Why Your Job Is Making You Depressed

Greg Couser, MD, is the medical director of the employee assistance program at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. He also holds a handful of other titles, including two that begin with director or assistant director. Needless to say, his job is demanding, but he typically doesn't get too stressed out. Why?

Because he has a lot of control over the demands that are placed upon him and "an understanding employer" that gives him the time he needs do his job well. Not everyone is so lucky.

Most people in today's economy are happy just to have a job—any job. But work-related factors like long hours, a poor relationship with your boss, and lack of control over daily tasks—factors that can get worse when the boss is pinching pennies—can contribute to depression as well.

Clearly having a job is better than not having one when you really need it. Those who are unemployed tend to have higher rates of depression (almost 13%) than those who are employed full time (7%).

But research suggests that some jobs can be more depression-prone than others for a variety of reasons, and certain work-related factors are known to be particularly bad for those already struggling with depression.

**High-risk occupations?**

"A job can be a source of meaning and social support, which can provide a buffer against depression for some people," says Eugene Baker, PhD, vice president of employee assistance programs for OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions. "It's a place to go every day and have people to interact with. But if you are unhappy with your job, and it is chronic unhappiness, and you feel powerless to change your situation, these feelings of helplessness can foster depression."

Factors contributing to depression range from genetics, gender, temperament, and lack of social support. And each year, more than 18 million American adults will experience some form of depression.

Certain occupations seem to have a higher risk of depression than others. The highest rates of worker depression (up to 11%) are seen in people with jobs in nursing home/child care, food service, social work, and health care, among others.
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These types of jobs seem to be less stressful because in professions like engineering, there is more control over how and when the work is completed, Baker says.

Willard adds that other job-related factors that can decrease the likelihood of depression include working in occupations that offer some physical movement, interaction with people, variety, and a sense of accomplishment.

"Most importantly, the happiest job is the one that you find personally fulfilling, challenging, and matches your personality," Willard says. "And if you are stuck in a depressing job, take good care of yourself and find ways to make it feel meaningful to you."

A lot of what is known about jobs and depression is highly individual; some people thrive in high-stress positions that would be toxic for others, Baker says.

It's also true that depression-prone or emotionally sensitive people may be drawn to certain careers, and it's not clear that the job itself elicits symptoms of depression. For example, the creativity that turns people to careers in the arts or writing might also make them more vulnerable to depression and bipolar disorder, Kaplin says. Other statistics can be misleading, too. For example, suicide is the leading cause of death in young physicians. However, it's possible that young doctors are no more prone to suicide attempts than people in other careers—they just have the means to do it.

If you are suffering from depression, whether it's job related or not, you can seek help from an employee assistance program. It is a free professional resource that most companies have to help employees deal with issues like stress and depression. Primary-care providers can also be a good resource.

"Depression is treatable and is not a sign of weakness," Baker says. "Reach out to a friend or family member and talk about what is going on."

By Tammy Worth
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