

Work stress doubles risk of heart disease

FINDING BALANCE:

It is also associated with depression, musculoskeletal disorder, says Lam Thye

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Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye

WORKPLACE stress must be looked upon seriously because if left untreated, it can double the risk of heart disease.

Malaysian Mental Health Advisory Council member Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye said work stress was associated with heart disease, depression and musculoskeletal disorder.

"There is increasing evidence that both the content and context of work can play a role in the development of mental health problems in the workplace.

"Several factors, such as poor work design, organisation and management, can contribute to psychosocial risks of workers that can lead to a negative outcome, such as work-related stress, burnout and depression," he told the *New Straits Times* yesterday, adding that stress and bullying were the two main causes of mental distress at work.

Lee, who is also National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health chairman, said high job demands, excessive workloads, job insecurity, lack of role clarity, low control over work and effort-reward imbalance were among the factors causing workplace stress.

There were also employers and managers who contributed to job

stress by denying employees the work-life balance that was very much needed to maintain employees' positive mental health, he said.

"Today's work arrangement, which is facilitated by technological advancements and sophistication of smartphones, also contributes to mental stress.

"Information and requests received via smartphones and other mobile gadgets demand people to give immediate response on work matters.

"Work-related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressure that do not match their knowledge and abilities, and which challenge their ability to cope."

Lee said good management and work organisation were the best stress prevention methods.

Employers, he said, should be aware that neglecting mental health and psychosocial factors at the workplace was not only detrimental to their workers, but directly affected productivity, efficiency and output.

"Managing psychosocial risks at work would create a healthy work environment in which workers feel valued, the workplace culture is more positive and, consequently, productivity and business performance improve.

"Although many factors contribute to workers' mental health and wellbeing, there is increasing evidence that shows the workplace environment makes a significant contribution because on average, workers spend one third of their day, five days a week, at their workplace."

Lee said work-related stress was one of the most challenging issues in occupational safety and health.

Stress, if not managed well, could be costly to workers and their companies, he added.

He stressed that mental health problems among Malaysians should be taken seriously and needed to be addressed urgently so that problems like depression, mental illness and psychiatric disorders could be avoided.

Organisations, he said, should implement plans to prevent or reduce stress, create a healthy psychosocial work environment and develop organisational functions and culture that could reduce workplace stress.

"Organisations should also introduce an Employee Assistance Programme that can provide both prevention and early intervention for employees suffering from poor mental health.

"Risk management approach should also be implemented, such as conducting situational analysis, formulating an action plan to reduce risk, implementing screening for early detection and having a flow chart for management and referral."

Lee urged the government to introduce guidelines for promoting

Workplace Stress

1 Factors causing workplace stress:



2 Dealing with workplace stress:

A. Take control:

- Develop good relationships with colleagues
- Talk to someone you trust
- Say if you need help
- Be assertive: say 'no' if you can't take on extra responsibilities
- Healthy work-life balance
- If things start to feel overwhelming, take a deep breath
- Learn some relaxation techniques

B. Get help from your employer:

- Learn to recognise what you find stressful in your environment
- Talk to your employer about it
- Make your physical work environment comfortable to work in
- Discuss the possibility of flexitime
- Make use of support, such as Employee Assistance Programmes

Source: World Health Organisation 2005- Mental Health Policy and Service Guidance Package

mental health at workplaces.

It has been estimated that by 2020, mental illness will be the second biggest health problem affecting Malaysians after heart disease.

The Health Ministry's National

Health and Morbidity Survey 2015 had found that mental health issues among Malaysians, aged 16 years and above, had increased from 11.2 per cent in 1996 to 29.2 per cent last year.