

Myth or Science?

Job Stress Can Kill You

This statement appears to be true. Self-reports of job stress are negatively correlated with all sorts of indicators of physical and mental health. A problem with many of these studies, however, is that causality is a bit hard to establish: Does job stress cause poor health, or does poor health increase the stress of the job? It's also possible a third variable causes both: neurotic individuals report both more stress and poorer health, which might call into question the causal link from job stress to health.

A recent study, though, suggests job stress may indeed lead to poor health. In this study, 972 participants, ages 35 to 59, returned to work after experiencing a heart attack. The researchers followed them for 6 years. Those who returned to high-stress jobs were 2.2 times more likely to suffer another heart attack (or be hospitalized for a heart condition) than those in low-stress jobs. One of the researchers deemed the effect “very important” and concluded the risk factor was roughly the same as that of smoking or high blood pressure.

Another recent study with a strong design—an eight-year study of 7,810 Finnish forestry workers—found those who suffered severe levels of job stress, in the form of high psychological burnout, were 3.8 times more likely to suffer from disability at a later date. Yet another long-term study of 3,190 Japanese men revealed that working in a high-stress job roughly doubled the odds of suffering a later stroke. Thus, it appears the implications of working in a high-stress job can be very severe—and life threatening.

Sources: Based on A. Tsutsumi, K. Kayaba, K. Kario, and S. Ishikawa, “Prospective Study on Occupational Stress and Risk of Stroke,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 169, no. 1 (2009), pp. 56–61; K. Ahola, S. Toppinen-Tanner, P. Huuhtanen, A. Koskinen, A. Väänänen, “Occupational Burnout and Chronic Work Disability: An Eight-year Cohort Study on Pensioning Among Finnish Forest Industry Workers,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 115, no. 1–2 (2009), pp. 150–159; C. Aboa-Eboulé, C. Brisson, E. Maunsell, B. Masse, R. Bourbonnais, M. Vézina, et al., “Job Strain and Risk of Acute Recurrent Coronary Heart Disease Events,” *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* 298, no. 14 (2007), pp. 1652–1660.

Class Exercise

1. Divide the class into groups of three to five students.
2. Ask them to read the article at <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/01/27/eight-high-stress-jobs/>
3. Ask the students to discuss why they believe these are high-stress jobs.
4. Ask them to identify other jobs that would be considered high stress for similar reasons.
5. Ask the groups to share their conclusions in a class discussion.

An Ethical Choice

Your Responsibility to Your Stress

You are likely to have substantial control over the types of work you pursue once you've completed your education. Although your choice does not necessarily have ethical implications for others, it does have ethical implications for you, if you believe you have a duty to manage your own well-being. Here's what you can do:

1. Avoid high-stress jobs. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), some jobs—such as stockbroker, customer service/complaint worker, police officer, waiter, medical intern, secretary, and air traffic controller—are known to be stressful for most people. Unless you're confident in your ability to handle stress in these jobs, avoid them.
2. If you do experience stress at work, try to find a job that has plenty of control (so you can decide how to perform your work) and supportive co-workers. Control and social support each have moderating effects on the experience of stress.
3. Don't assume this exercise rules out a financially rewarding career: Money is the top stressor reported by people under age 30. So by all means, pursue a career that pays you well. But also realize there are jobs that don't have a high degree of stress but still pay competitively.

Sources: Based on S. Martin, "Money Is the Stressor for Americans," *Monitor on Psychology* (December 2008), pp. 28–29; *Helicobacter pylori* and Peptic Ulcer Disease, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.cdc.gov/ulcer; and M. Maynard, "Maybe the Toughest Job Aloft," *New York Times*, August 15, 2006, pp. C1, C6.

Class Exercise

1. Divide the class into groups of three to five.
2. Ask the students to read the article <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/2009/qualitylife/index.html>
3. Have the groups discuss why they believe the jobs listed were judged as "low stress."
4. Ask the groups to make a list of other jobs that could meet these low-stress criteria.
5. Have the groups share their conclusions in class discussion.

International OB

Coping With Stress: East and West

In several places in this chapter, we've noted that social support can play an important role in effectively coping with stress. Stress, of course, is a human universal: people all over the world experience it. However, the way they deal with it generally—and whether they do so through social support specifically—seems to depend a lot on culture.

A recent review compared the tendency to seek social support to relieve stress among Asians (Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese), Asian Americans, and European Americans. Its conclusions might surprise you.

