

ACTU NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY CONFERENCE

“WHAT CAN BE DONE TO STOP STRESS AT WORK?”

Panel: How stress at work affects health, safety, family and social relationships”

Work injury and stress

Over ten years ago, in 1985, I interviewed Mary as part of a study of the social and health effects of work injury amongst 30 members of the then Australian Telecommunications Employees’ Association. Mary had been off work for over a year with a severe repetition strain injury. She reported a high level of stress at work prior to her injury, feeling anxious, tense, frustrated and upset because of her dirty work environment, low income, low level of involvement in decisions about her work, work pressures and the attitudes of her supervisor.

After her injury, Mary reported that she often experienced a wide range of stress symptoms, including feeling run down, tenseness, irritability, depression, tearfulness, tightness in the chest, loss of appetite and reduced interest in sex. Mary said this caused conflict with her husband, because she felt bad. “I cry every day,” she said, “and I don’t want him to look at me.”

As we went further with the interview, Mary became more tearful. Then she told me her 15 year old daughter was seeing a psychiatrist. Her daughter had become so traumatised and stressed by Mary’s suffering and depression that the daughter had herself suffered a nervous breakdown and become suicidal. In turn, Mary felt a failure as a mother because of her daughter’s inability to cope with Mary’s pain and depression. Mary said she was too embarrassed to go out with her daughter. She stopped visiting friends. She said, “I don’t want to have people asking me questions because it upsets me.”

Mary’s story links the stress she experienced at work with her work injury. The inter-relationships of her work-related stress and her injury quickly spilled over into the home, and there its effects magnified and intensified. Away from the public pressures and constraints of her workplace, and in the isolation of her own home, Mary’s stress leached into her marriage, her family, and her social relationships.

Stress at work does not stay at work. Working people bring their work stress home. Stress at work becomes stress in a marriage. Stress at work becomes stress in parent-child relationships. Stress at work becomes stress in your social relationships.

The myth of our industrialised society that separates the worlds of work and home as two distinct spheres is revealed as a lie by stories such as Mary’s.

Farming businesses and stress

In 1989 the Urban Ministry Network conducted a study of 50 farming families in the salinity-affected Victorian shires of Deakin and Waranga in northeast Victoria. This study also confirms that work and home life cannot be separated into two distinct spheres. Forty-one per cent of those interviewed reported increased levels of stress in their family over the previous three years. Those who reported increased levels of stress were more likely to have reported longer hours worked on their farms, with some farmers reporting 80 - 100 hours worked per week. In these circumstances, there is no boundary between work and home. Home is the workplace, and work takes up all of home life. Nor surprisingly then, pressure of business correlated with the amount of time farming couples spent on their marital relationship. The greater the financial pressures on their business, the more likely farming couples were to report less time for their marital relationship. Similarly, those who reporting having to "tighten their belts" financially were more likely to report higher levels of marital conflict. The areas of greatest disagreement for these farming couples were the issues of whether to continue farming, decisions about buying household furnishings, and having time off from work.

The experience of these farming families is a clear indication that stress at work does not stay at work. The stress of work obliterates the mythical boundary between work and home, and sets up conflicts and tensions which move backwards and forwards between the two spheres, undermining the quality of life in both spheres. So the cost of stress at work cannot be limited to its effects on the workplace, on work relations and productivity. The full cost of stress at work must include the cost of its impact in the home and in the so-called 'private' world of workers. The cost of work-related stress on the home may include marital conflict and divorce, mental illness, impairment of children's health, and social isolation.

Corporatisation and stress

A research project carried out by UMN in 1996 concerning the working lives of thirty-eight ASU shop stewards in Melbourne's corporatised water industry reported similar findings. As one respondent, George, said, "I'm spending more time at work. I'm going home all stressed out and my work problems come with me, which in turn causes problems at home. I'm continually thinking about work problems at home, and I never used to."

George's comments illustrate a further myth that has little basis in fact. One of the touted benefits to employees of corporatisation is that commercialising employment relations will 'free' employees from the supposed constraints of bureaucracy. The promise to employees from corporatisation is their empowerment, which will in turn lead to increased work satisfaction and greater personal fulfilment. But the reality is more like enslavement rather than freedom. Two-thirds of those interviewed reported that job security, work stress, and work morale had worsened a lot compared with three years ago. Worker's comments included "I used to enjoy coming to work prior to the new direction in Melbourne Water", "Workers don't care about their work anymore, because at the end of the day they will be shafted anyway", and "I now don't give a shit about the place".

So, rather than increased personal fulfilment, almost two thirds said that the amount of time they spent with their family had decreased. Over half said that their family's quality of life had worsened, and one third said the amount of conflict in their family had increased compared with three years ago. Workers made comments like "family quality of life has dropped off", "a major difficulty is balancing the demands of family and personal time", and "work is becoming increasingly invasive".

Blind faith in work and stress

The question of stress at work reveals a fundamental religious question for our society, because its impact is unmasking some of the myths that have been fundamental for industrialised societies. When I was slogging away at my computer late one night for the "nth" night in a row to meet a deadline for our research report on the water industry, I became aware of the rising level of tension and anxiety in my body about this unfinished report. I reflected on the report's title, "The Pressure is Enormous: The hidden costs of corporatisation" and realised the irony of working to try to save workers from stress by hiding the cost of my own stress from myself.

The power of modern myths to blind us from the truths in our own hearts is essentially a religious problem. We have put our faith in the myths of economic progress, personal freedom and fulfilment, and the sanctity of the home. But the stories of those suffering stress at work reveal that these myths have become idols, extracting a heavy cost of human sacrifice. The challenge of stopping stress at work invites us to acknowledge how much these myths have captured our hearts and souls. We need to acknowledge how much our society has put its faith in these myths for our salvation, and how much we need a renewed vision of what it means to be a human person in human community. But that is a question for a later time in your program!

References:

1. John Bottomley, 1986, They destroyed my life. O God, why? A study of the work related causes of the social and health effects experienced by injured workers, An Urban Ministry Network Inc Research Report, Melbourne.
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