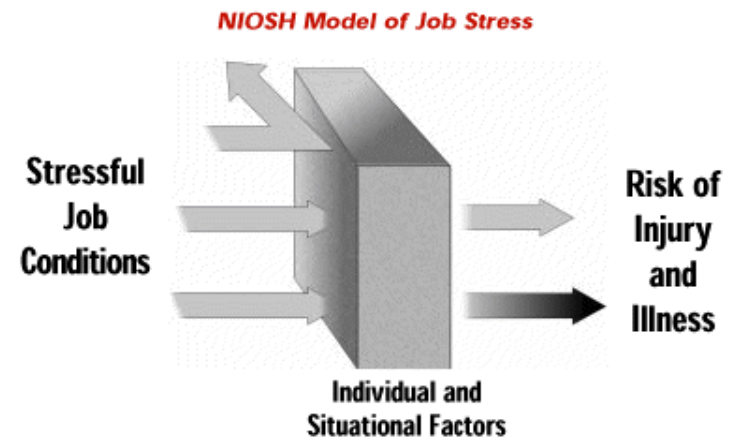
**Stress causes a narrowing of attention, preoccupation, and fatigue - a sure recipe for workplace injuries.** Stressed-out employees trying to do more with less are also likely to take shortcuts which lead to accidents..., less likely to take safety precautions, use proper equipment, and implement appropriate body mechanics. Workers who report high stress are 30 percent more likely to have accidents than those with low stress. Stress-related accident claims are, on average, two times more costly than non-stress-related cases, reports the Harvard Business Review.

### Errors of Judgment and Action

When people are under stress, they become preoccupied with the issues troubling them. Stress also causes attention to narrow, creating a sort of "tunnel vision." **This makes the stressed-out employee more susceptible to missing environmental cues and information required to make both effective and safe decisions.** Stress also dulls the thinking process. This is because endorphins - nature's painkillers - are released under stressful situations. Besides killing pain, these natural chemicals also dull our ability to think and feel. Under extreme or unremitting stress, people become intellectually, emotionally, and interpersonally dull. This can result in costly - and sometimes life-threatening – errors.

### Causes of Workplace Stress?

A multitude of circumstances: organizational dynamics, personalities, changes in work complexity, demands of new organizations and systems, excessive workload/inadequate staffing, lack of control over work, job insecurity, perception of low pay or low status, unclear reporting lines, lack of recognition or promotion, over-promotion, lack of participation in decision-making – all exacerbated by off-the-job stressors.



High Demands + Low Control = **Stress**

High Effort + Low Reward = **Stress**

High Demands + High Effort + Low Control + Low Reward = **Greatest Stress**

*Is there anything I can do to help myself deal with the stress I am experiencing?*

In many cases, the origin of the stress is something that cannot be changed immediately. Therefore, finding ways to help maintain overall good health – physical and mental – is essential. There are many ways to be proactive in dealing with stress. In the workplace, you might try some of the following as suggested by the Canadian Mental Health Association:

Take charge of your situation by taking 10 minutes at the beginning of each day to prioritize and organize your day. Be honest with your colleagues, but be constructive and make practical suggestions.

Laughing is one of the easiest and best ways to reduce stress. Share a joke with a co-worker, watch a funny movie at home with some friends, read the comics, and try to see the humor in the situation.

Learn to relax, take several deep breaths throughout the day, or have regular stretch breaks. Stretching is simple enough to do anywhere and only takes a few seconds.

Be realistic about what you can change.

**DILBERT**



(From: Canadian Mental Health Association, "Sources of Workplace Stress" Richmond, British Columbia)

For more information on this topic...

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/atwork.html>

[www.jobstresshelp.com/DV\\_jobstress.htm](http://www.jobstresshelp.com/DV_jobstress.htm)