

The best medicine for productivity

February 6 2012

A worker experiencing the stress of intense workdays might develop somatic symptoms, such as stomach ache or headache, which will eventually lead to taking leave of absence. But when the individual's supervisor offers emotional and instrumental support, the employee is more likely to recover without needing to take that extra afternoon or day off. This has been shown in a new study from the University of Haifa, soon to be published in the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*.

In earlier studies, scholars have shown that workers who experience [stress](#) at the workplace, due to, for example, high job demands and low control, develop psychological strain that translates into physiological symptoms, such as headaches, stomach aches and fatigue. These are often relieved when the individuals have some time away from work to recover. The U.S. is losing approximately \$225.8 billion per year due to absenteeism, and noting this, the present study, conducted by Dr. Michal Biron of the University of Haifa's Graduate School of Management, set out to examine what interpersonal workplace dynamics are influencing the worker's "burnout" symptoms and whether those dynamics have an effect on when the individual ultimately takes sickness leave to recover.

The study was conducted in a manufacturing enterprise in China and examined a sample group of 241 workers. As the study explains, in China there is significant distance between supervisor and employee, making it a particularly relevant context to examine the role of supervisor support relating to absenteeism. The workers were asked to report on common somatic symptoms, such as headaches or [muscle](#)

[soreness](#), that they experienced over the past month and to indicate how often their supervisor provided them with emotional and instrumental support once they experienced physical symptoms of stress. Data on sickness absence was provided by the employer.

The results showed that support from a supervisor when an employee is experiencing psychosomatic symptoms of the stress can make a real difference. When the boss offers support in the form of, for example, a lightened work load or stress management training – it is more likely to keep the worker from taking sick leave. This is because the worker feels more inclined to reciprocate the supportive treatment by keeping their work effort high. "The worker who is given this sort of support is more likely to overcome the somatic stress and continue to work productively, leaving recovery for the normal after-work hours when we recharge our batteries," explains Dr. Biron. A worker who develops the [somatic symptoms](#) of stress and does not receive this sort of support from the boss might stay at work out of fear for their position. But as the study shows, this worker is also less likely to be able to shake off the symptoms and will in due course need more sickness absence.

The study also shows that co-worker support early on, when the employee begins to experience workday stress, plays a role in attenuating the somatic effects of stress, thereby reducing the likelihood of even developing the need for sickness absence. "We see from this study that employers can provide concrete support for employees experiencing somatic stress [symptoms](#), but can also encourage co-workers to support one another in the first place and minimize the effects triggered by their workload," Dr. Biron clarifies.

"With the enormous economic losses due to absenteeism and with this still being a poorly understood phenomenon, the results of this new study are shedding light on those factors influencing [sickness absence](#) and which can be considered in the effort to reduce the losses without

compromising work ethic and commitment," explains Dr. Biron.

Provided by University of Haifa

Citation: The best medicine for productivity (2012, February 6) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-medicine-productivity.html>

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