

Like their clients, psychologists struggle with work/life conflict. How can they help their clients and themselves?

BY REBECCA A. CLAY

Do psychologists practice what they preach when it comes to dealing with stress?

Not necessarily. An APA survey of practicing psychologists found that many psychologists are suffering from stress, with issues related to work/life balance their No. 1 stressor.

Of course psychologists aren't the only ones suffering from work/life conflict. With the economic downturn entering its third year and the advent of cell phones and other technologies that make it possible to work any time and anywhere, more American workers are struggling to manage simultaneous professional and personal responsibilities. And according to APA's 2010 Stress in America survey, just 36 percent of Americans say they are satisfied with the way their employers help them balance work and non-work demands, down from 42 percent in 2009 (see page 60).

That Americans — including psychologists — are stressed-out is no surprise. But what psychologists' research shows works and doesn't work when it comes to reducing work/life conflict can be surprising and even counterintuitive.

Contrary to common advice, for example, psychologists have found that working during family vacations can be okay for some people. They've discovered that some workplace initiatives designed to reduce work/life conflict can backfire and that supervisors can become allies rather than enemies in the fight for balance. They've also gathered evidence suggesting that it may not be baby boomers juggling work, child care and elder care responsibilities who feel the most conflict but members of the Millennial generation who may not even have children yet.

Stressed-out psychologists

Conducted by APA and the California Psychological Association, the 2009 APA Colleague Assistance and Wellness Survey examined stressors in the lives of 650 practicing psychologists.

"There are ways psychologists are particularly vulnerable to stress, part of which has to do with the nature of our work with people who have difficulties and maybe getting too engrossed in that," says Daniel I. Galper, PhD, director of research and special projects in APA's Practice Directorate. "And in this economic environment, there's a tendency to maybe see more patients and work harder trying to make up income and keep the practice going."

Those tendencies can strain psychologists' abilities to meet their family obligations, the survey found. Nearly three-quarters of respondents reported that an overly challenging work/life balance was interfering with their optimal functioning as professional psychologists — a worry that topped even dealing with insurance companies and managed care.

On the flip side, 96 percent of respondents reported that maintaining balance between their personal and professional lives was their most effective strategy for coping with that stress.

Patricia A. Rupert, PhD, an associate psychology professor at Loyola University Chicago, has found similar results in her own research on the interplay of work and family life among practicing psychologists. In a paper published in 2009 in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (Vol. 40, No. 1), for example, she and her co-authors found that work/family conflict was associated with burnout among the 487 practitioners they surveyed. They also found that family

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support — having someone to talk to and help out at home when work demands increased — may help prevent burnout.

“Work/family conflict is associated with greater emotional exhaustion at work,” says Rupert. “It’s also associated with lower levels of family satisfaction.” Rupert’s data also suggest that conflict is associated with lower life satisfaction overall.

Advice to clients

Psychologists’ research also points to ways both individuals and organizations can help reduce conflict and its consequences. Here’s a sampling of their findings:

Know your style. The traditional literature on work/family issues makes it sound like there’s a one-size-fits-all approach to resolving conflict, but there isn’t, says psychologist Ellen Ernst Kossek, PhD. Kossek, a professor in Michigan State University’s School of Human Resources and Labor Relations and co-author of “CEO of Me: Creating a Life That Works in the Flexible Job Age” (Wharton School Publishing, 2010), argues that people shouldn’t blindly follow advice like “Don’t do work on vacation.”

“Two people can do the exact same thing — take a work call while on vacation in Hawaii, for example — and one feels awful about it and one feels great,” says Kossek. According to her research, that’s because different people have different “flexstyles.” Some people are “integrators” who mix work and family life all the time, texting their family while they’re at work and bringing work back home. Others are separators who erect rigid boundaries between the different spheres of life. Still others are “volleyers” who alternate between periods of integration and separation depending on the season or year.

