

Work Stress Taking Larger Financial Toll

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By Steve James

NEW YORK (Reuters) - In the 1999 movie "Office Space," stressed-out workers crammed in cubicles and belittled by incompetent bosses plot to break out of their bored existence. One smashes the permanently jammed photocopy machine and another finally loses it and burns down the office.

Hollywood fantasy? Perhaps, but job stress is a leading cause of illness, depression and work place violence in America today and is increasing, experts say.

It is estimated to cost U.S. industry a staggering \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, health costs and programs to help workers manage stress as unemployment rises and companies cut staff in what is euphemistically known as "down-sizing."

Fears of losing jobs as the economy stalls, or not having a personal life as pagers, cellphones and the Internet keep employees linked to their work 24 hours a day, have Americans complaining of muscular pain or fatigue or even seeking therapy. Surveys show more people are driven to frustration or physical violence by the daily demands they face at work.

"Stress is increasing dramatically," said Dr. Paul Rosch, president of the American Institute of Stress (AIS), which estimates 1 million workers are absent daily due to stress.

Causes range from the demands of competing in the global marketplace, the need to keep up with new equipment and technology and creeping depersonalization in the work place.

"VERY FRUSTRATING"

"People sit 6 feet apart in little cubicles and never speak with each other except by computer. You never hear a human voice and it's 'press one' or 'press three', it's very frustrating," Rosch told Reuters by telephone from his office in Yonkers, New York.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reports that more than half of the 550 million working days lost annually in the United States from absenteeism are stress-related and that one-in-five of all last minute no-shows are due to job stress.

"We estimate it (stress) costs American industry \$300 billion a year in terms of diminished productivity, employee turnover and insurance," the AIS's Rosch said.

His institute cites a 2000 Gallup Poll, "Attitudes in the American Workplace," sponsored by The Marlin Co., a North Haven, Connecticut-based work place communications firm.

It found that 80 percent of workers feel stress on the job and nearly half say they need help coping with it. Twenty-five percent have felt like screaming or shouting because of job stress, 14 percent felt like

striking a co-worker and 10 percent are concerned about a colleague becoming violent.

According to AIS, an average of 20 workers are murdered each week in the United States, making homicide the second leading cause of work place deaths.

"Postal workers who work in a safe environment have experienced so many fatalities due to job stress that 'going postal' has crept into our language," the Institute's Web site, <http://www.stress.org>, says.

"Desk rage" and "phone rage" have also become increasingly common terms, it said. Adding to the increasing stress of modern living, Americans work longer hours and take fewer vacations to unwind, than people in Europe or elsewhere.

An International Labor Organization study showed that Americans worked the equivalent of an extra 40-hour week in 2000 than 10 years before. Americans work almost a month longer than the Japanese and three months more than Germans, it said.

MORALE CAN SUFFER

Stress can manifest itself in different ways, from breaking out in hives to chronic headaches, back pain, obesity, insomnia and depression, all contriving to drive up health-care costs. In addition, morale often suffers.

Betsy Robinson, director of strategic program development at Intracorp, a medical and disability management company, said a recent survey by Mercer Management Consulting revealed that although muscular and skeletal problems are the leading cause of disability in the work place, 70 percent of employers said stress was the fastest growing cause.

"It's a strong driver of absence and requires management," she told Reuters. "It's in a kind of stealth mode, because although headaches or insomnia may be the reason for long-term absence, underneath could be stress."

Diane Larson, employee assistance consultant at Cigna Behavioral Health, a subsidiary of health insurer Cigna Corp., said stress covers many things such as uncertainty over the future, lack of recognition by employers, a lack of control or unsure job responsibilities.

She said she speaks to employers about different ways to identify stress in workers and institute programs to prevent or deal with it on an individual basis or in wellness seminars.

"We talk of red flags, such as increasing absenteeism, decreases in job performance, not being able to complete jobs, or even crying and anger on the job," Larson said. "Earlier intervention is better."