

That bad boss may be toxic to your family, too

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Research shows employees bring workplace stress home to spouses, children.

(HealthDay)—When workplace stress spills over into your personal life, your family's well-being can also suffer, new evidence suggests.

A recent conference on work, stress and health, sponsored in part by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, included research on family-supportive workplaces and the influence of supervisors—good or bad—on employee health.

"Survey results vary, but you can find that large numbers of individuals report that work is the biggest source of stress in their life," said Michael Ford, an assistant professor of psychology at the University at Albany-State University of New York.

"At the same time, everybody has a life outside of work," Ford said. "So we need to continue to understand how this affects the psychological and physical well-being of the population as well. I think it's something that a lot of people can relate to."

Another presenter at the Los Angeles conference explained that when it comes to work-related stress, [health consequences](#) are wide-ranging. Leslie Hammer is a professor of psychology at Portland State University in Oregon, and director of the Center for Work—Family Stress, Safety and Health.

"With high levels of job stress and work-life stress, we see [mental health problems](#)," Hammer said. "We see increased levels of depressive symptoms. We also see increased levels of negative health outcomes. Cardiovascular disease has been a clear link with job strain. We see obesity problems. We see general physical health complaints."

Positive [health behaviors](#) can fall by the wayside, she added.

"When people are stressed at work, when their supervisors are really not supportive around work-life issues, we are seeing more negative health behaviors in the sense of poor [food choices](#), lower levels of exercise, poor [sleep hygiene](#)," Hammer said.

Work stress takes a toll on relationships as well.

"Marriage quality is definitely impacted," Hammer said. "That [relationship quality](#) goes down. When one experiences negative stress/strain, work-[life stress](#), that ends up crossing over to their partner or spouse or children, and it results in similar stress and strain among those family members."

In Ford's study comparing American and Chinese workplaces, he found

that people in supportive work environments tend, in turn, to be more supportive of their spouses.

Hammer said, "In the research literature there's correlational evidence that when parents are more stressed, kids are more stressed. Kids experience that stress, and it comes out in terms of health compliance, it comes out in terms of behavioral difficulties."

Managers and supervisors are a primary source of work support—or [work stress](#).

"Lack of support or abusiveness of the supervisor can spill over into home life, both in terms of the time and energy that it takes away from people, but also if it affects their mood," Ford said. "That can, of course, potentially affect the life of your family members."

What separates good and bad supervisors?

An unsupportive manager, Hammer said, "will have a complete disregard for workers' own non-work needs."

"Sometimes bad bosses post schedules at the last minute so that people who have family responsibilities or non-work responsibilities—anything, not just family—have to readjust their whole non-work lives around their work schedules," she said. "When supervisors basically don't allow for schedule control and control over work, that leads to high levels of stress."

Hammer and colleague Ellen Kossek at Michigan State University train supervisors to be more family-supportive and are completing large-scale research on the training's effects.

"First of all, training focuses on providing emotional support," Hammer

said. "Teaching supervisors [that] simply listening to your employees and paying attention and showing that you care is incredibly helpful. It's not rocket science, but what we find is many supervisors don't do these things."

The training starts with a workforce survey, which usually reveals a disconnect: When it comes to work-family conflict, managers tend to think they're more supportive than workers perceive them to be.

Supervisors can contribute to a healthier atmosphere by demonstrating their own work-life balance "in the sense that they are taking care of their own work, life and family integration and that, for example, they take time off to go to their kid's basketball or baseball game," Hammer said.

One challenge is convincing organizations that being family-supportive means the [work](#) still gets done.

"Employers are paying for health care and employers are taking a hit when workers are absent, and what we see are higher levels of stress related to higher levels of absenteeism and higher levels of health complaints and health problems," Hammer said. "Employers can be paying attention and understanding what they can do to help alleviate that [stress](#). It will help their bottom line as well as help employees' health and well-being outcomes."

More information: The Work, Family & Health Network lists a variety of [family resources](#).

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