



Feeling Stressed? You're Not Alone

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. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury. In addition to experiencing stress from day-to-day roles, center staff could also experience secondary traumatic stress which causes the gradual lessening of compassion over time or Compassion Fatigue.

The American Institute of Stress related the following from a survey pre-pandemic:

- 83% of US coworkers suffer from work related stress
- Stress causes around one million workers to miss work every day
- US businesses lose up to \$300 billion dollars yearly as a result of stress

A recent study (March 2022) by the Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association states the following:

- 63% of US workers are ready to quit their job to avoid work-related stress.
- Chronic stress is commonplace at work with 94% of workers reporting feeling stress at work.

In addition to experiencing stress from day-to-day job functions, employees also experience stress from their personal lives. Center staff are also exposed to secondary traumatic stress which causes the gradual lessening of compassion over time resulting in Compassion Fatigue. Dealing with other people's trauma can genuinely have an impact over time.

Workplace Stress

There are many causes of workplace stress. Examples include a relationship with the boss, relationship with coworkers, unreasonable workloads, low pay, bad job match, lack of resources, and work/life balance. In addition to these causes that are not industry specific, center staff must also deal with behaviors, families, caseloads, benchmarks, and trauma.

Personal Stress

Personal stress can be related to death, injury, or illness, separating home responsibilities, marriage of self or a family member, separation or divorce, relationship stress, pregnancy, birth of new baby, other family issues, and financial strains.

The impacts of high stress are significant:

- Loss of production
- Mistakes

- Accidents
- Absenteeism
- Increased healthcare costs
- Turnover
- Substance use issues
- Giving up or stopping
- Checking out

Unresolved high stress can result in burnout and apathy. You might experience high performers no longer producing. You might also see enthusiastic staff become apathetic. The pandemic has amplified stressors over the past two years and there has been an increase in substance use and suicides. Your role is to pay attention to stress warning signs in yourself and your staff and suggest self-care but most importantly, pay attention to *your* warning signs and model self-care.

Warning Signs

Stress rarely is caused by a singular event. Many times, it is the cumulative effect of many stressors which are then translated to mental and physical manifestations. You and your staff often experience physiological and emotional warning signs. Physiological warning signs include increased stress hormones, muscle tension, increased heart rate, increased susceptibility to illness, gastrointestinal complaints, headaches, increased blood pressure, and sleep disturbances. Emotional warning signs could be over-worrying, excitement, low self-confidence, hopelessness, waiting for something else to happen, isolation, blaming, anger, irritability, the inability to feel joy, excessive substance use, and depression. Experiencing some of these warning signs are a normal occurrence but when it occupies and consumes you, you should seek assistance. Not seeking assistance could eventually lead to Compassion Fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue

Also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time (Figley 1996). It is common among individuals that work directly with trauma victims for example, first responders and military staff. You may feel similar fear, pain, and suffering because you care. Compassion Fatigue is not burnout. Burnout occurs when you become apathetic and negative about your job. Compassion Fatigue impacts all relationships, professional and personal.

Compassion Fatigue can be identified, arrested, and treated. As leaders at centers, you tend to put others' needs before yours. You can only do this for so long. You can't help those that need you or that you care about if you have nothing left in the tank. If Compassion Fatigue is identified, you should seek out a co-worker, a support group, or other professional assistance.

Self-Care Planning

One of the most important things you can do to prevent workplace stress, burnout, and Compassion Fatigue is practicing self-care.

Many models suggest that a focus for self-care should be to balance your physical, mental social/emotional, and spiritual life. These areas are like the four wheels of your car. When one is out of balance it can cause your car to be out of alignment and eventually cause significant damage. These areas impact our lives in a similar way. When one area is being neglected, it begins to impact your quality of life. To begin your self-care planning you should gauge how you are doing in each area on a scale of poor to excellent.

In the areas in which you are doing well, reflect on what you are doing now and how you can sustain it. In the areas that need improvement, look at what you are doing now and what activities can you do to replenish that area. Begin with a small, yet realistic goal and follow through. Consistency is more important than one grand gesture. Create a written self-care plan with action steps, a start date, and signature line for accountability to yourself.

Sometimes we get in the habit of going to “Some Day Isle.” Someday I’ll eat better, someday I’ll start an exercise program, someday I’ll go to the doctor. If you are out of balance and don’t make changes, you are guaranteed that things will stay the same. The self-care plan is commitment to yourself to improve your life experience and prevent stress, burnout, and Compassion Fatigue.