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DEER OAKS PRESENTS

Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

Emotional Intelligence for Supervisors

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THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSORS IN THE WORKPLACE (PART 1)

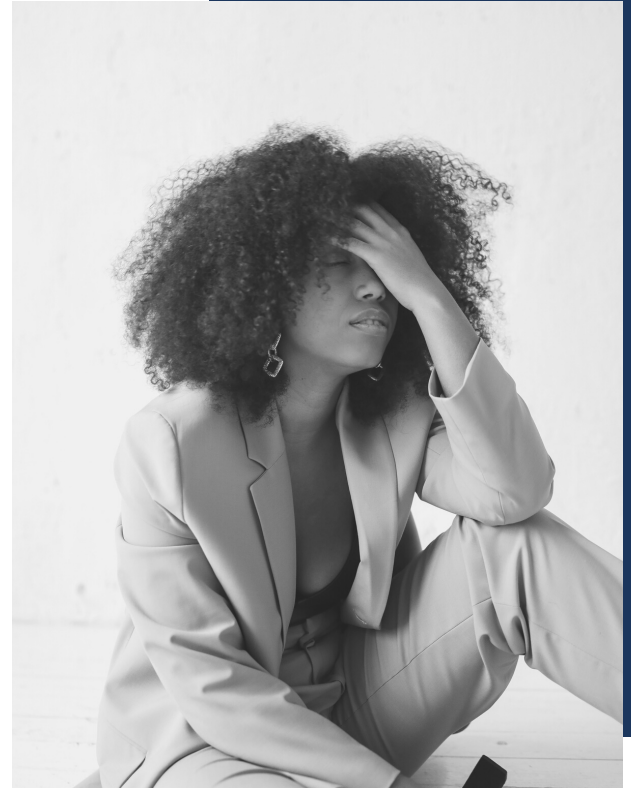
Signs and Symptoms of Psychological Stressors at Work

While it's helpful to know the various types of psychological stressors that may be present at work, this doesn't necessarily make them easy to spot—especially if employees (whether due to stigma or poor self-awareness surrounding their own stress levels or the cause of them) do not approach management about the stress they may be experiencing at work or the conditions that are causing such stress.

Thankfully, there are tell-tale signs of workplace stress that leaders can familiarize themselves with in order to identify stress in their own employees.¹ These signs include:

- Social withdrawal or tense, hostile interactions with coworkers
- Short temper, irritability, or mood swings
- Low mood or low overall morale
- Loss of motivation, commitment, and confidence
- Difficulty concentrating
- Slow, poor job performance
- Changes in dietary habits (skipping lunch, consuming more caffeine, eating more "junk" foods)
- Changes in weight
- Alcohol or drug use (smoking at work)
- Frequent or increased absences
- High turnover
- Psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased heart attack or stroke

It's important to note that while these are the most common signs of stress, stress may manifest differently between blue- and white-collar workers. For instance, research suggests that white-collar workers, due to their higher status and perhaps less-overt power imbalance at work, are more likely to openly complain to their supervisors about the cognitive effects of stress; blue-collar workers are more likely to exhibit the more behavioral effects of stress. This is largely due to problems with communication or conflict with their supervisors due to an uneven power dynamic, as managers may be insensitive to their



problems or to communications issues, since most of their communication with their staff is downward.²

Furthermore, data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that blue-collar workers are at higher risk of suicide compared to white-collar workers, with construction and extraction workers and those who work in mining, quarrying, oil, and gas having the highest suicide rates of any occupation. Furthermore, CDC research posits that suicide risk can be linked to low-skilled work, lower levels of education, and lower-class status.³

By monitoring employees for these early warning signs of stress, employers can work towards alleviating or removing stressors in the workplace before they lead to more chronic or severe conditions like cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, or suicidal ideation.^{4,5}

How Employers Can Respond

While some of these stressors are simply inherent to the nature of the job and cannot be done away with—like physical demands, organizational changes, and exposure to trauma, for example—there are steps that employers can take to lessen the adverse impact that they have on workers and improve their ability to cope with them. In fact, findings from a 2021 survey from the American Psychological Association show that more than four in five employees say that their mental health is greatly improved just by their employer taking some form of action—regardless of what that action is.⁶ The following sections throughout this article series detail key ways in which employers can alleviate or reduce stressors, foster workplace resiliency against stress, and provide adequate support in a manner that is timely and suitable to their workers' specific needs.

