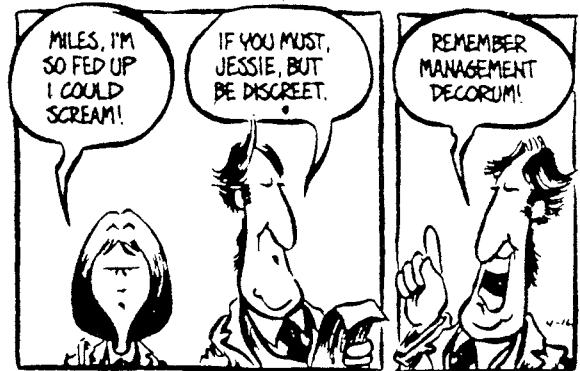


A Stress Epidemic In the Office

- In a study of 22,000 workers in 130 occupations, the government found that secretaries suffered the second highest rate of stress-related disease of all 130 occupations.
- Another government study of a single workplace found that clericals using video display terminals (VDTs) reported more stress on the job than any other occupation ever studied (including air traffic controllers).
- According to the Framingham, MA Heart Study, female clerical workers experience coronary heart disease (CHD) about twice as often as other working women. Clerical workers with children and lower family incomes experience CHD four times as much as other working women, and nearly twice as much as male workers. Heart disease, the major cause of death in the U.S., is known to be related to stress.



What Is Stress?

When we think of stress we often think of someone who is pressured or nervous. These feelings are frequent effects of stress. But on a more basic level, stress refers to a series of changes in your body when you are excited or scared. Your body "gears up" to meet a physical, mental or emotional challenge — your heart beats faster, you break into a sweat, and breathe more rapidly. And even more is happening inside — your stomach churns and your body releases chemicals which give you quick energy.

The changes your body goes through to cope with stress work well when they give you the extra drive to get on top of a situation, and then return to a relaxed state. However, if you are under severe or repeated stress day in and day out, things begin to backfire. The changes in your body due to stress can begin to cause disease.

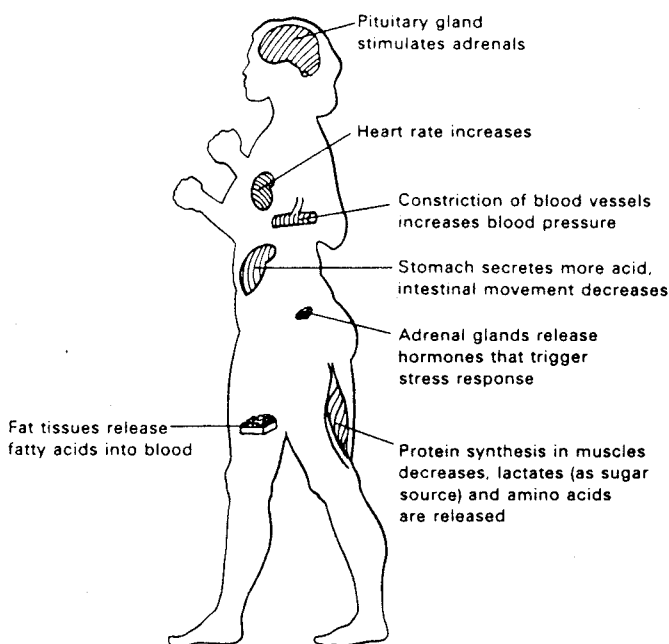
Symptoms of Stress

Some of the symptoms of longterm stress are: headaches, back or neck aches, stomach aches or diarrhea, trouble sleeping (insomnia), constant tiredness, loss or gain in appetite, frequent colds and flus, sexual and family problems. You may often feel anxious, depressed, irritable, bored, hopeless or worthless. You may find yourself turning more to cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs to escape the effects of stress. As a result, you may be more likely to be involved in accidents while driving or at work. These symptoms are not signs of personal weakness: they are the effects of your body's response to stress.

Stress-Related Diseases

These early signs sometimes develop into serious diseases such as:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- ulcers
- greater vulnerability to infections such as TB, pneumonia, viruses
- coronary heart disease
- diabetes



The body's response to stress

Clerical Work Is Stressful

Use the following as a checklist for stress in your office.

One key to a stressful job is one that demands a lot, but doesn't allow you to control how you do your job, including the pace of your work. Clerical work is especially stressful when:

- you have to work at a quick pace to keep up with a machine or quota
- your job is boring and repetitive (you do the same things over and over)
- you have a heavy workload
- you work in isolation and have little contact with coworkers

Control goes beyond how you do your job; it also includes how you are treated by the company you work for. Clerical work is more stressful when:

- your boss doesn't treat you with respect
- your supervisors make unrealistic demands on you
- you have little say in decisions about your own work
- you are discriminated against for being a woman
- you are discriminated against for being in a racial or ethnic minority
- you are paid too little
- you fear your job may end — you have no economic security

Clerical workers often work in physical surroundings that are irritating or unhealthy. These add to stress:

- excess noise
- too little fresh air
- overcrowding
- poor lighting
- hot or cold temperatures
- chemical fumes
- lack of privacy
- uncomfortable furniture and work postures

Most clerical workers are women, and many experience special problems of stress:

- two jobs: working at home and in the office
- lack of good, affordable child care
- sexual harassment on the job

The Office of the Future: More Stress?

Because of increasing office automation, the more enjoyable aspects of clerical work — variety, contact with people, natural rest breaks and changes in routine — are declining. The most stressful aspects — repetitive tasks, constant sitting, unsuitable lighting and furniture, deadend jobs, isolation, fast work pace and quotas — are on the rise. It's not the VDTs themselves, but *how* VDTs are used that causes most stress. For instance, one government study showed clerical VDT operators report the highest stress levels of all office employees. But professionals who use VDTs report the least, even less than clerical workers who don't use VDTs. This is because professionals have much more control over how they do their jobs than clerical workers. Unless clericals are able to help determine the use of automation in their offices, the stress epidemic can be expected to grow larger and larger.



What Clerical Workers Can Do

- **RECOGNIZE** the symptoms of stress, and their possible causes at work.
- **TALK** with coworkers: do they experience stress-related symptoms or disease? What aspects of their jobs create stress?
- **IDENTIFY** changes which will lessen stress at work. (See OTEP Fact Sheet on Job Content for some recommendations.)
- Get **SUPPORT** from coworkers to seek changes from management. (By working with unions, 9to5 chapters, and health and safety committees clerical workers have made important improvements.)
- **MINIMIZE** the effects of stress on your body through exercise, good diet, and relaxation while working towards changes in the office.

Produced by the Office Technology Education Project (OTEP)
6 Newsome Park, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130 (617) 524-4040