

Solutions

FAMILY SERVICES  EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

NEWSLETTER

Issue 49

Managing Environmental Stress in the Workplace

Environmental stress may be defined as the minor irritations and frustrations of everyday life that we all experience. It can include the experience of constant interruptions when trying to concentrate, attempting to accomplish a task amidst clutter and disorganization, or being late for an appointment and then getting caught in a traffic jam. In addition, environmental stress includes such things as the quality of the air we breathe, the lighting conditions of our workspace and the level of noise in our work environment.

When we are exposed to environmental stress in the workplace, our performance on the job and experience of job satisfaction can be significantly affected. Although environmental stress may seem minor, constant irritations can add up, decreasing our overall feelings of happiness as well as causing our bodies to secrete small amounts of stress hormones into the blood stream.

When we experience major stressors, environmental stress can make these experiences even more difficult to handle. In today's workplace, the number of responsibilities associated with our jobs has increased significantly. Add environmental stress into the equation, and we may feel overworked, overtired and begin to have negative feelings about the workplace. This is why it is important to recognize environmental stress and take steps to reduce or alleviate it as it occurs.

Types of Environmental Stressors

Noise

Research has demonstrated that high levels of background noise can severely impair one's ability to concentrate. It has been shown that excessive, intermittent or unpredictable noise can cause tension and headaches as well as raise people's blood pressure. It can impact concentration and reduce the ability to perform complex tasks. It can also undermine teamwork, as people in a noisy environment tend to become more irritable and less willing to help one another.

Solutions to noise at work can involve:

- Arranging to work from a home office.
- Installing partitions or physical barriers to reduce or deaden sound.
- Scheduling work tasks so that those requiring the most focus can be completed when the environment is more peaceful.

- Using meeting rooms separate from the main source of noise.
- If all else fails, using earplugs!

Lighting

Poor lighting, such as insufficient light, light that is too bright or light that shines directly into one's eyes can cause eye strain and increase fatigue. In addition to lighting conditions, the quality of light is also important. Most people are happiest in bright daylight. Daylight which measures 10,000 lux (equivalent to a bright sunny day) is known to trigger a release of chemicals in the body that brings about a sense of psychological well-being. Unfortunately, most types of artificial light do not seem to have the same effect on mood. You will probably find that improving the quality of light will also improve the quality of your working environment.

Solutions to poor light conditions at work may include:

- Arranging work spaces to be near a window.

By Laurie Schroeder, Manager of Business and Product Development, FSEAP Vancouver. Reprinted with permission.

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- Whenever possible, allowing natural light to shine through open doors and windows.
- Trimming bushes that are in front of windows, painting walls with lighter colours, checking into the possibility of installing skylights.
- Installing brighter light bulbs in work areas or using full-spectrum bulbs in desk lamps.

Poor Air Quality

Research has shown that poor air quality at work can trigger headaches and tiredness, as well as impair one's ability to concentrate. A variety of factors can contribute to the problem of poor air quality, including a high concentration of pollutants in the air, poor air circulation or inadequate ventilation.

Other sources of poor air quality include smoking, heating and air conditioning systems, ionization by electrical equipment, overcrowding (too many people in a small space), pollution, solvents or other chemicals from carpets, furniture or paint, and excess humidity or dryness.

Solutions to poor air quality at work may involve:

- Opening windows.
- Banning smoking indoors.
- Using dehumidifiers when humidity is a problem or humidifiers if it is too dry.
- Introducing plants – not only do plants raise the amount of oxygen in the air and reduce stuffiness, they also help to absorb pollutants in the air; evaporation of water from plant pots or the plants themselves will help to raise humidity when the air is too dry.
- Keeping yourself hydrated by drinking water.

Clutter and Disorganization

Another source of environmental stress can be a work environment that is dirty, messy, or uncomfortable. The distraction of working in an area that is disorganized, untidy and chaotic can make it more difficult to achieve your goals.

Solutions to disorganization can involve:

- Contracting with janitorial services to ensure the workplace is kept clean.
- Developing systems for organizing product, information, and equipment.
- Implementing on- or off-site storage systems.
- Storing or discarding unnecessary furniture, equipment and office products.

Furniture and Ergonomics

Poorly designed furniture, or the improper use of quality furniture, generally contributes to a variety of aches and pains. The most common of these is backache. Prolonged ergonomic problems can produce serious injuries. Taking the time to arrange one's working environment is key to working comfortably and avoiding injury.

Solutions to ergonomic concerns at work may involve:

- Ensuring that office chairs are properly adjusted to reduce the risk of injury to the body.
- Arranging computer work stations so that correct postures are used when working with the monitor, keyboard, mouse, and documents.
- Organizing work materials and accessories to improve efficiency and reduce the distance and frequency of reaches.
- Organizing your workday to include tasks, breaks and exercises that allow you to vary your posture, rest your muscles and prevent muscle tension or soreness.
- Consulting with a professional who can give you expert advice, as often the ideal solution may not be immediately obvious.

Your Response

Now that you have been introduced to some of the practical things that you can do to manage the small but cumulative stresses that come from your environment, it is time to do something about them!

Take a notebook and pen wherever you go for one day. Make a note of everything in your environment that irritates you or causes you pain. At the end of the day, look at these things and think what you can do about them. Speak with your manager or supervisor about potential changes to your work environment or work process. When you have no control over the situation, find something positive about it that you can remind yourself of when the situation occurs.

To Learn More About Environmental Stress

- **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety:** www.ccohs.com
- **Links to provincial and territorial Workers' Compensation Boards:** www.awcbc.org/english/wcb_links.asp

Family Services Employee Assistance Programs (FSEAP) offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, go to www.familyserviceap.com or call 1-800-668-9920.