Patient

Is your job putting your health at risk?

Ever feel like your job is killing you? It's an expression we all use when we're stressed and exhausted, but the reality is that being overworked can be very bad for your health.

A recent study from the World Health Organization (WHO) found long working hours led to a staggering 745,000 deaths from stroke and heart disease in 2016 - a 29% increase since 2000.

It's the first global analysis of poor health and death associated with working long hours. It found that 398,000 people died from stroke and 347,000 from heart disease as a result of having worked at least 55 hours a week.

Between 2000 and 2016 there was a 42% increase in death from heart disease and 19% increase in death from stroke, all linked to working long hours.

The study concluded that working 55 or more hours per week can lead to a 35% high risk of stroke and 17% higher risk of dying from heart disease, compared to working 35-40 hours per week.

And that was before the pandemic hit and brought with it longer, more stressful working hours.

Here to explain why this might be, and the impact of stress on the body, are BBC Breakfast's Dr Rachel Ward and Brendan Street, professional head of emotional well-being at Nuffield Health.

Work it, baby (but only a reasonable amount)

Working long hours isn't just tiring, it can be detrimental to your health. You're not overreacting when you feel rundown and stressed due to a busy working life.

"Overworking, working long hours, impacts our physical health in two main ways. The first is through direct physiological responses to chronic stress," Street says.

"Working long hours is interpreted as a threat activating the stress response. The stress response is designed to be short lived - if the stress response is turned on long-term (working long hours over long periods) it leads to physical damage.

"An analogy would be using the accelerator on a car: short-term use is effective in increasing speed but long-term over-revving will damage the engine."

What does stress do to your body?

Stress can affect every organ in your body, as well as cause poor mental health, Dr Ward adds.

"It causes our heart rate and blood pressure to increase, circulating blood sugar level to rise, muscle tension, increased stomach acid production and even a change in hormone levels," she explains.

"The long-term effects of these changes can lead to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, some cancers and fertility problems. Stress can also lead to depression, anxiety and other mental health problems."

It's also important to know the difference between stress and chronic stress. We all experience stress from time to time, but chronic stress lasts for a long period of time, can impact your moods on a day-to-day basis, has a negative effect on your focus and energy and can be very damaging.

Street adds that working long hours can also result in people eating an unhealthy diet (think comfort eating when you're tired and stressed), drinking more, smoking more and sleeping less.

All of these behaviours can damage our health and lead to heart attack, stroke and other harmful conditions.

The facts and figures

Both Dr Ward and Street agree that the WHO study is an important one as it highlights the impact our jobs can have on our health, something that hasn't always been widely discussed.

"The key point from this report is that working more than 55 hours per week is a serious risk to your health. Most of the deaths that occurred due to increased working time were in people aged 60-79 years, who had worked for 55 hours or more per week between the ages of 45 and 74 years," Dr Ward explains. "Men were affected more than women - 72% of deaths occurred in men."

Dr Ward points out the loss of work-home separation since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with working from home often leading to blurring of the working day and time off.

Street agrees, adding: "The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light how many individuals are struggling to manage their working hours and further blurred the boundaries, which separate work and home life.

"I believe it highlights, more than ever, how much work employers and governments need to do to ensure the correct policies and support mechanisms are in place to protect employee well-being."

Work/life balance

The most obvious way to reduce the impact of long working hours on your health is to speak to your boss about reducing your hours. If you're working more than 55 hours a week, try to find a way to reduce them to 35-40 hours if that's possible.

"If you feel like there are individual factors like unrealistic deadlines, unmanageable workload or the company culture is not providing enough support through this difficult time, make a list of these issues and schedule time for a call with your manager to address these concerns," Street says.

"Everybody responds to stressful situations differently. This is known as your emotional resilience. When we are feeling resilient, we can adapt to change and stress, but sometimes we all have a harder time dealing with stress."

Street also suggests speaking to your HR department if initial calls with your manager don't go according to plan.

It's also important to schedule downtime, use any workplace support you are offered, and avoid adding any extra hours to your day, Street adds.

Dr Ward suggests protecting your health in other ways if cutting back your hours isn't possible.

"If you are unable to reduce your working hours to a healthier level it is crucial to optimise all other aspects of heath. This includes a balanced diet, regular exercise, sticking to a healthy weight, engaging in regular health checks and screening, not smoking or using illicit drugs and keeping alcohol intake to recommended levels," she says.

"It is also important to keep a close check on your stress levels and use techniques such as mindfulness, exercise and outdoor activities to help control it. Ensure that you take time off from work when possible and during that time do not engage in work activities such as checking emails."

Help! I need somebody

It's really important to remember that everybody experiences stress and needs help to manage it at some point in their lives. There is no shame in asking for help.

If you feel like work is getting on top of you it's important you let your manager and HR department know.

"Many companies offer counselling and talking therapy services to their employees," Dr Ward says. "There are many talking therapy and counselling services available and these can often be accessed directly by calling or referring yourself on their website.

"If you feel that your employer is not taking your concerns seriously, you can get advice from your local citizen's advice bureau about your employment rights," suggests Dr Ward.

You can also speak with your GP about stress and your mental health. They will be able to refer you to mental health services if needed, and in some occasions can recommend you be signed off work.

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