

WOMEN AND ON-THE-JOB STRESS

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist

Women now make up almost half of America's work force, and like men, they often suffer from job-related stress. But some of the sources of a woman's stress are unique to their gender, as are some of the work-related health hazards, according to a report in the Journal of the American Medical Women's Association (June, 2000).

Women constituting nearly half (46%) of today's work force, researchers are starting to identify occupational stress and health risks that are unique to women. According to this new research, more women than men report high levels of stress and stress-related illness, and 60% of women in one survey said that their number-one problem was job stress.

Prolonged exposure to a stressful working condition may lead to illness or disease. Stress can cause acute psychological, behavioral, or physical reactions that can eventually lead to illness, such as depression and coronary heart disease. Occupation stress can come from working conditions themselves, such as overload, poor interpersonal relations and physical working conditions, as well as from job-related factors like discrimination, lack of opportunity for advancement, and boredom. Both men and women face many of these stressors, but working women also face unique difficulties that can cause additional stress.

Sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and the pressures of combining work and family put particular stress on working women. This research noted that in 1997, women still earned only 79% of what men earned, and that even after taking into account education, experience, and other career factors, men and women still differed significantly in salary and managerial levels.

Despite the more active roles that many men are taking in home and family life, a recent study found that 80% to 90% of married working women still have primary responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and shopping.

This study noted that measures to reduce stress can focus on either the individual or the workplace. Women can be taught coping skills, relaxation techniques and other stress management strategies, but if workplace stress stays the same, these strategies may lose their effectiveness. The most effective way of reducing occupational stress is to eliminate the stressors through organizational and job redesign interventions. These can include allowing workers to participate more in decision making, clarifying job responsibilities, expanding opportunities for promotion, and providing more family support programs that help both men and women cope with work-life issues, such as child care.