



DUNEDIN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
DEPARTMENT OF PREVENTIVE & SOCIAL MEDICINE

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High Pressure Jobs Linked to Depression and Anxiety

New research has shown that work-related stress is a cause of clinical depression and anxiety among young adults. In a study of almost 900 32-year olds, 14% of women and 10% of men experiencing stress at work and with no prior mental health problems had a first episode of depression or anxiety at age 32.

The findings, published in the journal *Psychological Medicine*, come out of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health & Development Study at the University of Otago, which has followed 1000 Dunedin-born people since their birth in 1972/73.

Standard psychiatric assessments were done on study members at regular intervals between the ages of 11 and 32. At age 32, study members were also asked about psychological and physical job demands, the level of control they had in decision-making, and social support structures at work.

It was found that women who reported high psychological job demands, such as working long hours, under pressure or without clear direction, were 75% more likely to suffer from clinical depression or general anxiety disorder than women who reported the lowest level of psychological job demands.

For men, 80% were more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety disorders. Men with low levels of social support at work were also found to be at increased risk of depression, anxiety or both.

The researchers found that almost half of the cases of depression or generalised anxiety disorder newly diagnosed at age-32 were directly related to workplace stress and high job demands.

“This is important, as it suggests that work stress can be a cause of psychiatric disorders in previously healthy individuals,” says Dr Maria Melchior, lead author of the paper.

“In their 30s, most people are settling into careers, but it is also a time when people are at elevated risk for psychiatric disorders. Putting preventive efforts into reducing work stress at that age could bring big benefits.”

Those benefits include lower costs to the healthcare system and greater economic productivity, says Professor Richie Poulton, Director of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study and one of the authors of the paper.

“More people are being exposed to stress at work, and stress rates have increased in the last ten years. We now know that work-related stress is associated with psychiatric health problems that increase health-care and societal costs and reduce work productivity. It’s a vicious cycle but one that can be broken with the right interventions.”

The work for this study was funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand and the British Medical Research Council. It was done by researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College, London and the University of Otago.

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