

THE HIGH PRICE OF STRESS

How to Lower Health Care's Bottom Line

Companies today carefully calculate their bottom line, and the current cost of health care is of global concern. Yet, how often is one important ingredient—*STRESS*—factored in?

The Gallup Organization Well Being Index, the country's largest poll of health and well-being, polls at least 1,000 adults daily. Here are some of their recent findings:

- Almost 40% of those polled said they were significantly stressed the day before.
- Two-thirds reported at least one chronic health problem, including hypertension and high cholesterol.
- 28% claimed they were not well rested.
- Two-thirds of working adults are overweight or obese.

Based on responders' answers, the impact of negative work environment alone results in 12.3 million sick days a month nationwide amounting to about \$14 billion a year in wages.

In addition to these statistics, The American Psychological Association published an online study reflecting the responses of 1,848 adults. Their findings include the following:

- 77% experienced physical symptoms during the last month as a result of stress
- 73% experienced psychological stress during the last month
- 74% find work a significant source of stress
- 48% of adults lay awake at night because of stress
- 43% overeat or eat unhealthy foods because of stress
- 55% reported varying degrees of lost productivity while at work during the past month
- 7% have sought professional support during the past year

To help us evaluate the financial impact of these findings, let's consider one chronic illness, diabetes.

The prevalence of diabetes is increasing, partly as a result of obesity. According to the American Diabetes Association, the total annual economic impact of diabetes in 2007 was estimated to be

\$174 billion. This figure includes medical costs, indirect costs related to increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, disease related unemployment disability, and loss of productive capacity due to early mortality. According to the ADA, 20% of health care dollars is spent caring for someone with diabetes.

The impact of stress on diabetics is well documented. Not only does stress directly impact blood sugar control, but, when stressed, people use unhealthy coping mechanisms such as overeating, smoking and drinking alcohol. Stress also directly impacts the immune system which inhibits healing.

Wounds heal much more quickly in the absence of stress as shown by Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, Ohio State University School of Medicine, who observed that a pencil eraser size wound took 9 days longer to heal in a group of care givers who were under stress.

If we were to integrate stress management techniques and lifestyle changes into the care of diabetics, the savings could be astronomical.

Let's consider more facts from "Stress in America". People are losing sleep as a result of stress. People overeat and experience cravings when they have too little sleep. Sleepiness can lead to disruption of family life, an elevated rate of auto accidents (as much as 7 fold increase) occupational accidents, impaired immune function and increased cardiovascular events.

Forty-three percent of those surveyed reported overeating in response to stress. We see the cycle continuing ad infinitum: people experience stress, overeat in response, become obese, are at greater risk for type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular issues and orthopedic issues.

What do we do with this information?

Employers are paying a large portion of these costs in the form of absenteeism, presenteeism (employees who come to work ill, share that illness with others, and are less productive), health insurance premiums and Worker's Compensation premiums. They are also in a position to reduce the stress reported by 74% of the APA survey who say that work is a significant source of stress in their lives.

If you are an employer, please consider becoming pro-active in implementing changes.

Consider the following interventions personally and for your company's wellness program:

1. Schedule time to meditate daily.

The Wall Street Journal, November 5, 2004, [Scan of Monks' Brains show Meditation Alters Structure and Function](#), talks about Neuroplasticity "the brain's recently discovered ability to change its structure by expanding or strengthening circuits that are used and by shrinking or weakening those that are rarely used. Just as aerobics sculpts the muscles, mental training sculpts gray matter in ways scientists are only beginning to fathom."

For those who find it difficult to meditate, consider starting with “Peace of Mind”, a relaxation CD for anxiety. It is simple, easy to use and cost effective. It’s available at www.atlanticcomplementary.com.

2. Develop a culture of empowerment and responsibility.
3. Provide encouragement and opportunities for employees to adopt healthy habits.
4. Mediate differences of opinion.
5. Ask employees for input and hear their response.
6. Create a comfortable and peaceful work environment.

Incorporating these simple and cost effective actions can and will have a huge impact on personal lives, productivity and ultimately costs associated with health care.

This article reflects the opinion of the author, **Sharon M. O’Connor, RN, CEO**

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