

Stress, Burnout, Fatigue & Mental Health

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has touched all aspects of society including how we work. Employees have been especially stretched thin, working longer hours than usual, working more shifts or even overnight, and leaving less time to sleep and recharge. This leads to increased levels of stress and many employees are beginning to “hit a wall” of mental burnout.

Mental health disorders are among the most burdensome health concerns in the United States. Nearly one in five US adults aged 18 or older (18.3% or 44.7 million people) reported any mental illness in 2016. In addition, 71% of adults reported at least one symptom of stress, such as a headache or feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

About 63% of Americans are part of the US labor force. The workplace can be a key location for activities designed to improve well-being among adults. Workplace wellness programs can identify those at risk and put in place supports to help people reduce and manage stress. By addressing mental health issues in the workplace, employers can reduce health care costs for their businesses and employees.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM - MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AFFECT BUSINESSES AND THEIR EMPLOYEES

Poor mental health and stress can negatively affect employee:

- ▲ Job performance and productivity.
- ▲ Engagement with one’s work.
- ▲ Communication with coworkers.
- ▲ Physical capability and daily functioning.

Mental illnesses such as depression are associated with higher rates of disability and unemployment.

- ▲ Depression interferes with a person’s ability to complete physical job tasks about 20% of the time and reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time.
- ▲ Only 57% of employees who report moderate depression and 40% of those who report severe depression receive treatment to control depression symptoms.

Even after taking other health risks—like smoking and obesity—into account, employees at high risk of depression had the highest health care costs during the three years after an initial health risk assessment.

Thoughts on a Solution

Employers Can PROMOTE Awareness about the Importance of Mental Health and Stress Management

Workplace health promotion programs have proven to be successful, especially when they combine mental and physical health interventions.

The workplace is an optimal setting to create a culture of health because:

- ▲ Communication structures are already in place.
- ▲ Programs and policies come from one central team.
- ▲ Social support networks are available.
- ▲ Employers can offer incentives to reinforce healthy behaviors.
- ▲ Employers can use data to track progress and measure the effects.

Action steps employers can take include:

- ▲ Make mental health self-assessment tools available to all employees.
- ▲ Provide free or subsidized lifestyle coaching, counseling, or self-management programs.
- ▲ Host seminars or workshops that address depression and stress management techniques, like mindfulness, breathing exercises, and meditation, to help employees reduce anxiety and stress and improve focus and motivation.
- ▲ Create and maintain dedicated, quiet spaces for relaxation activities.
- ▲ Provide managers with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and depression in team members and encourage them to seek help from qualified mental health professionals.
- ▲ Give employees opportunities to participate in decisions about issues that affect job stress.

Follow these tips to build resilience and manage job stress:

- ▲ Communicate with your employees about job stress.

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- Identify things that may cause stress and work together to identify solutions.
 - Talk openly with employees about how the pandemic is affecting work. Expectations should be communicated clearly by everyone.
 - Be prepared to provide information about how to access mental health resources in your workplace.
- ▲ Encourage workers to increase their sense of control by developing a consistent daily routine when possible — ideally one that is similar to their schedule before the pandemic.
- Keep a regular sleep schedule.
 - Take breaks from work to stretch, exercise, or check in with your supportive colleagues, coworkers, family, and friends.
 - Spend time outdoors, either being physically active or relaxing.
 - If you work from home, set a regular time to end your work for the day, if possible.
 - Practice mindfulness techniques.
 - Do things you enjoy during non-work hours.

Managing Workplace Fatigue

Under regular circumstances, adults need 7–9 hours of sleep per night, along with opportunities for rest while awake, optimal health, and well-being. Long work hours and shift work, combined with stressful or physically demanding work, can lead to poor sleep and extreme fatigue. Fatigue increases the risk for injury and deteriorating health (infections, illnesses, and mental health disorders).

While there is no one solution to fit everyone's needs, here are some general strategies that workers and employers can use to manage workplace fatigue and work safely.

What steps should employers take to reduce workplace fatigue for workers?

- ▲ Recognize that these are stressful and unusual circumstances and risk for fatigue may be increased.
- ▲ Create a culture of safety with clear coordination and communication between management and workers. This can include establishing a Fatigue Risk Management Plan or strategies for fatigue mitigation on the job. Share and ensure that employees understand the processes.
- ▲ Spot the signs and symptoms of fatigue (e.g., yawning, difficulty keeping eyes open, inability to

concentrate) in yourself and your employees and take steps to mitigate fatigue-related injury or error.