None of these is the “right” way to manage work/life issues, Kossek emphasizes. “What determines whether your style is good or bad is whether you feel in control and whether what you’re doing fits your values,” she says. To find out if your style is working for you, Kossek recommends doing what she calls a “life bucket analysis” — assessing how much time you’re spending each week on working, commuting, family time, sleep and so on. “If there’s a mismatch between how you’re spending your time and what you value most,” she says, “then you need to start making a change.”

• **Take advantage of (the right) work/family policies.** Are flexible work arrangements help or hype? The answer is, “It depends,” according to University of South Florida psychology professor Tammy D. Allen, PhD.

In a meta-analysis she’s conducting, Allen has found the answer differs according to the type of flexibility you’re talking about. “A flexible schedule appears to be better for reducing work/family conflict — both work interfering with family and family interfering with work — than does flexibility in terms of place,” she explains. “Telecommuting does not appear to be really helpful in terms of reducing work/family conflict.” In fact, she says, it may actually increase conflict, thanks to family members’ increased access to someone who’s supposed to be at home working. And working at home doesn’t necessarily

translate into increased flexibility. “You might be expected to log into your computer at 8 a.m. and not log off until 5 p.m., leaving you pretty much chained to your computer,” says Allen.

Plus, she says, there is some evidence to suggest that flexibility benefits the employer more than the employee. While the research on how such initiatives affect work/life balance is inconsistent, she says, the evidence shows that they are associated with greater productivity, more favorable job attitudes and reduced absenteeism. “In trying to help organizations change and become more family-supportive, you have to make the ‘business case,’” she says. “What’s been overshadowed is the human case.”

Formal policies aren’t enough in any event, adds Allen, pointing out that workplace culture affects whether or not people actually take advantage of policies. “The policies may be on the books, but if you use them, you may be considered a B player rather than an A player,” she explains. APA’s Psychologically Healthy Workplace program and *Working Mother* magazine’s annual list of employers can help would-be employees find a family-friendly workplace, she adds.

• **Seek help from the boss.** Supervisors often face pressure to meet financial goals regardless of the human costs to their employees. That’s a short-sighted approach, especially among workers who may not share their supervisors’ belief that work always comes first, says Leslie B. Hammer, PhD, a psychology professor at Portland State University in Oregon. The result? Poor attitudes and high turnover.

Fortunately, says Hammer, managers can be trained to be more supportive about work/life issues. In a study soon to be published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (in press), she and Ellen Kossek assessed the impact of an intervention designed to make supermarket managers behave in ways more supportive of employees’ work/life struggles. The training consisted of a one-time, one-hour, self-paced computer tutorial followed by a 75-minute group discussion. The managers then tracked their use of four kinds of supportive behaviors over the next two weeks: behaviors related to the provision of emotional support, behaviors aimed at helping employees reduce scheduling problems, behaviors that modeled healthful integration of work and family and behaviors related to creative solutions that would benefit both employees and the organization.

The simple, inexpensive intervention made a big difference to the 117 employees who worked under the 39 supervisors who received the training. In postintervention surveys, they revealed that they were more satisfied with their jobs, less inclined to seek jobs elsewhere and more willing to comply with safety programs than a control group of 122 employees. In addition, overall health — including factors such as pain and psychological problems — improved, especially for those who had previously had the greatest work/life conflict.

“What we found is that workers are saying, ‘I just want my manager to ask how I’m doing and ask how my family is,’” says Hammer. “Even just paying attention to workers and checking

in can be beneficial.”

• **Take care of yourself.** Work/family conflict is associated with depression, anxiety, emotional strain and general dissatisfaction with life, says psychologist Jeffrey H. Greenhaus, PhD, a professor of management at Drexel University’s LeBow College of Business in Philadelphia. But conflict can also have a serious impact on physical health, he and co-authors found in a literature review published in “Employee Health, Coping and Methodologies” (Elsevier, 2006).

Researchers have found that work/family conflict is associated with high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels, for instance. Other researchers have found a relationship between conflict and unhealthy behaviors, such as lack of exercise and poor dietary choices.

