

The Effects of Exercise on Stress in Working Women

Patricia A. Coulter, Kathy Dickman, and Ann Maradiegue



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ABSTRACT

Working women distribute their time between career and family, leaving little time and energy for personal health. Proven links exist between chronic stress and disease, which can be alleviated through regular exercise. Focused efforts by employers and advanced practice nurses can promote exercise as an effective tool to reduce stress, resulting in disease prevention and reduced health care costs. The coaching model is proposed as a method for health care professionals to encourage working women to develop a daily physical activity plan.

Keywords: counseling, effects, exercise, sedentary lifestyle, stress, stressors, women, working mothers



INTRODUCTION

Workplace pressure that becomes excessive or unmanageable leads to stress.¹ Although increased levels of stress can help motivate people to achieve incredible feats, chronic or traumatic stress is destructive and can lead to physical and mental health disorders.² Continued stress can compromise health and the ability to function effectively. One third of Americans are living with extreme stress and 48% of Americans believe that their stress has increased over the past 5 years.³

To reduce the effects of stress and promote health, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends regular physical activity.⁴ About 23% of adults in the United States report regular, vigorous physical activity that involves large muscle groups in dynamic movement for 20 minutes or longer 3 or more days per week.⁵ An additional 15% of adults report physical activity for 5 or more days per week for 30 minutes or longer, and another 40% do not participate in any regular physical activity.⁵ Healthy People 2010 asserts that approximately 43% of women are not involved in physical activity, and research suggests that moderate physical activity can have significant health benefits, including stress relief.⁵

Stress reduction is important to managing and reducing many health problems.⁵ While there are various lifestyle and coping strategies for reducing stress, such as socialization, meditation, and leisure time, exercise is a natural means to have a positive effect on health. Integrating exercise into working women's daily routine is a crucial step toward prevention of health problems and improved lifestyle. This article examines the effects of stress on working women and the benefits of exercise in reducing tension and stress-related illnesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A search was conducted for articles evaluating exercise, stress, and the working woman. The data bases CINAHL, Pub-Med, OVID, Pro-Quest, Medline, and ERIC were searched with the key words: exercise, stress and stressors, counseling, effects, working mothers, and sedentary lifestyle.

Over the past several decades, women's participation in the labor force has increased, particularly among

married women with children.⁶ Currently, participation of women in the labor force is at 46.3%.⁷ More women are projected to enter the workforce, and proactive measures to reduce stress and to promote preventive health care strategies will have a better end result for employers and families.

A 2006 survey, conducted by the American Psychological Association, found that stress affects more women than men.⁸ In the United States, female workers accounted for the majority of stress-related cases during 1992-2001.⁹ Stress has reached epidemic proportions, with approximately 80% of all non-traumatic deaths caused by a stress-related illness.²

A survey in the new European Member States found that 90% of the respondents thought that stress is a major cause of disease in their countries.¹⁰ A Scandinavian study reported women perceived themselves to have a higher level of stress than men.¹¹

Job stressors are objective conditions in the work environment that tax an individual's emotional, physical, and cognitive stores, potentially leading to health problems.¹² In the workplace, these stressors facilitate a response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and challenge their ability to cope.¹ Stress can lead to reduced work effectiveness and ultimately increased employment absenteeism, health compromise, increased health expenses, and decreased income. Annual costs to U.S. employers for lost productive time amount to over \$250 billion.¹³

STRESS

Stress is a risk factor for a variety of illnesses, ranging from metabolic and cardiovascular disorders to mental illness.¹⁴ Stress can be compounded by family life, workplace environment, and the social arena whenever the human body attempts to defend itself. The stress response is the body's natural defense mechanism to life's challenges.¹⁵ Each individual responds to stress differently and this response is based on the severity of the stressor. What is perceived as stressful to one individual may be considered insignificant to another individual. The manner in which

Working women need to recognize how exercise favorably affects multiple systems by reducing obesity risk, preventing disease, and decreasing stress.

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