Asians and Asian Americans are significantly less likely to cope with stress by seeking social support than are European Americans. Given that Asian cultures are more collectivist than American and European cultures, that's somewhat counterintuitive. Social support, after all, would seem the collectivistic thing to do. The authors explain, however, that because collectivists strive for group harmony, they may keep problems to themselves rather than use social support as a means of coping with stress.

What's the upshot? Collectivists experiencing stress may be limiting themselves in terms of coping mechanisms and may need to find other means of coping with work-related stress.

Sources: Based on H. S. Kim, D. K. Sherman, and S. E. Taylor, "Culture and Social Support," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 6 (2008), pp. 518–526; S. Taylor, D. K. Sherman, H. S. Kim, J. Jarcho, K. Takagi, and M. Dunagan, "Culture and Social Support: Who Seeks It and Why?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, September 2004, pp. 354–362; and S. E. Taylor, W. Welch, H. S. Kim, and D. K. Sherman, "Cultural Differences in the Impact of Social Support on Psychological and Biological Stress Responses," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 9 (2007), pp. 831–837.

Class Exercise

1. Ask students to read <http://arunkottolli.blogspot.com/2006/07/managing-global-careers-dealing-with.html>
2. Have the class discuss the effects of culture shock on stress levels of expatriate workers.
3. Based on the article, have the students define what preparations should be made to help an employee cope with culture shock.

Point/CounterPoint

Managing Change is an Episodic Activity

Point

Organizational change is an episodic activity. That is, it starts at some point, proceeds through a series of steps, and culminates in some outcome that participants hope is an improvement over the starting point. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Lewin's three-step model represents a classic illustration of this perspective. Change is seen as a break in the organization's equilibrium. The status quo has been disturbed, and change is necessary to establish a new equilibrium state. The objective of refreezing is to stabilize the new situation by balancing the driving and restraining forces.

Some experts have argued that organizational change should be thought of as balancing a system of five interacting variables within the organization—people, tasks, technology, structure, and strategy. A change in any one variable has repercussions on one or more of the others. This perspective is episodic in that it treats organizational change as essentially an effort to sustain equilibrium. A change in one variable begins a chain of events that, if properly managed, requires adjustments in the other variables to achieve a new state of equilibrium.

Another way to conceptualize the episodic view of looking at change is to think of managing change as analogous to captaining a ship. The organization is like a large ship traveling across the calm Mediterranean Sea to a specific port. The ship's captain has made this exact trip hundreds of times before with the same crew. Every once in a while, however, a storm will appear, and the crew has to respond. The captain will make the appropriate adjustments—that is, will implement changes—and, having maneuvered through the storm, will return the ship to calm waters. Like this ship's voyage, managing an organization is a journey with a beginning and an end, and implementing change as a response to a break in the status quo is needed only occasionally.

CounterPoint

The episodic approach for handling organizational change has become obsolete. Developed in the 1950s and 1960s, it reflects the environment of those times by treating change as the occasional disturbance in an otherwise peaceful and predictable world. However, it bears little resemblance to today's environment of constant and chaotic change.

If you want to understand what it's like to manage change in today's organizations, think of it as equivalent to permanent whitewater rafting. The organization is not a large ship but, rather, more like a 40-foot raft. Rather than sailing a calm sea, this raft must traverse a raging river that is an uninterrupted flow of white-water rapids. To make things worse, the raft is manned by 10 people who have never worked together or traveled the river before, much of the trip takes place in the dark, the river is dotted by

unexpected turns and obstacles, the exact destination is not clear, and at irregular intervals the raft needs to pull to shore, where some new crew members are added and others leave. Change is a natural state, and managing it is a continual process—that is, managers never experience the luxury of escaping the white-water rapids.

The stability and predictability characterized by the episodic perspective no longer captures the world we live in. Disruptions in the status quo are not occasional, temporary, and followed by a return to an equilibrium state. There is, in fact, no equilibrium state. Managers today face constant change, bordering on chaos. They're being forced to play a game they've never played before, governed by rules that are created as the game progresses.

Class Exercise

1. Choose two teams of 3–5 students. [The rest of the class will act as a jury.]
2. Have them prepare, outside of class, one side of the issue to debate in class.
3. Create a controlled debate, giving each side up to 8 minutes to make its case, 3 minutes to cross-examine the other side, then 5 minutes in class to prepare a 3–5 minute rebuttal, and then a final 1-minute closing argument.
4. Have the remainder of the class vote on who made the stronger case.
5. Close with a discussion of the issue leading the students to understand this is not an either/or situation, but the best response incorporates elements of both positions.
6. This will take approximately 45–60 minutes.