The key, says Greenhaus, is to make yourself more resilient to stress through good nutrition and sleep. But don’t stop there. “Try to get at the situations that are producing the stress in the first place,” he emphasizes, adding that negotiating with supervisors, clients and family members can often yield solutions you might never have thought of. A client might agree that you could make fewer but longer trips to a job site as a way of reducing disruptions to your family life, for example.

• **Keep your expectations realistic.** With each passing generation, expectations about work/family balance are becoming more unrealistic, warns psychologist Jean M. Twenge, PhD, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and author of “Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable Than Ever Before” (Free Press, 2007).

In a 2010 paper in the *Journal of Management* (Vol. 36, No. 5), Twenge and colleagues examined generational differences in attitudes toward work and leisure. Drawing on nationally representative data from high school seniors in 1976, 1991 and 2006, they discovered that the centrality of work has declined steadily while the importance of leisure has increased from the Baby Boom generation to Generation X through what Twenge calls “Generation Me,” also known as the Millennials. “There’s been a shift where there’s more importance being placed on having a life outside of work,” says Twenge, adding that the desire for more work/life balance is apparent even among young people without children.

That could mean bad news for workers now and in the future, says Twenge. “The Generation Me group probably has more work/life conflict in some ways because they have a desire to work less,” she says. “Yet with the recession, people are being asked to work more.” Her research has found that young people also place a greater emphasis on making money than their older counterparts. Combined with their desire for more time off, says Twenge, that’s a recipe for disappointment. More realistic expectations can help forestall frustration.

“Sometimes,” she says, “there has to be a trade-off in life.” ■

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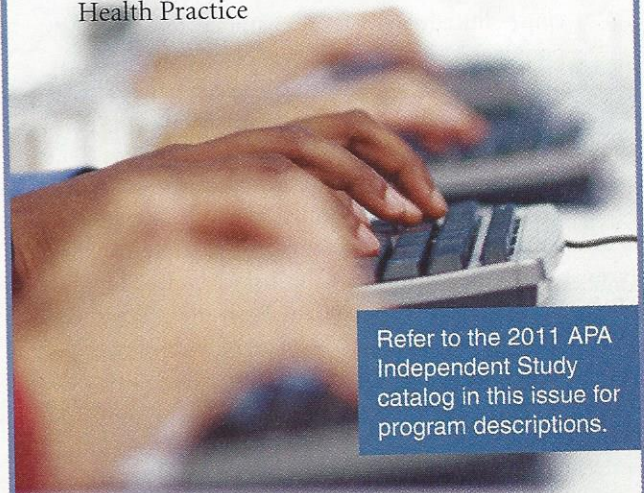
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Stressed in America

Boil down the findings from APA's 2010 Stress in America survey, and the message is clear: Chronic stress — stress that interferes with your ability to function normally over an extended period — is becoming a public health crisis.

"America is at a critical crossroads when it comes to stress and our health," says APA Chief Executive Officer Norman B. Anderson, PhD.

Part of APA's Mind/Body Health campaign, the survey revealed the impact stress is having on Americans' physical and emotional health. Harris Interactive conducted the online survey of adults and young people ages 8 to 17 in August.

