

Overview of Occupational Health Psychology

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Objectives

- OHP Background & History
- Overview of the field
- Why is this so important?
- Suggestions for getting involved
- Suggested readings

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What is OHP?

- **O**ccupational **H**ealth **P**sychology
- Multi-disciplinary research and practice focused on improving working lives of individuals, families, communities, and work organizations
- Within psychology, these goals can be addressed by combining clinical, industrial-organizational (I-O), and health psychological principles to these challenges (Quick, 1999; Schneider et al., 1999)

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Introducing OHP

- Applying psychological principles to manage stress and health within work organizations
- Multi-disciplinary research and practice
- Extension of WHO model:

Wellness > absence of symptoms

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Why OHP is Relevant to You

- Creating and maintaining healthy and safe work environments requires attention to multiple factors:
 - Physical/biological
 - Social
 - Psychological
- Interdisciplinary efforts should involve professionals with psychological training

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OHP Emphases

- **Prevention***
 - of negative effects of workplace exposures
- **Promotion***
 - of healthy personal and organizational actions and behaviors
- **Response**
 - to workplace exposures or crises when they occur, in a timely fashion

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Challenge of OHP

- Limited governmental involvement
 - Especially in the U.S.
- Health and well-being is a relatively new target for psychologists and other professionals in organizations
- Professional resources are growing though
 - SOHP, NIOSH
 - EA-OHP, I-WHO
 - ICG-OHP

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Challenge of Occupational Health

- Difficult to enhance + maintain occ. health
- For lasting positive change, OHP professionals often work collaboratively with specialists in:

Industrial safety/hygiene

Ergonomics

Epidemiology

Public health

Labor organizations

Medicine

Law

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OHP Concepts You Should Know

- **Stressor exposure**
 - Workload
 - Constraints
 - Work-nonwork role challenges
 - Incivility
- **Psychosocial Resources**
- **Work-Related Strains**
- **Intervention options**



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Common OHP-Related Issues

- **Work Stress**
- Healthy workplaces
- Work Safety
- Worker Incivility
- Work-family/nonwork issues
- Multi-level concerns
- Aging population
- Ethnic diversity
- Fast-paced and continuous work



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We have all been “stressed”...



...but why does this matter at work?

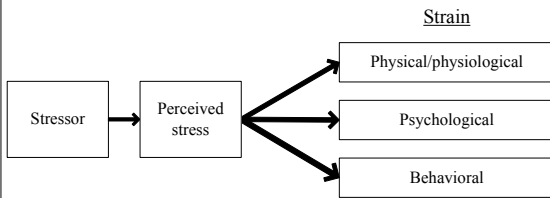
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So, what is stress?

- Psychologically and physiologically we seek a balanced resting state
 - Homeostasis
- **Stressors** are stimuli that disturb this state
- **Stress** is the experience of arousal in response to stressors and in preparation for a response
- **Strain** is what develops if the stress process continues without interruption

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Traditional Stress Process Model



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Is stress at work “bad”?



It depends

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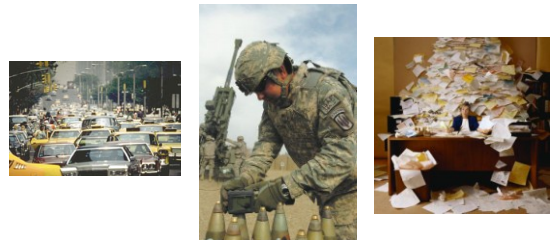
Stressors at Work

- Ambiguity, lack of resources, amount/speed/ quality demands, interpersonal conflicts...
- Especially problematic because:
 - Limited response options
 - Cumulative effects
 - Individual differences
 - Potentially “toxic” environments



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Stress is Triggered by Many Work-Related Experiences (i.e., combinations of stressors)



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Physiological Reactions to Stress

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Increased metabolic rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Dilation of pupils
- Tensing of muscles
- Secretion of endorphins and stress hormones
- Release of extra sugar from the liver

Body goes into “overdrive”

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Psychological Reactions to Stress

- Anxiety
- Anger and aggression
- Apathy and depression
- Cognitive impairment
 - Narrowing of attention, focus



Mind steps out for awhile

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“Bad” (threatening) stress can...

- ...impair cognitive functioning
- ...lead to cardiovascular health problems
- ...damage immune and nervous systems
- ...contribute to other physical/psychological strains
 - Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)
 - Depression, anxiety, frustration
- ...reduce worker effectiveness



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Stress at work may be good if it...

- ...motivates (challenges)
- ...forces necessary adaptation
- ...is not a permanent environmental feature
- ...is handled appropriately by the worker and the organization



Bring it on!

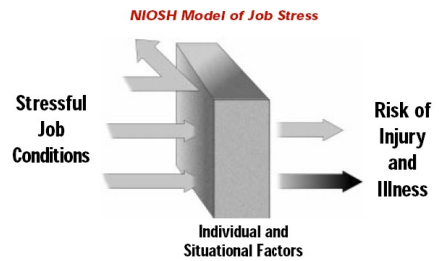
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So why does this matter?

