

## Finding Balance: Bridging the Work/Family Divide



### Is My Job Killing Me?

By Dr. Malcolm Smith

Recently a dear friend started having sharp chest pains, shortness of breath, skyrocketing blood pressure—the classic signs of cardiac problems. A few days later as my buddy and his wife were relating the horrors of their hospital experience (he will be fine with some major lifestyle changes and constant medical attention.), I nearly choked

when I heard my friend tell me his wife blamed the stress of his job as the cause of his health problems and wanted him to slow down at work, but that he thought it would be more stressful to slow down because his work might become mediocre.

I could have laughed the comment off as a “Classic Type A” sort of silliness, if I didn’t see some of myself in his comment. It also made me wonder. Is it the nature of the job or the nature of our personalities that causes work stress?

Even here in the confines of academia, both self-induced and external pressure can combine to create what sometimes feels like a toxic work environment. My friend’s experience started me thinking about my job in context of my life and my family. What do we really know about the relationship between our careers and our health? Can our jobs kill us?

Consider some hard facts about heart disease. High blood pressure alone, according to the American Heart Association, affects about 73 million people in the U.S. Each year, about 55,000 die from it. An exploding body of research indicates that a person’s weight is only one small contributor to a world-wide epidemic of hypertension and increases in heart disease.

The most recent evidence was released earlier this year by researchers at University College of London in the UK who have found the most convincing evidence to date of a direct link between coronary heart disease and work stress. Looking at the lives and jobs of more than 10,000 British men and women since 1985, they found that stress contributes both directly, by triggering stress pathways in the body, and indirectly, by triggering poor lifestyle choices in stressed workers’ behaviors.

So, stress not only increases activity in our nervous systems that causes negative health effects, it spurs us to make poor decisions at the fast food drive-in, the liquor store, and in our frequency of lunchtime walks or trips to the gym.

One important concept in examining work stress that many researchers are using is the idea of “job strain.” It is a formula that considers that stress is the result of the demands a worker feels and the range of decision-making freedom a worker has to deal with them. So, when an important research proposal of mine gets hung up in some distant university office of something

or other, my job strain increases. Job strain has also been found in the opposite extreme, when both a worker's job demands and his/her decision-making ability are low.

Job strain has been linked to other health conditions besides heart disease. Research at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has attributed job strain and stress to mental health problems, back and musculoskeletal disorders, workplace injuries, suicide, cancer, ulcers and impaired immune function.

The research has some clear implications about the root causes of stress in our workplaces. First, job stress can't be mitigated solely by an employee wellness program. It takes organizational and cultural change. Generally, the research indicates that to reduce strain and stress at work you must address at least six areas. Ask yourself the following questions in each area of your job:

- **Tasks:** Is what you're doing meaningful? Does it make a difference? Does anyone tell you so? Are you using your skills? Do you have some control over what you are assigned? Is what you're doing ethical?
- **Management:** Do you participate in management decisions? Is your workplace family-friendly? Do people at your job communicate with you?
- **Relationships:** Do you feel supported? Do the people you work with care about you? Do you care about them? Do you laugh and have fun?
- **Roles:** Do you have too much responsibility? Too little? Are your expectations clear?
- **Career:** Do you feel secure in your job? Do you have opportunities for both personal and professional growth? Are things changing too fast, without preparation? Does your family know who you are? Do you have time to do the things you really enjoy?
- **Environment:** Is your workplace unpleasant? Is it dangerous? Is it crowded, polluted, or uncomfortable?

Looking at the list of questions above can be revealing. If you find yourself, as I have, seeing some room for improvement, it may be time to rock the boat a bit and make some changes. The research is clear that just changing your own behavior may not alleviate job stress; you have to change the toxicity in your work environment. It may well be worth either demanding some changes in your work environment or changing jobs, because where work and stress are concerned; it really is a life and death situation.

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