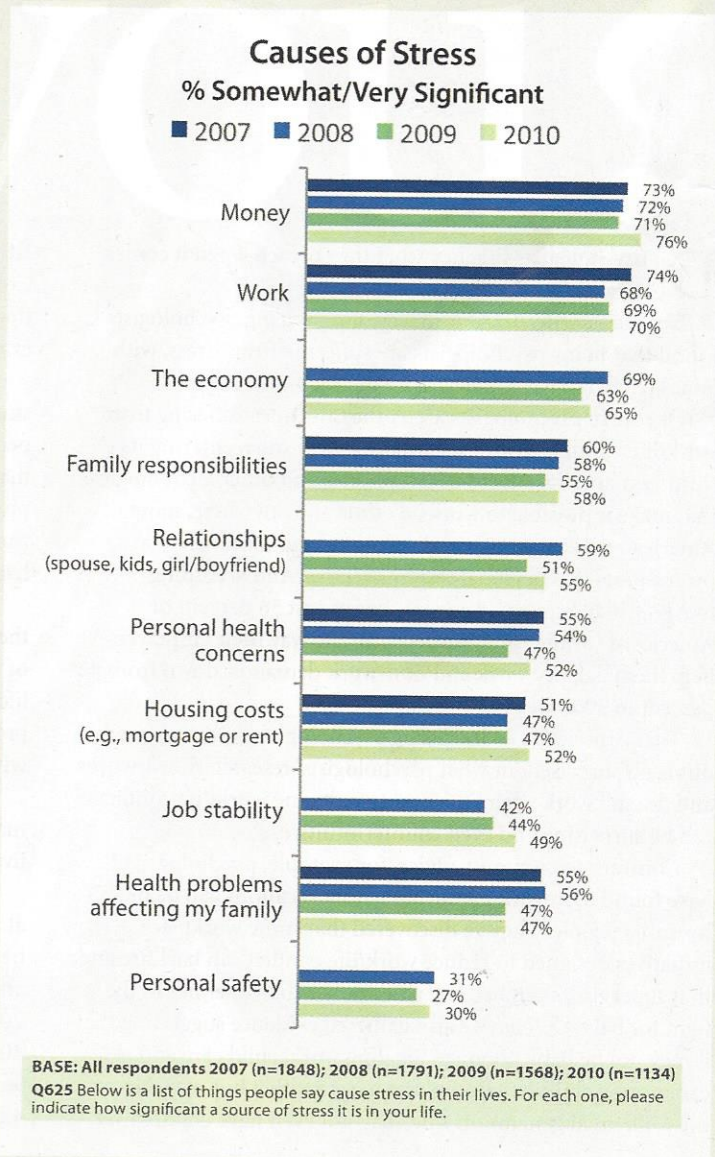
Key findings include:

- **Stress is up.** Most Americans are suffering from moderate to high stress, with 44 percent reporting that their stress levels have increased over the past five years. Concerns about money, work and the economy top the list of most frequently cited sources of stress. Fears about job stability are on the rise, with 49 percent of respondents citing such fears as a source of stress — up from 44 percent last year.

- **Children are hurting.** Stress is also taking a toll on kids. Almost a third of children reported that in the last month they had experienced a physical health symptom often associated with stress, such as headaches, stomach aches or trouble falling or staying asleep. In addition, parents don't realize their own stress is affecting their kids. While 69 percent of parents say their stress has only a slight or no impact on their children, just 14 percent of youth say their parents' stress doesn't bother them. Stress is a special problem for the third of young respondents who reported being slightly or very overweight. Overweight children worry more than normal-weight children, the survey found. The relationship between stress and overweight is bidirectional, says psychologist Kathryn Henderson, PhD, director of school and community initiatives at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. "Weight gain can be both cause and consequence of stress,"

she says. When kids are under stress, she explains, they may eat too much, sleep too much or favor sedentary coping activities like watching television; the resulting weight gain and the teasing and bullying that often accompany it can lead in turn to more stress, creating a cycle that can be difficult to escape from.

- **Self-care isn't a priority.** Only 40 percent of Americans rate their health as very good or excellent. They also know they're not doing a good



job taking care of themselves. While 54 percent agreed that physical activity was very or extremely important, for example, just 27 percent of respondents were happy about their own level of exercise. Instead of managing their stress in healthy ways, Americans are indulging in unhealthy behaviors: Almost a third of adults say they skipped a meal because of stress in the past month. Two-fifths reported overeating or eating unhealthy foods because of stress. And more than 40 percent reported that they had lain awake at night.

