

## Safety: What's Health Got to Do With It?

### Introduction

Healthy, alert workers suffer fewer injuries and recover more quickly when hurt. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) understands this and has developed the Total Worker Health approach, integrating occupational safety and health protection with health promotion to prevent worker injury and illness and to advance health and well-being.

We have all seen it. The seasoned worker—the one everyone turns to for answers—suffers a serious injury doing something he has done thousands of times, but this time he missed an important step. We mentally set that incident aside when trending because it was an anomaly, an unexpected worker error, and there was no hazard to address—or was there?

The Total Worker Health approach provides us with tools to help answer this question—and to potentially prevent injuries as well as promoting good health that leads to a better quality of life and improved productivity. This article will introduce safety professionals to this approach and provide links to resources for implementing the Total Worker Health approach at the worksite.

### Why Total Worker Health?

Managing health promotion (wellness) and health protection (injury prevention) together benefits everyone. Improved health means workers are more alert, so they may be more aware of their environment and less likely to become distracted and do something unsafe. This distraction, illustrated in the example above, is called presenteeism—a condition where a worker is unable to be mentally present because of a health concern. The health issue could be due to sleep insufficiency, obesity, or simply as a result of being inactive. Long hours, heavy workloads, jobs that don't match our skill sets, and conflict between responsibilities at work and at home and other work or personal stressors may serve to make it worse, increasing risk of injury.

Our kidneys and liver, and even our upper respiratory tract, are important filters for removing chemical contaminants; damage to these organs may make it difficult for a worker to remove toxins from their bodies. Optimal health helps prevent chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, which may damage these and other vital organs. Physical fitness improves stamina, balance, and alertness. It reduces fatigue and helps to prevent slips, trips, and falls and other injuries that may be related to presenteeism. Fitness also serves as a deterrent to dementia in later years.

Exploring the interdependency between health and injury prevention illustrates why workers' compensation costs may be reduced when workers are in optimal health. Healthy workers may be less likely to suffer occupational illness or injury in the first place, and will likely enjoy a speedier recovery in the event of an incident. Similarly, workers who engage safely in home and leisure activities, perhaps as part of the health promotion effort, may be less likely to be hurt, thus contributing to fewer off-the-job injuries, potentially reducing health plan costs.

Managing health protection and health promotion together minimizes duplication of effort and promotes synergy. Traditional health promotion programs rarely embrace injury prevention, yet unintentional injuries were the fifth leading cause of adult deaths in 2011 – ahead of diabetes.

The goal is to create a safe and healthy work environment where workers are supported in both health protection and health promotion, a place where all workers may thrive.

In short, presenteeism may certainly be a hazard, with the Total Worker Health approach as an effective prevention strategy. Let's take a look at a few health issues that may contribute directly to presenteeism and the organization's role in prevention.

### **Applying the Total Worker Health Approach**

The Total Worker Health approach differs from traditional wellness programs that place the focus on the individual worker. It also differs from the traditional safety approach that focuses mostly on management. This approach breaks down silos, promoting participation and accountability across the company. Its goal is to create an environment in which employees are empowered—and supported—in making safe and healthy choices on and off the job. As with any safety or health program, it is important to start with solid management commitment, especially in midlevel and front-line management. An assessment is important. It can be as simple as asking an employee about the factors in his or her work and life that make it easy or hard to be healthy.

As previously mentioned, this article is not intended to provide implementation guidance. Rather the intent is to describe the Total Worker Health approach in the context of safety, and to illustrate how it might look in your work environment.

### **Refueling**

Obesity is a risk factor for presenteeism as well as other health conditions. It is now considered a health condition on its own. The rise in obesity has been in the news over the past few years. This rate has risen dramatically over the last decade. The obesity problem is much more complex than simply eating too much, yet traditional wellness programs often blame the worker. Stress is a contributor; it may alter the ways our bodies metabolize food. Changing the way work is organized by implementing flexible schedules and similar strategies may help improve work-life balance and reduce stress. There is a growing body of research that suggests that workers thrive in environments where they are given the opportunity to make decisions about their work; autonomy is an important stress reduction strategy. Hormonal and metabolic changes from increased weight and inactivity make the problem worse. And our portion sizes have changed dramatically. Our nine-inch snack plate of today was the dinner plate of yesterday. Today's dinner plate averages 12 inches in diameter.

Not getting the right nutrients also contributes to presenteeism. Our typical diet has too few fruits and vegetables (recommended 11 servings per day) and too many refined food products, which have been shown to be less satisfying than foods that are less processed. Although they deliver many calories, they leave us hungry and craving more and do not provide the nutrients the body needs. Socioeconomic and cultural factors also play a role. Healthy food is simply not available in some places, especially in urban areas.

### **How Does This Look?**

Wholesome food promotes alertness. Explore traditional wellness awareness and education activities to promote good nutrition, such as inviting a nutritionist from a local healthcare organization to do a lunch-n-learn, creating an activity around portion sizes. Do an environmental and organizational assessment. Some things to consider include:

- What is your policy for snacks at meetings?
- What kinds of foods and beverages are stocked in your vending machines?
- Are healthy foods available on-site or nearby?
- Is a refrigerator and microwave available for workers who bring healthy food from home?
- Is there a clean place for workers to enjoy their meal break?

Verbally promoting a culture of health while serving samosas and coca-cola at an all-employee meeting sends a mixed message. It isn't necessary to do away with the less healthy options completely, but a healthy option should be available to those employees who want to make a healthy choice.

### **Resources for healthy eating**

It is important to choose a food plan that focuses on a broad range of wholesome foods that help control appetite and food intake.

