
Stressed Out? Turmoil Takes a Toll on Diet, Exercise Routine

NEW YORK - Stressed workers often reach for calorie-rich foods, skip the gym after a taxing day or forego meals because of heavy workloads. Or they indulge in other bad-for-you behavior like smoking, drinking or staying out late.

As the credit and housing crises rattle Wall Street, pressures over bigger workloads, job security and shrinking nest eggs are upending diets and fueling unhealthy habits across the country.

Breakfast is diet Pepsi and two packets of M&M's. For lunch, macaroons and white chocolates filled with marzipan from the farmer's market near Wall Street.

After learning her job would be cut this summer, Kelly Daly started reaching more frequently for the soothing effects of sugar.

"It's a stress reliever. Especially now that a bunch of us are going to be laid off," said the 49-year-old Daly, whose job reviewing medical insurance records in Manhattan's financial district is being cut after 11 years.

But it is in times of duress, experts say, that minding your health is perhaps more critical than ever.

Eating right and getting exercise may seem burdensome and even frivolous under such circumstances, but it actually gives people a greater sense of control and calm, said registered dietitian Heather Bauer, author of "The Wall Street Diet."

"It's one less thing to stress you out," Bauer said. "If you're out of a job or in a financial slump, it can give you a sense of inspiration as well."

For Aleksandra Cogura, heftier workloads in recent months means skipping lunch. If she's lucky, she'll manage to grab breakfast on the go. Once a gym regular, she hasn't been in four months.

"I just feel like I need to complete my work," said Cogura, a 44-year-old sales analyst in publishing in Manhattan.

Stress can take more serious, physical tolls. People under great stress release hormones and nerve chemicals that weaken the immune system, rendering them more susceptible to illness, said Dr. Esther Sternberg, who studies the effects of stress at the National Institute of Mental Health. Stress can also slow the body's ability to heal wounds, she said.

That could all translate into higher worker absenteeism, and those who do show up are likely not as productive when under great stress, said David Ballard, who specializes in work stress issues at the American Psychological Association.

Some ingredients for happy, productive workers include a flexible work-life balance, employee recognition programs and an atmosphere that lets employees take part in decisions, he said.

"It's about looking at the big system, creating a work place that puts a variety of components in place," Ballard said.

For individuals, reducing stress means "controlling the things you can control" when work seems to get too chaotic, said Marlene Clark, a dietitian with Cedar Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Taking a brisk, 10-minute walk can do wonders for clearing the head, Clark said. She suggests penciling the breaks in and giving them as much priority as other meetings.

Laying off the caffeine - coffee, tea, soda or even chocolate - could also help calm nerves, she said. Getting enough sleep is critical, too, especially when faced with more demanding work and hours, Clark said.

Taking such measures to reduce stress will only become more critical as the economic forecast darkens.

The nation's unemployment rate, now at 5.1 percent, is expected to move higher in coming months. Gasoline and food prices are at record levels, too, with ground beef, milk, apples, coffee and orange juice costing more these days.

"The first thing people want to do when they get stressed is eat stuff that's bad for them," said Bauer, who counsels Wall Street executives. "But the end result is that they're more stressed out because they're eating something they shouldn't have."



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