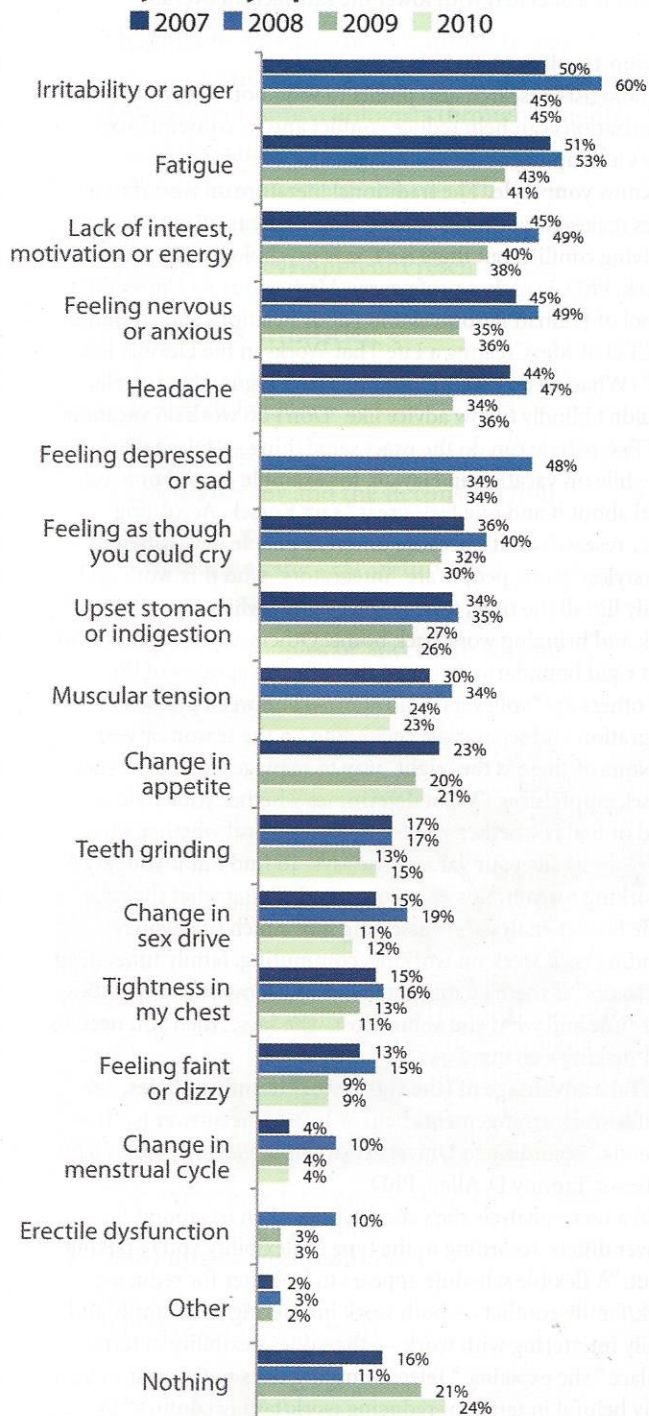
• **Lack of willpower is a problem.**

Americans cite lack of willpower as the biggest barrier to adopting healthier behavior. But 70 percent believe that willpower is something they can learn or improve — if only they had more money, energy or confidence in their ability to change. To Henderson, those responses are misguided but not surprising given our culture's emphasis on personal responsibility. "Survey respondents are mistakenly looking to some kind of inner strength to make the kinds of health behavior changes we want to see, when the reality is in large part they're at the mercy of their environment," she says, pointing to data on the role of food costs, advertising and other environmental factors in shaping eating behavior. "Our job is to teach people how to structure their environment to increase the likelihood of making healthy choices at any given time."

By raising awareness of stress and its impact, says Anderson, the survey is good news for both Americans in general and psychologists. Within the first week of the survey's release, there were more than 800 stories about it in newspapers, television programs, radio stations and online news channels.

—R.A. CLAY

Physical Symptoms of Stress



BASE: All respondents 2007 (n=1848); 2008 (n=1791); 2009 (n=1568); 2010 (n=1134)
 Q810 Which of the following, if any, have you experienced in the last month as a result of stress?