

Work seems life threatening to people suffering from stress

October 7 2013

Stress causes today more cases of prolonged absence from work due to sickness. Work and identity are more closely knit together than ever before, and therefore work becomes a matter of life and death to the person suffering from stress. This is the conclusion of Copenhagen University researcher Malene Friis Andersen in a newly published anthology which questions modern quick fixes for those faced with stress. The book is based on research into stress by prominent experts in the field.

Black spots in front of your eyes. Palpitations. Shooting pain through your body. These are symptoms in people who go to [work](#) with the feeling that their lives are at stake. Even though evolution intended for [stress](#) to occur when a person's life is threatened, today we are most at risk of experiencing stress at work, even if our work – for most of us – does not bring our lives in actual danger.

"Some reach what may seem like an obvious conclusion; that, in our modern world, the saber-toothed tiger is our boss or the deadlines that we have to meet. But even if you have an unpleasant boss, he or she will rarely go so far as to kill you. Yet work becomes a question of life or death to the people who get caught up in stress. Today, and as never before, we tie our identity to our work, and for many of us this link is necessary in order to perform at work, and meet our employer's demands. This is the conclusion of authorised Psychologist and PhD student Malene Friis Andersen from the Department of Psychology," University of Copenhagen, in a new book.

In the book, "Nye perspektiver på stress i arbejdslivet" ("New perspectives on work related stress") which is published in cooperation with Professor of psychology Svend Brinkmann from Aalborg University, 12 researchers present their latest research into stress.

Simple advice does not work

Malene Friis Andersen's research is based, among other things, on 15 interviews with people who have been absent from work for longer periods of time due to stress. They all had jobs where creativity, knowledge, and personal commitment were their primary working tools. The 15 interviews were chosen among 51 interviews from her PhD thesis.

"Job identity is extremely important to maintaining our general identity, self- image and sense of worth, and it is necessary to use our [identity](#) to be able to perform our tasks at work. This is why today stress poses an existential threat to us. The place of work has become a potential arena for fighting many major battles and achieving recognition," she says.

Subsequently, the simplistic advice which we are given today on stress only makes sense in times of peace at work:

"It is not just about saying no or lowering your own expectations. Once the symptoms of stress have occurred, you end up in an impossible situation in which your life depends on you succeeding at work," she emphasises.

Companies miss the target

Stress especially affects the working ability of employees in companies who make high demands on the knowledge, social competences and

creativity of their employees. Malene Friis Andersen bases her research on employees from this category. Quite contrary to their intentions the companies create an environment which is counterproductive to the commitment and welfare of the employees.

"Many companies use different tools to measure and evaluate the performance of the employee, but these tools only make the employee insecure. The parameters for success become too narrow and the employee can no longer take stock after his or hers own authority, values, feelings or hunches. This creates employees who are inflexible and vulnerable to stress," says Malene Friis Andersen.

The myth of perfectionism and stress

Malene Friis Andersen believes it is a myth that perfectionism is a character trait for which you are responsible yourself, and which leads to stress.

"Instead perfectionism must be regarded as behaviour brought about by the demands made by the labour market on the employee. Therefore, if you are suffering from stress, it is important for the outside world not to blame you for being a perfectionist. If you want to eliminate stress, you must first realise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution," she concludes.

"The companies throw money at consultants who promise to make the [employees](#) more robust under stress, but there is no indication that stress reactions are less frequent now. There has never been consensus as to what constitutes stress which in turn makes it common property and thus, big business.. It is necessary to come to a common understanding of stress and examine how stress develops in different types of work. The effort must be tailored to the challenges of different sectors of industry, if you want to eliminate stress," says Malene Friis Andersen.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

Citation: Work seems life threatening to people suffering from stress (2013, October 7) retrieved 4 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-life-threatening-people-stress.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.