

Stress can impair professional health

By Genita Kovacevich-Costello

TODAY'S professional environment is a minefield riddled with pressure points ranging from the critical boss to never-ending deadlines. An inability to buffer yourself against these stresses can lead to "job burnout."

"We all can handle varying levels and kinds of stress," explains Bonnie Greenwell, a consultant with the Center for Creative Counseling and Consulting in Cupertino. "A high achiever, for example, may work in a high-stress environment and thrive on it — not burning out. Others take on more than they can handle."

"The amount of stress we can live with is an individual thing," adds David Lee Woods, consultant and author of *My Job, My Boss and Me: Gaining Control of Your Life*.

It's like the body builder who lifts 300 pounds, he says. "That would kill me. We have to recognize our own limits."

What Greenwell, Woods and other management consultants working in the Bay Area have found is that many workers today haven't defined the boundaries of their stress level. And even for those who have, the limits frequently are stretched by the fast pace of today's technology.

Janelle Barlow, a program director with Management of Stress Training in San Francisco, believes that workers often feel they have little control over their jobs.

One of her clients described it this way: "I'll work on a project for several months and word comes down that the project has been scratched. I feel useless."

With this type of atmosphere, workers eventually may find their professional health breaking down. Beverly Potter, management consultant and author of *Beating Job Burnout*, describes some of the symptoms to watch for:

- **Physical.** Workers may experience unusual fatigue or become susceptible to illness.
- **Social.** Difficulty in social interaction may arise because of anxiety and irritability.
- **Intellectual.** Workers may find themselves bored or unable to concentrate.
- **Emotional.** Feelings of fear, anger, guilt and loss of self respect are likely to surface. Feeling that what they do is meaningless, employees may adopt an attitude of, "So what!"

If these symptoms go unchecked, the bottom begins to fall out and workers eventually lose their motivation.

Causes of job burnout can be found in the job itself, in the work environment or in the workers' perception of their situations.

Potter cites the critical boss as one example. No matter what the employee does, the boss finds fault. Eventually the person decides, "I don't know how to please this guy" and quits trying.

Sometimes employees may find themselves in a no-win situation. Take the manager who must trim the budget while upgrading services. Or the social worker with a caseload of 100.

Specialists in stress management make these recommendations for workers to protect themselves from burnout:

- **Learn how to reduce and handle stress.** While this won't eliminate the pressures, it can help employees respond to them.
- **Create a balance in life.** Workers must learn to establish other things in their lives that are important besides work.
- **Modify the job.** By making changes such as expanding current duties or managing their time more effectively, employees can tailor their jobs to their abilities to cope.
- **Develop a solid nutrition and exercise plan.** One of Greenwell's clients saw no relationship between the stress he was feeling and the 20 to 30 cups of coffee he drank a day.
- **Change jobs.** This step should be taken only after a careful analysis of why things broke down in the first place. It's like treating a back ache without finding out what caused the pain, explains Woods.

When workers fall victim to burnout, employers pay a high price in terms of absenteeism, low productivity and high turnover.

Potter recommends that companies try to create an environment in which employees feel they have some control over their own functions. Her suggestions include involving employees in establishing their own objectives and providing feedback on their progress.

"We can put up with a lot of bad situations," explains Potter, "if we feel there is something we can do to make them better."

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