

Office stress? Workers may wait before acting out, study finds

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Employers know that dramatic changes in the workplace, such as the start of the "busy season" or a new, more demanding boss, can cause employees to act out in ways that hurt the bottom line. But a new study suggests that companies may be underestimating the impact of such behavior because they assume it only happens immediately after a stressful change.

The research from SF State organizational psychologist Kevin Eschleman shows that many employees wait weeks or months before engaging in "counterproductive work behaviors," like taking a longer lunch or stealing office supplies. As a result, this behavior, which by some estimates costs businesses billions of dollars annually, may actually be far more expensive.

"People don't just respond immediately with these deviant behaviors. They may also have a delayed response that isn't caught by the organization," said Eschleman, an assistant professor of psychology. "That means the organization is not taking into account long-term costs associated with these delayed behaviors."

Psychologists have known that high levels of workplace stress lead to counterproductive work behaviors, but previous research had primarily looked at snapshots in time: an employee's response at one specific moment to his or her current level of stress. Eschleman and his colleagues wanted to know how and when employees handled changes in workplace stress, as well as whether workers' personalities affected their

response.

Researchers surveyed employees in a variety of career fields three times over six months about stress at work and asked if they had engaged in various counterproductive work behaviors, or CWBs. They found that, as expected, increases in stress led to immediate increases in CWBs. But they also found something that is not often recognized by organizations: Some people who did not engage in such behavior at first nevertheless did so some weeks or months later.

"Maybe you don't have the opportunity to engage in these deviant behaviors right away, and you want to wait until no one is around," Eschleman said. "Or maybe you think you can cope right away, but then down the road you end up engaging in these behaviors."

That effect was especially seen in workers considered to be more "agreeable" (those who are cooperative, good-natured and trusting of the organization) or more "conscientious" (those who are ambitious, responsible and abide by ethical principles). While these individuals were less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors initially, they were just as likely—and the research suggests may be even more likely—to do so later on.

Why? According to Eschleman, these workers have more "resources" available to help them cope with the increased stress, at least at first. For agreeable workers, that means there are more friends and other kinds of support to buck them up during tough times.

Conscientious workers, for their part, receive more tangible benefits. Employers tend to invest money, benefits and more in employees they view as hard workers.

An effective training program, for instance, can make adjusting to a new

computer system easier. Eventually, though, the added stress will win out for many: "Your personality might influence how you try to cope initially, but if things are bad for a really long time, it doesn't matter what your personality is. At the end of the day, you're going to do these deviant things," Eschleman said.

Companies should take care to tailor programs to help employees deal with [stress](#), he added, since the research shows personality can complicate how and when [employees](#) respond.

"The moderating effects of personality on the relationship between change in work stressors and change in counterproductive work behaviors" by Kevin J. Eschleman, Nathan A. Bowling and David LaHuis was published online Oct. 3 in the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology.

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /joop.12090/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joop.12090/abstract)

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