

STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM PAYS OFF

Beaumont employees use on-site services such as massage, tai chi and special classes for relief.

By Elise Oberliesen / Special to The Detroit News

Les Quick often uses his lunch hour to unload work-related stress. The facilities supervisor at Troy Beaumont Hospital uses the time for a chair massage through a stress-management program at work that makes him feel "mellow and relaxed." Lower back pain motivates Quick to make an appointment for a massage every couple of weeks. "If you don't have the aches and pains, you're able to do your job a little better," Quick said. "There is a lot of stress to keep things running around here."

Managing work-related stress is an inside job for individuals and organizations, experts say. Fred Blosser, a spokesman for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), said **it's important to look at how organizations contribute to employee stress**. Correcting organizational dysfunction is cost-effective and helps diminish stress, he said. "Workplace stressors affect the employees and the employers' bottom line."

It is estimated that job stress cost U.S. organizations about \$300 billion annually, according to a report from the American Institute of Stress. It cites absenteeism, turnover and declining employee productivity as contributing factors. In fact, if your significant other seems a bit more grouchy than usual, it could be the work-related stress. A telephone poll by Harris Interactive reported 42 percent of the survey's respondents cited "work pressures" as a source of strain on their relationships.

Employees who ignore stress-related symptoms may be more likely to take an unanticipated trip to a cardiologist or psychiatrist. **Cardiovascular disease and psychological disorders are associated with stress**, experts say. Warning signs of stress include headache, sleep disruptions, short temper and difficulty concentrating, NIOSH data show. **Musculoskeletal disorders, workplace injury and ulcers are related to stress, too.**

Steven Sauter, NIOSH's lead researcher, wants to better understand the impact that work environments have on employees. Risk factors that may contribute to on-the-job stress include increased use of contingent workers, organization restructuring, downsizing and little control over one's job. "As workplace demands increase, and workers have little control, stress goes up," Sauter said. Sauter said a lack of peer and supervisory support is another known contributor of stress. Considering the globalized economy, increased competition and job insecurity, Sauter said more research is needed to fully understand how these factors affect employee health and safety.

Tammy Conway works in the graphics department at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan. Conway's fast-paced, deadline-driven work prompted her to take an onsite stress management class. Time-sensitive mass mailings, last-minute changes and "unforgiving deadlines" create a high-pressure atmosphere, she said. "I found myself going to the vending machine more and more," Conway said. M&Ms and Diet Coke were Conway's stress-busters until taking the stress management class. Now, the 41-year-old takes five-minute breaks and initiates problem-solving sessions with colleagues. Instead of feeding the vending machine, Conway is saving her spare change for something special. "I may treat my husband to a nice New Year's dinner or hit some after-Christmas sales," she said.

Beaumont Hospital offers a variety of services available at worksites through its health and wellness programs. Julie Kusiak, the program manager, said the reason why the programs exist is "because employees wanted them." Employees pay \$15 for a 15-minute chair massage. Kusiak said stress reduction is the objective of many classes offered at Beaumont. She said it's just as important to **consider nontraditional services to provide better employee wellness programs**. Financial health, debt management and emotional health are a few supplemental programs. A tai chi lunch and learn series of the traditional Chinese martial arts to reduce stress is going strong, she said.

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