Investigate and assess psychological stressors present in the workplace.

The first and most crucial order of business is identifying the specific stressors that employees are facing at work, how these stressors are impacting their health and wellbeing, and what employees think should be done about them. One of the easiest ways to achieve this—and a good way to demonstrate awareness of current issues and a commitment to employee wellbeing—is by disseminating annual, biannual, or even quarterly surveys to employees, prompting them to provide feedback about the current state of the workplace and how they think it can be improved.

For an example on how these surveys can be laid out or what kind of questions should be asked, leaders can refer to (or even use) the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA's) Workplace Stress Sample Survey: https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/Workplace_Stress_Sample_Survey_Q.pdf.⁷ Some of the questions that this survey prompts employees to answer include the following:

- On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), what was your average stress level at work over the past month?
- Has your stress level at work increased in the past month? If yes, what factors made it worse?
- What worries you the most about your job?
- Does your supervisor talk about and look for ways to reduce workplace stress?
- Is there anything we (senior management) could do to alleviate the stress you are feeling related to work? If yes, please explain how we could make things better.



Instead of asking open-ended questions and putting workers on the spot, employers can also prompt respondents to check off boxes next to statements that they agree with, including these examples:

- I do not think we have enough protective measures in place at work.
- I am afraid of getting into arguments with customers or coworkers who refuse to follow safety protocols.
- I am having more trouble juggling my personal obligations than I did before.
- I do not have all the tools or training I need to complete my work efficiently.
- I am worried about job security.

Employers can also use surveys to measure employees' awareness or understanding of benefits offerings or employee assistance program (EAPs), by asking questions like these:

- Did you know that we have an EAP?
- Do you know how to use the EAP if you need support?
- Do you know how to contact an EAP representative to talk?
- Do you feel comfortable talking with coworkers or your supervisor about stress and mental health issues? If no, why not?
- Are you interested in having access to mental health resources at work, such as traditional counseling or therapy, as well as wellness programs like meditation sessions, and yoga and exercise classes?
- Do you think that we offer enough mental health support?

Ultimately, by allowing employees to participate in stress-reduction and health and safety initiatives, employers can not only develop solutions better suited to their needs but can also boost their self-efficacy and sense of support at work by helping them to feel seen, heard, and valued. Further OSHA guidance can be found here:

<https://www.osha.gov/workplace-stress/employer-guidance>.

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Source: Fournier, E. (2023, March 28). *The effects of psychological stressors in the workplace* (B. Schuette, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO). Retrieved April 18, 2023, from the WPO Blog: <https://www.workplaceoptions.com/news-media/blogs>

MENTOR

INSPIRE
ORGANIZATION
SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE IMPROVE
TRAINING
WORK
SUCCESS
LEARN
MOTIVATE
BUSINESS
RELATIONSHIP

MENTORING

Mentoring and coaching are both valuable tools to aid personal and professional development. While there are similar aspects to each method, they are fundamentally different in a variety of ways. Mentoring is a process that focuses specifically on providing guidance, direction, and career advice. Coaching's primary emphasis is on maximizing people's potential by working on their perceptions, self-confidence, and creative drive.

Mentoring and coaching efforts can operate as stand-alone programs, or they can be integrated into an organization's training and development program. Many organizations run formal mentoring and coaching programs to enhance career and interpersonal development.

Mentoring is usually a formal or informal relationship between two people—a senior mentor (usually outside the protégé's chain of supervision) and a junior protégé.

Mentoring has been identified as an important influence in professional development in both the public and private sector. The war for talent is creating challenges within organizations not only to recruit new talent, but to retain talent. Benefits of mentoring include increased employee performance, retention, commitment to the organization, and knowledge sharing.

