

Could stress at work kill you?



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As part of our series exploring mental health in the workplace, in this week's post we're asking: could stress at work kill you?

You may have seen reports over recent years about work-related deaths. Particularly in Japan, where they even have a word for it: *karoshi* — which literally means 'death by overwork.'

Whilst Japan may have a far more intensive working culture than the UK, is there still a risk that you could die if you work too much overtime, or you take on too many tasks during your standard working hours?

We all feel stressed from time to time. And work pressure can get to the best of us. But there is concrete scientific evidence that suggests work stress can have a negative impact not just on your mental health, but your physical health too.

Spending too much time sat at your desk has led some to suggest that sitting is the new smoking. In this blog we've collated the data to give you the lowdown on stress at work.

It's not all negative here at Tate though! We're offering some easy to follow advice on how to take a positive approach to lightening the load of work related stress.

Let's start with the grim-sounding science, and finish with the ways to make your working life better. Here we go...

What the scientists say

For years now, we've been told that we need to work less, work smarter, and unwind, not just to aid our own mental health, but also to improve workplace productivity. Doctors have already linked long hours, including overtime, and work-related anxiety to increased blood pressure, depression, heart disease and stroke.

The age-old idea that constantly working overtime gets you places is only true if that place is an early grave. This might not align with what you're told at the start of your career, but there is evidence to support this claim. Here are 5 examples:

1. Working long hours increases your chance of death by 20%
2. The more hours you work, the more chance you've got of having a stroke. Even working more than the standard 40 hour working week increases your chance of death by 10%
3. Sitting for long periods of time in front of a computer increases the risk of early death
4. Not taking a holiday from work increases your chance of having a heart attack by 30-50%
5. People who work more than 10 hours a day have an 80% increased risk of coronary heart disease

How to minimise work related stress

Whilst it is true that working too many hours can cause work stress, there are other factors that can contribute to stress at work, and ways in which you can make a positive contribution to lessen the stress in your life.

Eat well

One of these is the food we choose to eat. Eating badly stresses your system. Eating a low sugar diet is one way in which you can prevent dips in focus throughout the working day — allowing you to work more effectively and productively throughout your working week. Eating well aids productivity, so there's less chance you'll need to work time outside of your contracted hours.

Sleep

Equally important when it comes to stress at work is getting enough sleep. When you don't sleep properly you're not giving your body chance to recuperate. 20 million Britons don't get enough sleep. Workers in the UK are the most exhausted in the world. This is a big issue. Sleep is a critical recovery for our body and minds. If you can't get to sleep in an evening because your mind is racing with work-related issues, there are things that can help...

Be mindful

...One of which is to practice mindfulness. If you're feeling overwhelmed, whether at work or at home, a simple way to help alleviate the stress is to undertake a few minutes of deep breathing. Outside of the office, doing activities like yoga and meditation can help clear your mind of all the unnecessary mental clutter that is conducive to stress. Even doing something as basic as clearing your desk can help free the mind from distractions.

Optimise your time

If you, like us, work in an office for most of our working day, you'll know about the endless interruptions that occur. Whether it's responding to emails, phone-calls, meetings, instant messages or last minute deadlines, the stress that they all cause can soon accumulate, and you're soon going home with a head filled with stress.

Whilst you can't stop deadlines and requests, you can prioritise their importance. Make criteria for what is most crucial within your role, and complete those tasks before you get around to those less pressing. It is even worth saying no to requests sometimes: especially if they obviously add little value to your work.

Don't put too much pressure on yourself

Whilst external pressures are the biggest cause of stress, self-determined pressure can also contribute. It is important that whatever role you are in, you aren't too critical of your abilities. Instead of being negative, make a mental note of everything positive you contribute, and have previously contributed to your company. Nothing beats a good personal pep talk, even if it's in the bathroom mirror!

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