



Reduce harmful work stressors.
Improve job quality and health.

Healthy Work Strategies

Reducing COVID-19-related work stressors

I. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused 44,774,935 cases and 1,179,232 deaths worldwide, and 25,333,200 cases and 421,003 deaths in the U.S., as of January 26, 2021. It has also caused much uncertainty, anxiety, and stress, touching nearly every aspect of our lives. Many “essential” workers have become ill due to exposure to the virus, with even greater exposure among some workers of color.¹ Essential workers whose work cannot be done from home, or those who work in close proximity to others (increasing the risk of exposure) also tend to have lower incomes.^{2,3} Essential workers, such as healthcare workers, flight attendants, emergency responders, corrections officers, and kindergarten and special education teachers are among some of the occupations at increased risk of COVID-19.⁴ Black, Native American & Hispanic/Latinx workers are more likely to be essential workers who work in person and close to others and have lower incomes compared to white workers.² Immigrant workers are also more likely to be essential workers than native-born workers.⁵

Stressful, low-income working⁶ and living⁷ conditions increase the risk of comorbid conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes, as well as impaired immune function, all of which increase the likelihood of severe illness if a person is exposed to SARS-CoV-2.⁸⁻¹⁰ Thus, stressful and low income working and living conditions can increase the likelihood of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 and to infection (including by being an essential worker), and can lead to more severe COVID-19 illness (through comorbid conditions).¹¹

Work stressors can include reduced social support, difficulty attending to personal and family needs, and a blurring of the lines between work and home life.¹⁴ About half of Americans report that the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health, with a large increase in reported emotional distress¹² as well as increases in opioid deaths.¹³

Many people and groups have been advocating for strategies, not only designed to contain the pandemic and reduce exposure and infections, but also to reduce the stressors related to the pandemic. These efforts have included contract language, laws and regulations, workers compensation, the development of guidelines for safe return to work, and mutual aid networks which have directly or indirectly targeted stressors including workload and staffing, lack of adequate benefits (e.g. sick leave), job and economic security, job control (especially around speaking up about health & safety concerns related to the pandemic).

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