

**PANEL: WORKPLACE STRESS, DEPRESSION
COSTS JOBS, MONEY, LEADS TO PHYSICAL ILLS**

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WASHINGTON (PAI)--Stress and depression in the workplace, which affects almost one in every 10 U.S. adults, costs workers their jobs, costs companies money and has direct ties to physical illnesses--such as strokes, heart attacks and diabetes--which also harm workers, a panel of specialists said.

Speaking at an Aug. 2 forum hosted by the AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees, the panel also said unions should take the lead in bargaining for mental health treatment by qualified outside professionals--through employee assistance programs--or even for other, simpler, measures to relieve worker stress.

Without that union spur, too many firms and supervisors ignore or minimize workplace stress and depression, or fire the workers, even though one panelist quoted a federal survey showing up to one-quarter of all stress and depression is job-related.

The dimensions of the problem of workplace stress are enormous, the causes are many and varied and impact is widespread, panelists agreed. Former Assistant U.S. Surgeon General Marilyn Gaston said "stress, depression and anxiety are all associated with diabetes, hyperthyroidism, lung cancer, heart disease, strokes and other diseases."

Studies show the correlation between the physical ailments and stress and depression runs as high as 70 percent, in the case of stroke, panelists said.

Stress and depression can be brought on, they added, by factors at work, including increasing volumes of work at a time when the workforce is cut, corporate attitudes, hard-nosed bosses, prospective layoffs and bad working conditions.

But workers also bring stress and depression from other outside causes--home, individual and family factors, from worrying about their health insurance to worrying about their kids--to the job site. That results in reduced efficiency, greater absenteeism, lower productivity and sometimes workplace disruption.

Studies estimate the annual cost of depression and stress at the workplace at \$51.5 billion yearly, and rising.

"Stress is a major issue in the workplace and it's often taken for granted," Gaston said. "Employees ought to be given a choice" on how to relieve stress and decompress.

If they don't get that choice, the alternative is harmful to workers and sometimes is fatal, warned clinical psychologist Gayle Porter, a former Chicago teacher. Reactions to stress and depression on the job include everything from increased alcoholism--drinking beer among construction workers--to "going postal," she said.

That point was confirmed by one audience member.

Machinists' safety and health director Mike Flynn told the group of a successful joint union-management stress and depression relief program at IAM-represented Air Canada, and added the union is now discussing whether to implement it at a Lockheed-Martin plant in Georgia.

"We're doing that after violence at the Lockheed-Martin plant in Mississippi where a worker came in shooting and killed six people. It was a problem there" with stress "and no one had a vehicle to address his problem," Flynn explained. "When the shots went off, everybody knew who it was."

The panelists agreed on the dimensions of stress and depression at work, many of the causes and the need for treatment rather than ignorance. But they also emphasized roadblocks workers and unions must overcome.

One is lingering attitudes among managers and certain groups of workers that attach stigmas to anyone seeking help for stress and depression. Another is company short-sightedness, where managers refuse to spend money for treatment of workers suffering from those ills--even though they would save more money in the long run.

Yet a third roadblock, and another cause of stress, is that even where health insurance covers such treatments, the coverage is limited. One panelist said insurance should cover unlimited outpatient consultations that stressed or depressed workers need with professionals.

Unions negotiate for benefits to help workers through stress and depression on the job, and should continue to do so, panelists said. They also suggested other practical, inexpensive moves to relieve job stress and depression, from flexible working hours to "quiet rooms" to 5-minute breaks for walking and decompressing from job tension to even shifting work cubicles to let in sunshine. That shift, one said, would aid workers suffering from a form of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Employers could also improve conditions by becoming more attuned to the workplace itself as a cause of stress and depression, panelists said.

"A psychologically healthy workplace is one where employees are recognized and respected, where they're involved in decision-making, where conditions are adjusted for the work-family balance and where communication is open," said Dr. Dianne Polowczyk, president-elect of the New York State Psychological Association and a member of the American Federation of Teachers.

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