

Chronic Pain Has A Major Impact In The Workplace

Ed. Note: The following is a press release from Florida State University.

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Chronic pain, which is any physical discomfort lasting for at least six months, affects up to 50 million Americans, most of whom work full time. Common forms of chronic pain include headaches, backaches, arthritis, respiratory conditions, and ailments caused by sports injuries or other traumas, such as car accidents.

Wayne Hochwarter, an associate professor of management in Florida State University's College of Business in Tallahassee, Fla., has conducted several studies to examine the role of chronic pain on work factors such as job stress, employee performance and organizational profitability. He found that social stigmas and job fears help mask the true size of the problem.

"Generally speaking, chronic pain and other physical and mental disorders have been categorized as 'silent disorders' in the workplace simply because most employees are afraid of the consequences if employers find out," he concluded.

Hochwarter's research indicates that chronic pain at work has a significant effect on both the worker and the organization. For example, higher levels of chronic pain are associated with:

- More conflict on the job
- Less-effective communication
- An inability to focus on tasks that require sustained concentration
- Less enthusiasm for the job
- Fewer favorable interactions with coworkers and supervisors
- Less support from the organization
- More job tension
- Higher levels of depressed mood (feeling "blue" on the job, etc.)

Hochwarter also was interested in gauging the bottom-line consequences of chronic pain for sufferers.

"For those experiencing even moderate levels of chronic pain, the financial consequences are staggering," he said.

In one study, Hochwarter asked more than 2,000 employees to report the number of hours per week that pain caused them to be ineffective.

"The results indicate that chronic pain accounts for over five hours per week of lost productivity," he found. "When projected over the course of the year, we are talking about more than \$5,000 per employee."

According to Hochwarter, this result does not take into consideration indirect costs, which can double or triple the amount.

"An inability to be productive also affects customer retention and increases bottlenecks caused by not keeping up with others, not to mention the costs associated with absenteeism, tardiness and ongoing medical treatment," he said.

Hochwarter suggested that a proactive approach by employers may help minimize some of these undesirable effects.

"First, education and communication can go a long way in reducing the stigma of chronic pain as a weakness," he said. "Also, organizational support, even if it is only in the form of empathy, may help sufferers get through the roughest days."

Hochwarter's research (with co-author Zinta Byrne of Colorado State University) will be presented in May at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychologists (<http://www.sio.org/>).