*An important note:* It is easy for workers who are overweight to feel ostracized or singled out in health promotion activities related to eating. Take care to avoid activities such as Biggest Loser contests. These activities focus attention on the overweight worker that may cause added stress. Instead, create healthy eating challenges and activities that promote healthy eating for all. Being of normal weight does not necessarily indicate that nutritional needs are adequately being met.

### **Rejuvenating**

Exercise provides a plethora of health benefits. It increases alertness, improves endurance, controls pain, and improves strength and agility. All of these reduce presenteeism and may serve to prevent injuries. A 30-minute walk has proven cardiovascular benefits. A brisk walk after a stressful event can help metabolize harmful stress hormones and make it easier to let go of the event. Taking extra care to really observe surroundings during a walk promotes mindfulness, which can further benefit the walker by reducing stress. Walking is probably the easiest activity to implement in the workplace, but employees should be encouraged to choose something they enjoy such as swimming, kabadi, or bicycling. The most important thing is to move. It helps to create a jogging track with markings at every 50 metres.

### **How Does This Look?**

There are a variety of ways to promote walking at the workplace. Often all that is needed is to mark off an area in the parking lot that can be designated for walking during work hours. If that isn't feasible, using apps or online tools may help create competitions across work groups during off-work hours. Posting a highway map in the break room and asking employees to use stickpins to mark progress from one city to another can be a fun and low-cost way to promote physical activity. Inviting a vendor in to talk about appropriate footwear for walking and running may be helpful; employees should be educated on how to tell when their shoes are too worn to provide adequate support. Ergonomics and fitness go hand-in-glove. Inviting a local physical therapist to speak on joint health can be a nice addition to an organization-wide ergonomics intervention. There is nothing like a walking meeting to stimulate creativity. Not all meetings are suitable for walking, but certainly meetings that have three or fewer attendees and minimal writing required could be good candidates.

As workers are encouraged to walk more, they should be refreshed on the basics of pedestrian safety. It takes 260 feet for a car to stop at 60 miles an hour on dry pavement. Unless the individual is wearing reflective clothing, he or she will likely not be seen in time for the driver to stop. High visibility walking gear is important. It is also important to remind employees to use sidewalks when available, to obey traffic rules, and to walk facing traffic if they are walking on the shoulder.

### **Resources for Exercise in the Workplace**

The American Heart Association has a website specifically designed to promote walking. The Start Walking Now! site has an employer tool kit to help launch a walking program. Employees can track their walking, and walking paths can be customized to your area.

### **Resting**

Being sleepy and fatigued are two different things. A person who is sleepy easily falls asleep when he or she sits or lies down, whereas a person who is fatigued gets relief from the physical rest and does not necessarily feel compelled to sleep. Sleep insufficiency and fatigue are significant risk factors for stress, obesity, and presenteeism and both impair mental flexibility. Workers who would never entertain the idea of coming to work intoxicated may not realize that they are placing themselves and others at similar risk if they come to work tired. Compounding the issue, workers may not be aware that they are sleepy; a microsleep is an involuntary sleep lasting about three seconds. If an individual driving a car or a scooter at 60 miles per hour experiences a microsleep, the vehicle covers approximately the length of one football field in the three seconds the driver is asleep at the wheel.

### **How Does This Look?**

Getting good sleep does not come naturally. Good nutrition and fitness are important, but equally important is sleep hygiene, or sleep health. Educating employees on how to get good sleep may be helpful. One of the areas of safety where fatigue is a prevalent problem is driving. In many cases, the main strategy for improving driver safety is a defensive driving course. Interestingly, most defensive driving courses spend very little time on fatigue, if at all. We may be more effective by using similar techniques our wellness colleagues employ to increase awareness about the problem of fatigue. Scheduling fatigue-related awareness activities and educational sessions over a period of weeks, culminating with a defensive driving course, may be a more effective strategy. Other fatigue-related issues to consider:

- Does your company encourage employees to pull over in a safe place for a quick nap if they become tired while driving? Is break-time napping allowed for shift workers?
- How long are your shifts?
- Do you have 24/7 coverage? If so, do shifts rotate forward, not back?
- How many hours per week do employees work on average?
- Do you consider hours worked and shift length in your injury analysis?

### **Resilience**

The balance between home and work responsibilities is a delicate one. Work-life conflict is one of the top stressors for workers today. The traditional approach to stress is often focused on the individual, yet the organization plays an important role in creating the stress the employee is experiencing. Tight deadlines, inadequate staffing, poorly defined career pathways, and

dysfunctional interpersonal relationships all contribute to workplace stress. Stress is a major contributor to presenteeism. Mental flexibility is impaired and it becomes difficult to focus on work when the mind is distracted by stressors regardless of their source.

### How does this look?

Reducing stress should be just the first step in a process toward a psychologically healthy workplace. Defined as a workplace that fosters employee health and well-being while enhancing organizational performance and productivity, these workplaces characteristically have good communication and goal setting, employees have autonomy and are involved, and workers at all levels are respected. They may have work-life balance strategies in place such as flexible work schedules and the option to telecommute. Workplace bullying is rare and is not tolerated.

A systems approach to stress management includes the following:

- Reduction of organizational stressors, including hazards and security gaps.
- Resilient workforce. Workers in good health are better able to manage stress. Resilience is the overall health status of the worker.
- Coping tools. In spite of our best efforts to improve the organization, there will be times when experiencing a stressful event is beyond our control; coping tools equip us to manage ourselves more effectively.
- Remediation. There are times when we are unable to cope and professional help is needed.

These services are a safety net for those times when coping skills are inadequate

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