

When Work Affects Your Health

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A new year brings about many possible changes – promises to eat better, exercise more, stop smoking, save money, and so on. Another priority for some is to improve their work situation.

If that's you, there may be no better time than the present, especially after the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released a report that links a toxic workplace culture to health issues such as heart disease, depression and anxiety.

“A toxic workplace is basically any work setting where you're dealing with any sort of psychological stress, where you're feeling nervous, you have some fear, anxiety, sadness, depression – things like that,” says Victor Mendoza, a behavioral health provider with OSF HealthCare. “If you start noticing those things in your own workplace, that can be something we would call a toxic environment.”

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, the five components of a healthy workplace include: protection from harm, connection and community, work-life harmony, mattering at work and opportunity for growth.

Mendoza says now is the time for organizations to assess their relationship with employees – to create a sense of connection among workers, show them they are important, and support their professional needs.

“First of all, if they haven't added these five components, they should probably try to because I think that's a good foundation to what a healthy work environment should be like,” says Mendoza. “You want to have a workplace where you feel comfortable, you feel heard, you feel like there is upward mobility, and that that people care for you. That you're not just a number to them but that you actually are a human, and they understand and are willing to be empathic to your situation. And if there is a concern, they're open to listen to you.”

There are many ways feeling stressed or miserable can manifest in an unhealthy work environment such as increasing the risk for cardiovascular disease, increasing the chance of high blood pressure, weakening immune systems, causing headaches and increasing anxiety and stress. Mendoza says physical symptoms can include stomach aches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and racing heartbeat.

The report comes during an uncertain time in workplace culture due to the COVID pandemic, when employees are seeking more flexible opportunities including working remotely or a hybrid schedule. Mendoza adds that the pandemic also affected our routines, and when routines are changed it can impact our mental health.

“It's been really tough for a lot of people,” says Mendoza. “When all this started with the pandemic, a lot of people were having anxiety about what was going to happen. People feared losing their jobs, and a lot of people did lose their jobs, sadly, and that was very hard for them. They had to switch careers. A lot of them were lucky they were able to keep their jobs, but they had to work from home and that that created some stress as well even though we do have good technology.”

There are things, however, you can do to cope with your workplace stress. Mendoza suggests keeping track of the stressors in your job, developing healthy responses such as exercise, getting enough sleep and learning how to relax and take time to recharge by unplugging from work, and making sure to use your vacation days.

Mendoza says it's easy for some people to feel guilty about work-related issues. The most important take home message is to first take care of yourself, and not let a stressful environment affect your health.

“Sometimes you can only do so much and you have to advocate for yourself, and you have to be aware when this happens,” he adds. “So set up good boundaries with your workplace, make sure that you're taking some time off work for self-care, whatever that looks like for you, and do something you enjoy. Make sure you do some basic things like exercise, you're eating well and you're sleeping well. That's a really good foundation to deal with a toxic work environment.”