

Getting a grip on stress

The situation in Canada seems to be improving, but more research is needed

WORK STRESS often gets labelled a 21st century epidemic. Studies link chronic work stress to numerous health conditions, including heart disease, depression, diabetes, asthma, migraines and ulcers. However, increased employer attention on creating healthier work environments may be helping to get stress under control.

There's only one way to know whether the stress landscape is changing: track national trends using best available data. We can do this using Statistics Canada's biennial *Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS)*, which gauges Canadians' self-perceived levels of work stress.

Stress on the decline?

According to the 2005 survey, most days at work were "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful for three in 10 workers. The study also found that the proportion of Canadians in this high-stress group declined slightly—from 32.4% in 2001 to 30.3% in 2005.

This should give pause to those who claim that job stress is steadily rising. But it's too early to tell if this trend will continue. We need to understand the reasons for the slight drop in high levels of job stress. It could be due to any number of factors, including an increased availability of employee-assistance programs, increased worker resilience in the face of constant stress, improvements in work environments, and changes to the nature of work, reducing the root causes of stress.

Not being able to explain these findings points to a major gap in the available information on Canada's workplaces. We need an ongoing national survey that includes the underlying causes of job stress and workers' overall assessments of their stress levels.

Whatever the causes, the survey findings have clear implications: for workers, it means one in three will not meet his or her quality-of-work-life expectations. For employers, it means 33% of their workforce will be less productive because of regular stress. Considering these substantial risks to

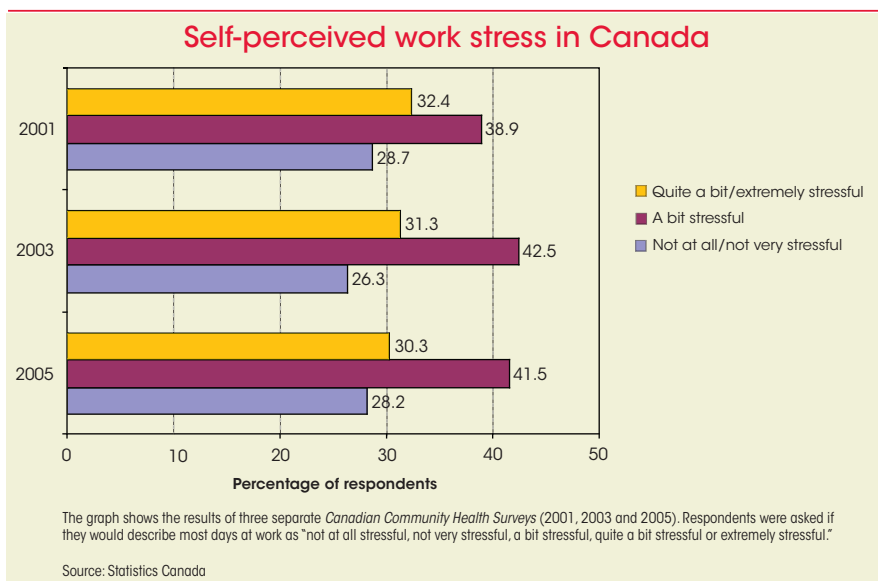
quality of life and productivity, more needs to be done to find solutions.

Finding solutions

We can start by looking at which groups have the highest levels of self-perceived stress. Workers 26 to 44 years old are more stressed than their younger or older colleagues, and women are more stressed than men.

Bigger differences exist across occupational groups. The proportion of workers reporting most days as "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful ranges from over 40% in management and healthcare, to 22% in primary industries and in processing, manufacturing and utility occupations. (The fact that managers have the highest levels of job stress is an obvious barrier to getting better control of it. In practical terms, progress on stress reduction depends largely on the commitment of managers at all levels to address their own workloads and priorities.)

It's also helpful to understand the sources of job stress. This is done by measuring the demands of a job and the skill discretion and decision authority needed to respond to those demands. Such measures were included in Statistics Canada's *1994/95 National Population Health Survey* and the *2002 CCHS*. Comparing the results of these two studies, job stress has declined slightly for both men and women. In 2002, 19%



of men and 27% of women reported high job stress, compared with 23% of men and 35% of women in 1994–'95. The decrease for men resulted from a small drop in psychological demands and an increase in skill discretion. For women, increases in skill discretion and decision latitude accounted for the decline.

The same research documents serious mental health consequences for workers in high-stress jobs. In 2002, men in these jobs were 2.5 times and women 1.6 times more likely to have experienced depression than those in low-stress jobs. These associations hold after taking into account age, socio-economic status and social support.

As in any public health initiative, the goal should be to lower the incidence and flatten the gradient of the factors causing job stress.

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Better evidence needed

With so many important questions unanswered about the causes and current trends in job stress, Canada needs an ongoing national survey to provide this information. Ideally, the survey should be a “public good,” available free to all stakeholders. Statistics Canada is the ideal lead for such a project.

A good model is the *European Working Conditions Survey*, the most comprehensive assessment of job quality trends anywhere. Conducted in 25 countries of the European Union, the 2005 survey found that most workers were satisfied with their jobs (as are most Canadians). However, the survey also identified a rising perception of work intensity, such as working at high speeds and to tight deadlines, between 1991 and 2005.

After identifying stress as imposing considerable economic and social costs, Britain has begun discussions around solutions. The Health and Safety Executive, the national body responsible for occupational health and safety, has developed evidence-based management standards aimed at reducing the risk of work stress. The standards define the future state the organization should strive to achieve in six areas: work demands, employee autonomy, support, work relationships, role clarity, organizational change and culture. Set at 85% for each indicator (i.e. 85% of workers should be able to deal with the demands of their jobs), the standards are voluntary and designed to help employers meet their legal obligation to provide hazard-free workplaces. ■



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