



## Stress: An Occupational Hazard

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Define stress in the workplace.
2. Describe the negative effects of workplace stress.
3. Discuss measures to effectively manage workplace stress.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), workers in the healthcare fields experience some of the highest stress levels among US workers. This underscores what those of us in healthcare already know— that our jobs can be a significant source of stress in our lives. There are many factors that can cause significant workplace stress. These include erratic shift work, high-volume workload, increasing documentation requirements, emergency situations, and fear of making a mistake that could cause harm, to name just a few. In addition, the current economic climate in the US has resulted in increased work-related stress in all fields of employment, due to fear of layoffs, increased workload, assignment to unfamiliar tasks or areas, limited pay increases, reduced benefits, and longer working hours.

This newsletter will focus on occupational stress among healthcare workers, including defining stress and reviewing its physiologic and psychosocial effects. Sources of stress will be covered, as well as symptoms of unhealthy stress and actions/resources to help manage this stress.

### What is Stress?

Stress can be defined as any factor, either internal or external, that requires some sort of change or adaptation by the person. Stress is commonly associated with events

that we consider negative, such as a death. But, it can also occur with "happy" or positive events, such as a wedding or the birth of a baby.

Stress can have beneficial effects, such as motivating someone to finish a task or stimulating creativity. Or, its effects can be negative or undesirable, such as when stress causes someone to "shut down" or become less functional. In common use, many of us use the term stress in the more narrow sense, to describe an unpleasant or harmful response to something that affects us negatively.

The CDC defines occupational stress as "the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker." This may happen when the worker cannot meet the job requirements, feels overwhelmed, or receives little or no satisfaction from performing the job. Work stress is commonly the result of the interaction between the particular employee and the job requirements. One employee may find a specific job or conditions very stressful, while another may not.

Occupational stress is a common concern among workers. A study by the American Psychological Association found that 75% of those surveyed identify their job as a significant source of stress, and over half reported that their productivity is decreased by stress.



## Effects of Workplace Stress

Stress in the workplace can have many effects on the worker, both physiological and psychosocial. Humans have a built-in survival mechanism called the “fight or flight” response. This response allowed primitive humans to react quickly to danger, either by attacking the threat or running away. Today, our threats are more likely to be work deadlines than wild animals, but the flight or fight response continues.



When a threat is perceived, the adrenal glands secrete adrenaline, a hormone that increases heart rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Blood flow to the GI tract and kidneys decreases, to send more blood to the muscles. These responses are designed to allow fast action to deal with the threat, then the body returns to normal. But in today’s world, this stress response can become chronic, and the body doesn’t adequately return to a non-stressed state. This can cause effects such as:

**Physiological effects:** headache, pounding heart, stomach upset, nervousness, diarrhea or constipation, exhaustion, back pain, eating too much or too little, and sleeping too much or too little

**Psychosocial effects:** sadness, lack of motivation, irritability, unhappiness, impaired relationships with family or co-workers, excessive worry, difficulty concentrating, smoking, inactivity, and decreased job performance



When these stress responses persist over a period of time, illnesses may result, such as high blood pressure and other cardiovascular disease, ulcers, and infection due to decreased immune response. Mental health issues, such as alcohol or drug abuse, depression, or anxiety may also occur. In the workplace, these stress responses commonly result in absenteeism, low morale, higher healthcare costs, employee turnover, decreased productivity, and increased worker errors.

## Managing Stress Effectively

Everyone experiences stress at times—it is an unavoidable aspect of life. The good news is, your body and mind are well-equipped to respond to it. However, you must also effectively manage those responses to prevent the harmful and unproductive effects of chronic stress in the workplace.

As a home health aide, there are many aspects of your job that could be perceived as stressful.

Keep tabs on how you are responding to your job demands. Everyone has stressful days at work now and then, and this is normal, and sometimes even useful. But chronic, daily stress is not normal, and may be harmful. When stress occurs, pay attention to how you respond to it. Do you become agitated, with increased activity in an attempt to get things done? Or do you shut down, due to feeling overwhelmed and powerless to meet the demands? What physical and mental effects do you notice? Do these effects go away after a short period, or do they continue for hours, days, or weeks?

If you are experiencing job stress, try to determine the sources of this stress, considering factors such as work schedule, interactions with others, and job demands. This will help in your attempts to make changes and to cope effectively with the stress.

Even when you can’t control the stressful situation, you can control how you respond to it. Learn how to calm and soothe yourself without shutting down, attacking others, or using unhealthy foods, alcohol, drugs, or tobacco:

- Practice techniques such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation, and meditation.
- When you notice that you’re focusing on angry or negative thoughts, actively replace these with thoughts or memories that you enjoy.
- Practice assertive communication, and ask for help when you need it.
- Talk to your support system of family and friends.
- Get some physical activity every day, such as walking or going to the gym. This is an excellent way to improve mood and promote relaxation.
- Take a warm shower or bath, get some exercise, listen to music, or engage in other activities that promote relaxation for you.

These management techniques will help you to cope with stressful situations. If there are specific, work-related issues, you may want to talk to your supervisor. For example, it may be possible to make a change in your work schedule, or to receive additional training if there are specific tasks that cause stress for you. Also, if your agency has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), this may also be helpful in learning to manage and reduce your stress.

Workplace stress can be effectively managed by recognizing the sources of stress and how you cope with them, as well as taking steps to reduce or eliminate factors contributing to stress.



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NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ UNIT: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_ 1. Common sources of workplace stress for healthcare workers include:
  - A. managing increasing documentation requirements
  - B. handling emergency client situations
  - C. work schedules involving several different shifts
  - D. all of the above
  
- \_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following is common to all types of stress?
  - A. requires a change or adaptation
  - B. produces harmful or negative effects
  - C. affects the person's family members
  - D. the root cause is interpersonal relationships
  
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Stress can have positive effects, such as increased motivation or creativity.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
- \_\_\_\_ 4. Events that a person perceives as "good" or happy, such as a graduation or getting a new job, do not cause stress.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
- \_\_\_\_ 5. According to the CDC, workplace stress is defined as a poor match between the:
  - A. physical environment of the workplace and the job requirements
  - B. management style of the supervisor and personality traits of the worker
  - C. job requirements and the capabilities, needs and resources of the worker
  - D. culture of the workplace and the values of the worker

- \_\_\_6. The body's response to stress includes all of the following EXCEPT:
- A. increased heart rate
  - B. decreased respiratory rate
  - C. increased blood pressure
  - D. decreased blood flow to the GI tract
- \_\_\_7. Chronic stress may cause which of the following in the affected person:
- A. insomnia
  - B. headache
  - C. difficulty concentrating
  - D. all of the above
- \_\_\_8. Chronic workplace stress may contribute to physical problems, such as ulcers or cardiovascular disease, but does not cause mental health issues.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_9. In the workplace, chronic stress is most likely to result in:
- A. increased productivity
  - B. decreased worker errors
  - C. decreased healthcare costs
  - D. increased absenteeism
- \_\_\_10. Beth is a home health aide who is feeling increasingly stressed due to her work schedule, which often conflicts with her family responsibilities. The most effective action that Beth can take to address her stress level is to:
- A. spend more time with her favorite hobbies, cooking and eating
  - B. practice relaxation exercises
  - C. talk with her supervisor about a possible change in schedule
  - D. ask her co-workers to switch shifts with her