Organizations implement formal mentoring programs for different purposes. Some of these purposes include:

- To help new employees settle into the agency
- To create a knowledge-sharing environment
- To develop mission-critical skills
- To help accelerate one's career
- To improve retention

Informal mentoring is another option for employees to enter into a mentor-protégé relationship. An informal mentoring partnership has less structure and can occur at any time in one's career. The relationship is usually initiated by the mentor or protégé.

Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). (n.d.). Mentoring. In Career development planning. Retrieved September 5, 2019, from <https://www.opm.gov>

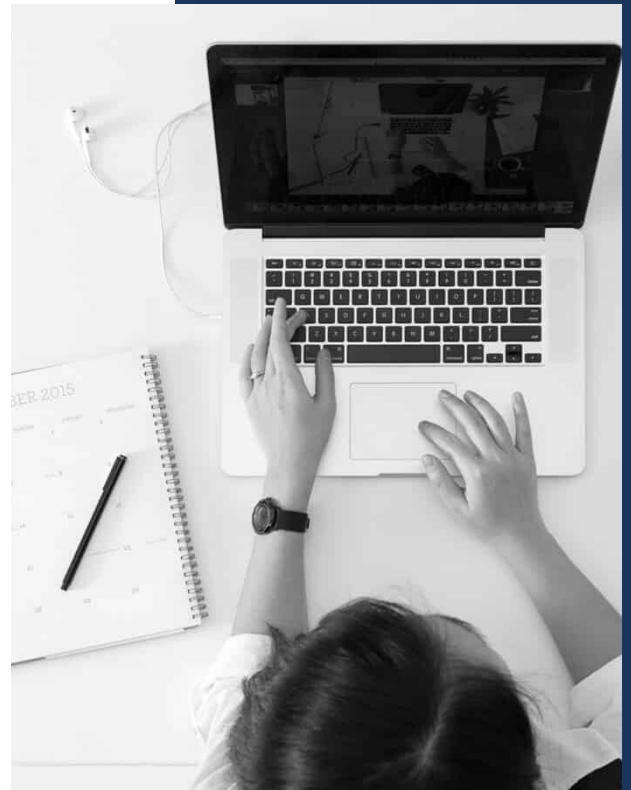
ASK YOUR EAP!

Q. I created a letter of reprimand for my employee because of severe tardiness. He has always refused the EAP, but when I offered to put the letter aside if he felt the need to attend the EAP, he readily agreed. He hasn't been tardy since. What did I do right (or wrong) since this took so long?

A. Rather than continuing to recommend and plead with your employee to go to the EAP, you offered an appropriate disciplinary measure to be held in abeyance if the employee wanted to attend the EAP. (This is a pull strategy versus pushing your employee to attend.) The "either this or that" option motivated your worker to get help rather than accept the possibility of having a disciplinary letter in his file with its ramifications. The approach you used is sometimes called "performance-based intervention." Key to progress was your decision to end the badgering of your employee without success. Often in situations like this one, the employee knows they need help for a personal problem, but denial and procrastination contribute to a chronic cycle of non-change. You finally decided that change was non-negotiable. It is a key to the success of the strategy you used. Praise the positive changes but be prepared to intervene again if attendance issues return.

Q. I need to confront my employee about a performance issue. What are the most common mistakes supervisors make that tend to not only undermine effectiveness of confrontations, but make them more stressful?

A. Inadequate planning and not having suitable documentation prepared for a meeting with the employee are perhaps the key issues that make confrontations difficult and stressful. However, there are less obvious issues associated with corrective interviews that can undermine their effectiveness. They get less mentioned in supervisor training. One of them is not doing them quickly enough after an incident of concern happens. The dislike of confronting employees can lead to postponement or procrastination, and risk that they will not happen at all. This of course would allow a problem to grow worse. If delayed meetings do occur, they can be awkward because details are not fresh in the mind of participants and cooperation may be lessened. An employee may also have more time to prepare mentally for a defensive position.



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