

FIGHT OR FLIGHT... OR FIX?

Employers must work
with employees to address
workplace stress



“I am so done with politics and egos and ridiculous workloads! I will never work in another lab as long as I live!” wrote a medical lab professional in a letter to the editor of the *CJMLS*. She had experienced an unrelenting increase in the number of tasks, felt pressured to do “12 things at once,” and had endured a toxic supervisor. After reaching the point of burnout due to chronic stress, she quit her job altogether.

The World Health Organization defines work-related stress as the response people have when presented with pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities, and that challenge their ability to cope. It is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from colleagues and supervisors, and little control over their work processes.¹ Most medical laboratory professionals – even those who derive great job satisfaction from knowing their work plays an essential role in the diagnosis and treatment of patients – have experienced work-related stress at some point. To better understand the prevalence of stress on the job and its related mental health impacts, the CSMLS conducted an anonymous online focus group in March 2016. A surprising 59 per cent (17/29) of participants reported that they experienced a high level of stress at work at least once or more daily, and 76 per cent (22/29) felt burned out at least weekly, if not daily, due to work stressors.² These results highlighted that workplace stress in medical labs is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.


When the body’s fight or flight stress response system is activated over a long period of time, it can cause a host of problems, including digestive issues, headaches, heart disease, weight gain, impaired memory and concentration, sleep problems and mental health issues like anxiety and depression.³ Stress expert Dr. David Posen, an Oakville, Ontario, family physician, spoke with CSMLS in the first episode of *The Objective Lens* podcast.⁴ He said that a certain amount of stress is beneficial as it can provide motivating energy to perform tasks well, but many workers today experience too much stress that leads to burnout.

In his best-selling book, *Is Your Job Killing You: A Doctor’s Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress*, Posen identified the three biggest sources of stress on the job: volume, velocity and abuse. Volume is the sheer quantity of work; velocity is the speed required to perform and complete tasks; and, abuse involves interpersonal conflict. For the member who quit her job, all three sources of stress played a role in the chronic overwhelmed feelings and burnout she experienced. Her solution, in the interest of self-preservation, was flight.

In stark contrast to her situation, the Anatomical Pathology Lab at LifeLabs Inc., in Toronto, Ontario, is an excellent example of a workplace that is doing its part to identify and address stress. Lab Manager, Louis Litsas, oversees a large group of 163 employees in the cytology and histology departments. His team processes around 600,000 cytology pap smears annually, representing about two-thirds of the province’s annual volume, and about 150,000 histology samples, 1.5 times the volume of a large hospital lab. When LifeLabs acquired CML Healthcare in 2013 to become the fourth-largest medical testing company in the world, Litsas led the project to combine two large teams of lab professionals with different work cultures. Today, he attributes the team’s high level of productivity to strong communication and continuous improvement approaches that management embedded in the company’s operational processes during that time.


Litsas uses daily huddles at the beginning of each shift where supervisors meet with employees to discuss issues according to the motto SPQDC (safety, people, quality, delivery

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Helpful Resources

CSMLS MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT.

If you or your team need help addressing workplace stress and mental health issues, the CSMLS has compiled a Mental Health Toolkit to empower employees, employers and organizations to identify, take charge and make positive changes in the medical laboratory profession. Packed with useful information and resources, the toolkit is available free online. It is intended to be a starting point for accessing information, support services and treatment for mental health issues.

Learn more at mentalhealth.csmls.org.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.

Many employers' benefit plans include employee assistance programs that provide access to confidential counselling in a variety of areas of concern. This includes work and career-related issues and stress assessment and counselling. Find out more from your human resources department.

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Dr. David Posen, stress expert

and cost) and suggestions for improvements. “This approach gives a lot of voice to staff members. They can talk about any issue that’s bothering them and anyone can come up with a great idea. I welcome problems because they are opportunities for improvement,” says Litsas. Case in point: “There were over 186 continuous improvement ideas in one of our departments in just one year. If we didn’t have a daily huddle, a lot of those ideas would sit fallow. When ideas are put into action and people see the benefits from the improvements, they are empowered,” says Litsas. There are also monthly team meetings where employees and managers review progress on key performance indicators and identify where improvements are needed.

Beyond annual performance reviews and quarterly check-ins with employees to assess what’s going well and to understand challenges they’re facing, Litsas makes sure he connects with each staff member on a frequent basis. “I cannot be a successful manager if I do not understand my team, their pain points on the job and their individual issues,” he says. “I can tell when someone’s in a funk, so I ask them about it. People do want to talk.” When his employees need to air something out privately, they can request a confidential “dome of silence” meeting in his office or a conference room for 30 minutes. He says, “Sometimes it’s a

heated discussion, but afterward, people feel better because they’ve been heard, the issue has more clarity and we can plan to work toward a solution.”

In Litsas’ lab, his staff indicated that they want more education, so he organizes quarterly brown bag lunch sessions where a pathologist gives a talk on a topic of interest. The sessions are usually well attended by about 30 to 40 people and may take the form of a workshop to discuss complex criteria for different diagnoses, or a presentation and Q&A with a subject matter expert to learn about industry trends, such as why the volume of immunohistochemistry (IHC) tests is increasing.

With the acquisition project well behind him now, Litsas says, “That’s the river that’s flowing beneath us. Today, we’re on the bridge. We are still using the same tools we used to build the team to enhance and give ownership back to the team.” The team is working at a high level, evidenced by the fact that last year, it brought 80 per cent of the company’s IHC work in-house, an improvement project Litsas had identified to his managers. “IHC was a massive project for us. It is a bit of a rallying point for the team,” says Litsas. “Turning around IHC samples used to take two weeks. Now we can turn them around in two days. It may be only one of the many tests that we offer,



but it illustrates that we can be innovative and responsive to grow the business.” He notes that strong communication and problem-solving approaches are espoused by management up and down the whole organization.

Posen wrote that while workplace stress needs to be addressed by both employees and employers, it is the executives who set the tone. They need to modify expectations and policies to be more realistic, in line with what their team can accomplish in terms of volume and velocity, and provide a supportive environment where continuous improvement is embraced.⁵ It’s not enough to put an employee health and wellness plan into place and leave it to employees to find ways to alleviate their stress responses. Employers also need to address the root causes of stress and model effective problem-solving approaches from the top down.

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, burnout is a hard nut to crack: “In today’s era of workplace burnout, achieving a simpatico work-life relationship seems practically out of reach. Being tired, ambivalent, stressed, cynical, and overextended has become a normal part of professional life... It can feel like a failure or surrender rather than what it really is: a chronic disease.”⁶ But when workplace stress can be fixed – identified and reduced to the right level – employees can experience better physical and mental health and at the same time, be more motivated and productive contributors to organizations’ objectives.

It’s unfortunate that the member who wrote the letter reached the point of no return. She may have fared much differently if her employer had stepped up and taken some responsibility to help identify the issues and worked with her to make meaningful changes. ■

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JANE LANGILLE
Health and Medical Writer
Special to *CJMLS*