

Silent and Deadly Stress

A recent study finds that workers who covertly suffer from stress are more likely to have heart attacks or suffer from heart disease. And since these employees suffer in silence, there are limited options available for HR leaders who would like to help mediate the problem. Experts offer some ideas, however.

By Tom Starner

Employers already do plenty of hand-wringing over keeping their workforces healthy and bottom lines from sagging, as risk factors such as smoking, obesity and stress drive healthcare costs up and cut into employee well-being and productivity.

But a recent Swedish study indicates a new, hidden danger may be lurking. It's a specific type of stress called "covert coping" -- meaning that some employees will not vent their frustration when treated unfairly on the job.

And for male employees, it apparently may have a direct link to heart disease. Worst of all, while experts agree that employers across the world have a variety of programs and strategies in place to combat workplace stress, the options are limited when attempting to counter it.

According to the Swedish research conducted at the Stress Research Institute at Stockholm University, the 2,755 men studied who suppressed anger about unfair treatment in the workplace are 40 percent more likely to suffer a heart attack or die from heart disease than those who quickly vent their frustration. The [study](#) was published in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health.

Of course, the idea that people who hold in their emotions, especially anger or frustration, may suffer from high blood pressure and other heart-related problems is hardly news.

But the researchers found that those men who often relied on "covert coping" -- those who walked away and/or ignored unfair treatment -- more often paid for it with serious health consequences.

The researchers followed healthy Swedish men with an average age of 41 from 1992 through 1995 and then tracked them over 10 years to compare several work and health factors.

How can HR help those employees who keep their reactions to bullying bosses or unkind co-workers under the surface? It's a challenge, but some experts believe HR leaders have a role to play in seeking out specific behaviors and offering assistance when necessary.

"There are ways to educate folks and communicate with them, give them opportunities to vent," says Michael **Warech**, president of **Warech Associates** in Morristown, N.J., a human capital adviser.

He cites 360-degree feedback, upward feedback on managers and even something as general as an enterprisewide survey as ways to offer employees opportunities to express their feelings. For example, using an enterprisewide or department-wide survey, employers can gauge the level of satisfaction with various supervisors.

When scores are low in specific areas, HR leaders can dig a little deeper to determine what factors are causing those scores. In that way, they may be able to uncover issues with certain managers or groups of managers -- and deliver training to change the unwanted behaviors.

"You also have to make sure that the performance-management process and system are solid and being executed properly," **Warech** says. "Apart from formal feedback reviews, you need to open a good line of communication for informal feedback. It's critical to have or develop a culture of open communications."

Marsha Petrie Sue, author of *The Reactor Factor: How to Handle Difficult Work Situations Without Going Nuclear*, says covert coping falls directly into the category of manager/employee dynamics.

"I believe that both the manager and the male employee should take personal responsibility for their communications," she says. "Creating an environment of trust and reduced conflict can be learned."

For example, Petrie Sue says, one of the best communications techniques is called fogging -- because it diffuses situations as does "fog with the sun." To use this technique, an employee voices frustration, then the manager asks to help him or her understand where the frustration is coming from.

"And then they continue to dig, to get at the core issue, the problem," Petrie Sue explains.

Margaret-Ann Cole, office practice leader for organization effectiveness practice in Watson Wyatt's New York office, says that, while many companies are putting efforts into wellness programs focusing on quitting smoking or losing weight, not enough focus is targeted at reducing stresses of all types, including covert coping.

For example, a simple employee survey that asks about stress in the workplace might be one way HR can begin to discover some negative types of workplace behaviors, she says. Another strategy might focus on the fact that in some cultures, employees, colleagues and managers do not know how to properly give feedback -- either positive or negative.

"This is something that managers need to be able to do in order to make their performance evaluations more meaningful," Cole says. "Also, if there were courses that people had access to that address how to speak up, that might also be a possible approach for this specific issue."

When it comes to performance management, Cole says, people just don't do feedback well -- regardless of cultural differences. Things have improved in this area, she adds, but most performance-management processes still have a long way to go.

"A check-the-box exercise and deciding how much a raise or bonus will be is not enough, especially today where there may not be a bonus or raise," she says. "Under today's economic conditions, feedback is even more important for the person who is stressed. They need the opportunity to speak with their managers more than once a year."

Cole says smart HR executives can link the Swedish study results to improved performance management and specific stress relief programs.

"If one percent of the workforce is potentially affected, that could equate to a specific number of heart attacks or increased heart disease, which is expensive for the employer and obviously bad for the employee," she says.

Patricia Strait, chair of Human Resource Management at the University of Richmond's School of Continuing Studies, says that HR departments have long been aware of the negative impact stress has on employees, whether that stress comes from the work environment itself or from personal lives.

Strait believes that the programs added to reduce stress and aid the quality of work life -- flextime scheduling, onsite childcare services, wellness centers, training in conflict resolution and training in interpersonal skills -- are positive steps.

In addition, she says, most HR departments offer a mediator to help supervisors and employees resolve conflicts within the workplace. But even those programs, as well intended as they are, probably won't have much impact on covert-coping behaviors.

"The type of stress that is described by the researchers in this study actually involves a more chronic condition of ongoing perceived inequities by the employee that are most likely insidious to the immediate work environment," she says.

"As a result, HR's real ability to resolve these issues is limited, since these problems involve subtle signals and interactions, and are inherent to the functional operating area of the employee."

For one, she says, the study states the source of stress coming from the aggressor – a boss or co-worker – is outside of HR, so HR is not really in a position to eliminate it.

"This type of aggression takes place quickly, a few words here or there," she says. "It often is very subtle, and hard to prove. HR can provide training and improve the work atmosphere, etc. HR professionals, however, are not policemen. These types of stressors unfold throughout the entire eight-hour day.

"People in HR like to think the answers rest there, but the truth is control and influence is limited," she says, adding that the research is not too surprising.

"You swallow your stress, you are going to get sick," she says. "One solution is, you change the work environment by changing the people causing the problem, but that's easier said than done in most cases."

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