

Knowledge Notes

EFFECTIVENESS OF ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

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Objectives

To evaluate the effectiveness of organizational-level interventions for the prevention of occupational stress in terms of reducing stress, psychological symptoms, absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover.

Background

Worldwide, occupational stress (also referred to as stress in the workplace or job stress) has increased considerably over the past several years. Data from national surveys indicate that approximately one-third of employed Canadians report high stress levels. Workers in the healthcare industry are significantly more stressed than employees in general, with close to half (45%) reporting high levels of stress. Although not always directly related, job stress has been linked to psychological and physical illness, absenteeism (including disability claims), presenteeism, and turnover. Workplace stress is therefore costly for employers, which is why they are seeking to prevent the problem.

Method

We selected systematic reviews (SRs) to formulate the evidence base for this review. We identified all SRs by conducting a systematic search of the health and business literature published in English between January 1997 and July 2007. The following databases were searched: The Cochrane Library, PubMed, CRD Databases (HTA, DARE), PsycINFO, Embase, Cinahl, ABI Inform, Econ Lit, Web of Science, and Business Source Complete. In addition, we searched the University of Alberta library catalogue, government websites, HTA agency websites, and the Google search engine.

The included systematic reviews were appraised independently by two assessors with respect to various methodological aspects using two quality appraisal tools. The same two assessors independently extracted data from the systematic reviews. The evidence was qualitatively synthesized and presented in summary tables.

Results

According to the reviewed evidence, research methods in the area of occupational stress prevention have improved over the past 10 years. However, the need for more rigour remains. Six systematic reviews (SRs) assessed the effectiveness of organizational stress prevention interventions and met the inclusion criteria of this review. Three SRs focused on healthcare workers as their population of interest, whereas the remaining three included employees regardless of the industry or occupation in which they worked. In

these studies there was considerable variability in how interventions were classified, the types of strategies employed, and the instruments used to measure outcomes.

The following points follow from the reviewed evidence:

- *Stress*: Two interventions of good methodological quality were associated with significant reductions in employee stress. One consisted of a psychological training program with theory, role playing, and experiential exchanges, whereas the other intervention consisted of “action teams,” whereby employee representatives liaised with management and employees to improve team communication and cohesiveness, work scheduling, conflict resolution, and the recognition of good work.
- *Burnout*: Five interventions were associated with significant reductions in employee burnout, although only two received good methodological quality ratings. One consisted of an emotion-oriented care training program, including clinical lessons and supervision meetings, whereas the other, a participatory intervention, was based on “health circles,” in which small groups of employee representatives met to identify psychosocial stressors and recommend solutions.
- *Psychological wellbeing*: Seven interventions were associated with significant improvements in psychological wellbeing. Four received good methodological quality ratings. Two interventions used a participatory approach to reduce stress, including the creation of committees with employee representatives. The other two involved policy or procedural changes: (a) the immediate transfer of control over production to employee work groups and (b) the introduction of flexible working hours.
- *Sickness absence and absenteeism*: Seven interventions were associated with reductions in absenteeism, for three of which statistical significance was reported. These three interventions also received generally high methodological quality ratings. In addition to improving psychological wellbeing, the two participatory interventions mentioned above significantly reduced absenteeism. An intervention consisting of more teamwork, more personnel, role clarification, production goals, fewer supervisors, a partial change in the shift system, and increased feedback significantly reduced sick leave.
- *Turnover*: Four interventions were associated with a reduction in employee turnover, for one of which statistical significance was reported. A change to primary care nursing model with support from managers, advice on core skills, and promotion of effective interprofessional communication reduced turnover.

Conclusions

There is limited evidence that organizational-level interventions reduce stress, psychological symptoms, or absenteeism in the workplace when compared to no-intervention controls or other interventions. We have drawn no conclusions on the effectiveness of one intervention relative to another. Studies have not yet incorporated measures of presenteeism in their evaluation of stress prevention interventions. Implications for Alberta and considerations for further research are discussed.

Reference

Bergerman L, Corabian P, Harstall C. Effectiveness of organizational interventions for the prevention of occupational stress. Institute of Health Economics, Edmonton AB Canada, Report January 2009; pp i-65.

The full report can be downloaded free of charge from the IHE website at the following address: <http://www.ihe.ca/publications/library/2009/effectiveness-of-organizational-interventions-for-the-prevention-of-workplace-stress/>

This report is the result of a partnership between the former Alberta Mental Health Board (now Alberta Health Services) and the Institute of Health Economics.