- Create a procedure that does not punish workers for reporting when they, or their coworkers, are too fatigued to work safely. Build it into team comradery as an example of how management and staff can support each other.
- Develop processes to relieve a worker from their duties if they are too fatigued to work safely.
 - * If available, and agreeable with workers, consider assigning workers who are just starting their shifts onto safety-critical tasks.
 - * If possible, rotate workers or groups of workers through tasks that are repetitive and/or strenuous. Tools or workstations that are unavoidably shared need to be properly cleaned and disinfected between usage.
 - * If possible, schedule physically and mentally demanding workloads and monotonous work in shorter shifts and/or during day shifts.
- ▲ Provide information for workers on the consequences of sleep deprivation and resources to assist workers manage fatigue.
- ▲ Allow staff enough time to organize their off-duty obligations and get sufficient rest and recovery.
 - Schedule at least 11 hours off in-between shifts (each 24-hour period), and one full day of rest per seven days for adequate sleep and recovery.
 - Avoid penalizing those who may have restricted availability to work extra shifts/longer hours (e.g., caring for dependents).
- ▲ If rotating shift work is needed, use forward rotations (day to evening to night) and provide staff with sufficient notice when scheduling, particularly if there is a shift change.
- ▲ Avoid scheduling staff for more than 12 hours, if possible.
- ▲ Formalize and encourage regularly scheduled breaks in clean and safe areas where social distancing can be maintained. Recognize the need for additional time for increased hand hygiene and putting on and taking off required personal protective equipment (PPE).

What can workers do when they feel too fatigued to work safely?

Recognize these are stressful and unusual circumstances and you may need more sleep or time to recover.

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LEGAL BRIEFING

Amazon.com, Inc. - Violated Labor Law?

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The NLRB says Amazon.com Inc. violated labor law when it fired two high-profile internal critics last year.

Did Amazon Violate Law in Firing Employee Activists?

- ▲ Employees were terminated after raising concerns about worker safety
- ▲ Amazon says they were let go for violating internal policies

This issue involves the familiar debate between an employee and employer—the employee alleges that an adverse employment action against them was attributable to some protected activity (here, when they raised concerns about worker safety) and the employer argues that it was based on some legitimate, non-discriminatory and/or non-retaliatory reason (here, for violating internal policies).

Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa were terminated April 2020 after raising concerns about Amazon’s treatment of warehouse workers during the pandemic. Their dismissals ran afoul of legal protections for employees who advocate for changes to their workplace, and the NLRB plans to file a complaint accusing Amazon of unfair labor practices if the company does not settle the case.

Amazon stated that, “We support every employee’s right to criticize their employer’s working conditions, but that does not come with blanket immunity against our internal policies, all of which are lawful. We terminated these employees not for talking publicly about working conditions, safety, or sustainability, but

rather, for repeatedly violating internal policies.”

Cunningham and Costa, both user-experience

designers, were among the leaders of an employee group that pushed Amazon to do more to address climate change. Last year, as the coronavirus began spreading, they sought to use their group to highlight the demands of workers who pack and ship items in the company’s warehouses. The pair say they were fired shortly after circulating an invitation to their coworkers to attend a virtual event connecting warehouse workers and tech employees. Some Amazon employees called in sick to protest the firings.

The charges are among dozens of complaints filed against Amazon with the U.S. labor regulator since the pandemic began. When regional NLRB offices find a company has broken the law and aren’t able to secure a settlement, they issue complaints on behalf of the agency’s general counsel, which are then heard by administrative law judges. Those judges’ rulings can then be appealed to the NLRB’s presidentially appointed members in Washington and from there to federal court.



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Know what to do if you feel too tired to work safely.

- ▲ Use a buddy system while you’re at work. Check in with each other to ensure everyone is coping with work hours and demands.
- ▲ Watch yourself and your coworkers for signs of fatigue — like yawning, difficulty keeping your eyes open, and difficulty concentrating. When you see something, say something to your coworkers so you can prevent workplace injuries and errors.
- ▲ Find out if your employer has a formal program

to help you manage fatigue on the job. Read information about the program and ask questions so you fully understand your employer’s policies and procedures for helping employees manage fatigue.

- ▲ Report any fatigue-related events or close-calls to a manager to help prevent injuries and errors.
- ▲ Do not work if your fatigue threatens the safety of yourself or others. Report to a manager when you feel too tired to work safely.