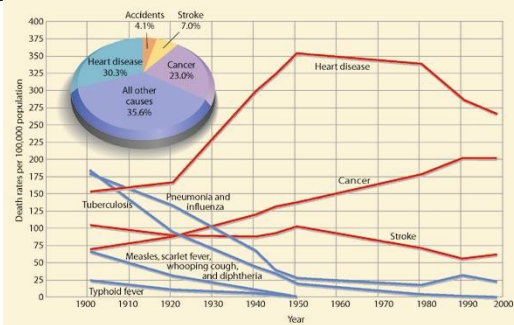
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Work/Job/Occupational Stress

Stressor → Experience & Exposure → Health & Safety



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Contagious diseases have declined.

Stress-related ones have not.

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Workplace Issues

- 25-40% of workers regularly report their jobs as very or extremely stressful
 - Chronic is “bad” in this case
- Worker well-being and performance are interdependent
 - Financially & psychologically healthy workplaces require both
- Basic personal needs at work matter
 - Turnover, commitment, morale, satisfaction

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Tangible Costs of Chronic Work Stress

- **Increased occupational disability**
- **Longer absences**
 - > all other work-related injuries + illnesses
 - Average stress-related absence is 20 days
- **Health care costs**
 - 50+% greater for high- vs. low-risk (i.e., stressed) employees

**Employer, employee*, and society
carry a major burden**

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How to Help

- Help employees do what they naturally do well:
 - Reduce impediments/constraints
 - Creatively reinforce to maximize positive emotions, attitudes, and behaviors at work
 - Support employee efforts to manage work and nonwork stress

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Stress Management Interventions

- Three levels:
 - *Primary (alter source of stress)
 - *Secondary (reduce severity of stress symptoms)
 - Tertiary (treat effects of stress)
- Focus tends to be on improving workers' ability to manage stress
- Few interventions actually target organization-level change

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Stress Management Interventions

- Increasingly prevalent in organizations
- Tend to focus on modifying stressors or employee perceptions/responses to stressors
- Wide variety, and most seem to work
 - Most effective = **Cognitive-behavioral**
 - *Still room for improvement in effectiveness*
 - Other popular forms:
 - **Relaxation enhancement**
 - **Meditation**

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Where Should I Start?

- OHP research and practice opportunities are largely built on goals of NIOSH
 - Start with guidance from NIOSH: the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA)
 - You can find the newest form of this through NIOSH's main website
- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh>

- Cunningham (2007), *Getting involved with OHP: A student's perspective*. Online at,
 - <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/>

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I'm interested...now what?

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Where Should I Start?

- Most OHP challenges require collaborative efforts with professionals in other related fields such as: epidemiology, public health, ergonomics, and industrial hygiene
- Apply for a small grant to support your OHP-related research in a field setting.
 - Organizations will be more likely to partner when you have money
 - Experience with grants can really set you on the path to greatness in research

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Where Should I Start?

- If you have applied-OHP interests you need to be more creative, though the market is improving
- Consider also how you could have an impact on policy
 - Learn about government and committee structures, processes, and politics
 - Study local, state, and federal regulations related to OHP issues, including new developments
- Develop a strong background in systems and integrative thinking, research methodology, and statistical analyses and interpretation

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Concrete Start-up Suggestions


- How can your interests in psychology be applied to or informed by ongoing OHP research and practice?
- Push yourself to work with others with different backgrounds/ skill sets. Work through any tension that may result in these relationships → this will help you in future collaborations.
- Educate yourself in OHP-related disciplines
 - Take courses outside your specialty area, do research with non-psychologists, read broadly
- Know thyself → Understand your psychology-related strengths and where your knowledge and expertise is weaker.
 - Will help you identify when collaboration will be helpful

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Where can I go for more info?

- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress/ohp/ohp.html>
- <http://www.sohp-online.org>

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Society for Occupational Health Psychology

Welcome to the SOHP website!

SOHP Home About SOHP Field of OHP Research Resources Teaching Resources Graduate Training Other Resources

What's New:

- October 27, 2008: It's membership renewal time. Membership renewal forms for 2009 are now available. Be sure to renew in a timely way so you don't miss any issues of JOHP! New for this year: SOHP members can now join the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology at a discounted rate -- and EA-OHP members can join SOHP at a discounted rate. See the [Membership](#) and [Membership Renewal](#) pages for more information.
- October 8, 2008: [Volume 4 of the SOHP Newsletter](#) is now available.
- May 23, 2008: [Volume 3 of the SOHP Newsletter](#) is now available. The newsletter includes highlights of the 2008 Work, Stress and Health conference, and many other features.
- April 22, 2008: CALL FOR PAPERS - EXTENSION 2008 conference of the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology Valencia, Spain, 12-14 November. In response to requests from some delegates for the opportunity to present to the conference in Spanish, the Organising Committee is delighted to announce that a Spanish-language activity stream will take place on Friday 14th November. To reflect this innovation, the deadline for submission of both English-language abstracts for the main conference and Spanish-language abstracts for the Spanish-language activity stream has been extended to 31 May 2008. Abstract submission forms in both languages can be downloaded from www.ea-ohp.org/conferences.
- March 22, 2008: New officers for SOHP were announced at the SOHP Business Meeting during the recent Work, Stress & Health 2008 conference. Officers for 2008-2009 are...
 President Robert Sinclair, Portland State University
 President Elect Janet Barnes-Forek, University of Connecticut
 Past President Peter Chen, Colorado State University

SOHP HOME

Welcome to the official website of the Society for Occupational Health Psychology.

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Suggested Readings

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Questions/Comments?

- If you think of any questions or have any comments, please contact me:

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