

# Older workers stress less, U-M study suggests

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Older workers generally report low levels of work-related stress, according to a University of Michigan study of a nationally representative sample of older workers.

The study, presented in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, is based on 2006 data from 1,544 participants in the U-M Health and Retirement Study, conducted by the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR) and funded by the National Institute on Aging.

By the year 2010, middle-aged and older workers are expected to outnumber their younger colleagues, making the physical and emotional well-being of older workers a growing concern for U.S. employers.

For the analysis, ISR researcher Gwenith Fisher, Quinnipiac University researcher Carrie Bulger and colleagues examined the prevalence of different kinds of job stressors reported by participants between the ages of 53 and 85. They also examined how those stressors relate to workers' life satisfaction and physical health. All participants worked at least 20 hours per week.

Slightly more than half of the participants were male, 87 percent were Caucasian, about eight percent were African American and seven percent were Hispanic. On average, they had about 14 years of education.

"In general, older workers did not report high levels of work-related

stressors," said Fisher, an organizational psychologist who is particularly interested in issues of work-life balance.

Just over half agreed or strongly agreed that they have competing demands being made on them at work, and 47 percent agreed that time pressures are a source of job stress.

Only 19 percent of older workers indicated that they have poor job security, however. "Given what we know about the extent of age discrimination at work and the current economic climate regarding unemployment, this is a surprisingly low number," said Fisher.

Just 15 percent reported that their work often or almost all the time interfered with their personal lives and a scant 2 percent said their personal lives interfered with their work.

"Many older workers are empty-nesters," Fisher said. "They don't have the same work-personal conflicts that younger and middle-aged workers deal with, juggling responsibilities to children along with their jobs and their personal needs."

Results from the study also indicated that workers who experience less job stress are more satisfied with their life and are overall in better physical health compared with those who report higher levels of job stressors.

For both younger and older workers alike, time pressure has been increasing over the last two decades, many studies have shown.

"Technological advances like Blackberries, along with out-sourcing and down-sizing, have all increased the amount of work and pace at work," Fisher said. "But it's particularly important to look at the effects this pressure may have on older workers, whose health may be more

vulnerable than that of younger workers."

At this time of year, time pressure may be even greater because work loads may increase, Fisher said. "Year-end goals need to be met at the same time as the holidays mean less time at work and more personal errands and activities," she said.

For older and younger workers facing work-related stress, Fisher recommended a few basic guidelines.

First, she advised, take good care of yourself. "Get enough sleep," she said. "In the short-term, you may be able to cut corners but in the long-term, cutting back on sleep may compromise your immune system and you'll be more likely to get sick." Also, be sure to get regular physical exercise. This can go a long way toward helping your body handle stressors, and reduce strains like anxiety and increase your energy level on the job.

Secondly, engage in active time management, Fisher advised. Use strategies that work for you, like creating a to-do list so you can keep track of tasks and set priorities. Establish clear boundaries. "With all the technologies that blur the boundaries between work and personal life, it's important to set aside some time that isn't available for any work," she said.

Source: University of Michigan

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