

Stressed-out workers less likely to stick with wellness centers

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Asking people who join a gym, fitness or wellness center just one short question about their stress level can identify those who are at risk of health problems and poor health habits, according to a new study.

The study, which appears in the September/October issue of the [American Journal of Health Promotion](#), looked at responses from a questionnaire about [stress](#) levels, [health status](#), quality of life, [tobacco use](#) and [physical activity](#) from workers when they enrolled in their

employer's wellness center. Nearly 17 percent of more than 2,000 participants reported stress "as bad as it can be," the survey selection for the top level of stress. Stressed employees also reported poorer eating habits and overall health, more fatigue and lower activity levels than their less-stressed counterparts.

According to Dave Gallson of the Mood Disorders Society of Canada, stress affects all interactions and relationships. For instance, workplace stressors can negatively affect home lives and vice versa.

"Unaddressed, workplace stress undoubtedly has negative repercussions for employers," Gallson said. "Understanding the consequences and costs of mental illness within workplaces led employers to acquire mental health resources and support to help those who are working through illnesses."

Certainly, as the spike in memberships to gyms, fitness and wellness centers in the aftermath of New Year's resolutions shows, people have good intentions about health — but the attrition rate is all too high. Unfortunately, the study shows that stressed-out people are the least likely to sign up and the most likely to drop out.

"Traditionally, many people defined a wellness center as a fitness center," says principal study author, Matthew Clark, Ph.D., of the psychiatry and psychology department at the Mayo Clinic. "This is changing, and most now include stress reduction, nutrition, spirituality, sleep, work-life balance and relationships [in their definition]. So it is important for facilities to include programs for all these domains and to ask the initial question about [stress levels](#) so they can address overall quality of life."

"It's important for employers to think about opportunities for workers to be active, because they will be happier, less stressed and more

productive,” said Carolyn Dewa, Ph.D., of Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. “This is especially true in winter months in cold climates, when it is more difficult to be active.” Or, farther south, when it’s too hot.

More information: Clark MM, et al. Stress level, health behaviors and quality of life in employees joining a wellness center. *Am J Health Promo* 26(1), 2011.

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