

# Workplace stress

YOUR mom was right ... count to 10. Most workers today report that they find their jobs stressful. Miners, in particular, are faced with hazardous and changing environments. Every shift provides different conditions and challenges. Coping with stress is an important tool to maintain your physical and mental health.

Now, back to mom. Studies on stress tell us that shifting your focus away from what is causing your stress increases your ability to cope. Counting to 10 is one method. Science proves mom right.

## The stress response

We are born with the stress response, which is a survival instinct, sometimes called the “fight or flight” response. When approached by a tiger in the jungle, our ancestors would perceive danger and prepare to fight or run.

The body prepares for the fight or flight response in a number of ways. The bloodstream brings extra glucose and oxygen (fuel) to the heart, the sense of pain is dulled, and memory and thinking improve. The pupils dilate for better vision and the lungs take in more oxygen, while heart rate and blood pressure increase. Body hairs become erect, as puffed-out hair makes an animal look bigger and more dangerous.

Once the perceived danger is gone – we have run fast enough to get away from the tiger or won the fight – the body returns to normal functions. Unfortunately, civilization gives us too many opportunities to experience this response. If activated too often, it can create wear and tear on the body, which may lead to injury and illness.

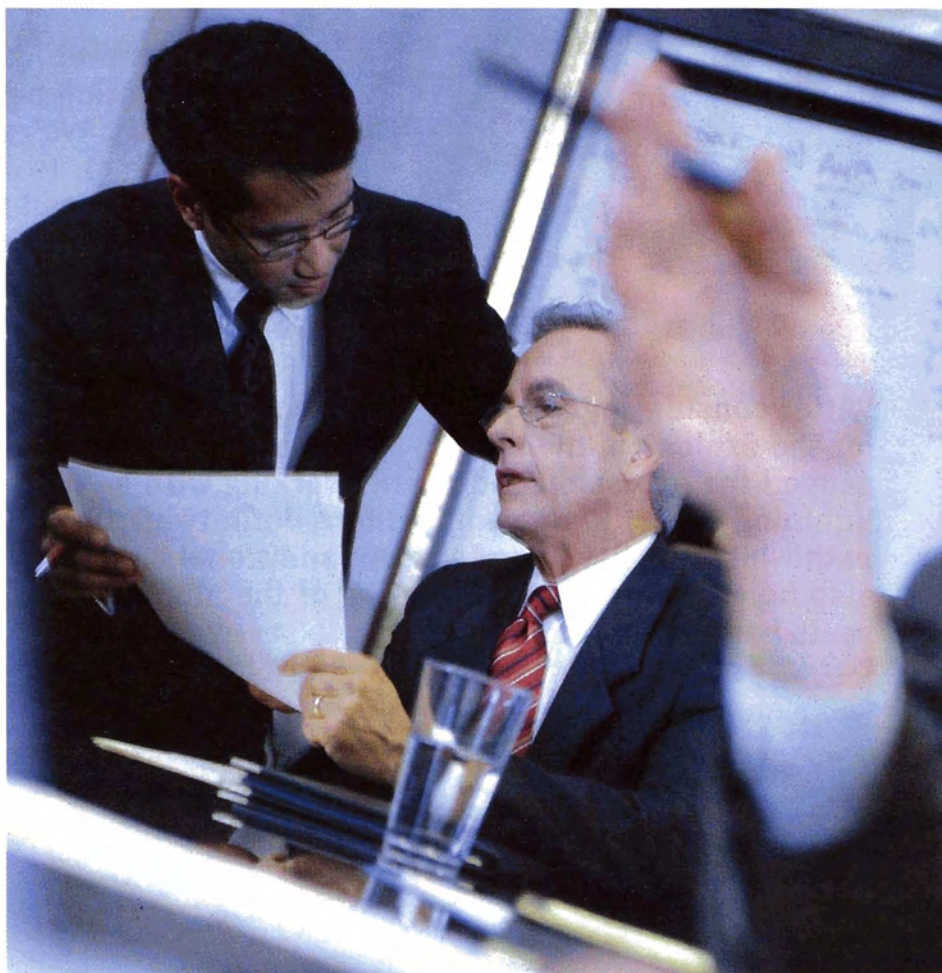
## Chronic and traumatic stress

There are two key types of stress: chronic stress and traumatic stress. Both types can cause both physical and psychological symptoms. Chronic stress builds up from the day-to-day hassles. Traumatic stress results from a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a mine disaster, or the sudden death of a loved one. Chronic stress is associated with an increased risk of a number of health problems including heart disease, depression, back pain, and carpal tunnel syndrome. Traumatic stress may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Miners may experience both chronic and traumatic stress in their work.

## What makes work stressful?

Research tells us that physical and mental demands on the job, lack of rewards for work done, infrequent breaks, heavy workloads, and long work hours are stressful. Shift work, which may disrupt the worker’s biological clock, contributes to stress.

In addition, tasks which do not use a worker’s skill and provide little sense of control contribute to worker stress. Minimal worker participation in decision-making, poor



communication in the workplace, and lack of support from supervisors and co-workers are all stressful conditions for workers. Also, fear about losing one’s job, and rapid changes in the workplace are stressful.

## What can you do?

The good news is that there are things that individuals and organizations can do to reduce stress levels. Here are some proven methods for reducing the stress response:

- When you are in a stressful situation, remove yourself or focus on something else.
- Use a programmed relaxation method to relax your body and mind. Effective methods include relaxation breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Look in the health and fitness section of your local store for books, videotapes, CDs, and audiotapes which explain these methods.
- Develop a positive outlook: you may not be able to control your work environment, but you can control your response. Think of the stressful situation as a test that you need to pass. Try to see your troubles as temporary, and celebrate the positive things in your life. This

can reduce your feelings of stress.

- Find a method of relaxation that works for you. It may be exercise, or it may be a warm bath or a crossword puzzle. For some people a quiet afternoon with a book is not relaxing; quiet may even make some people anxious! The key is making the activity work for you.
- If you have persistent physical or emotional symptoms after experiencing a traumatic event, talk with your health care provider. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is treated by a variety of psychological therapies and drug therapy.

Employee stress is a major cause of increased health care costs, as well as losses in productivity. Companies that introduce stress reduction measures often find improvements in their bottom line.

And remember what mom said – “count to 10”. Now, about that apple-a-day...