

**TITLE: The high price of stress**

**AUTHOR: Dr Richard Denniss**

**PUBLICATION: Australian Financial Review**

**PUBLICATION DATE: 15/11/12**

**LINK:**

**[http://www.afr.com/p/opinion/the\\_high\\_price\\_of\\_stress\\_Jh8TZTaKcuLNAGDcC8GO1J](http://www.afr.com/p/opinion/the_high_price_of_stress_Jh8TZTaKcuLNAGDcC8GO1J)**

Job ads and corporate websites are often littered with claims that particular companies are “employers of choice” or committed to the wellbeing of staff. But according to a recent survey by the Australia Institute, around one- third of the workforce reports experiencing stress and anxiety as a result of their work.

About 2.2 million workers head out for work in the morning with little or no idea of what time they will finish that night. Is that what “flexibility” means in the modern debate about workplace reform?

A genuinely flexible labour market has the potential to deliver substantial benefits for employers, employees and society more generally. A labour market that was more responsive to the needs of young parents, for example, would drive a substantial increase in labour force participation and, in turn, economic growth.

Similarly, a substantial increase in telecommuting such as that being advocated by the government this week, could result in substantial reductions in the amount of money we need to spend on transport infrastructure and office floor space as well as significantly reduce the time spent stuck in traffic for both the telecommuters and other road users.

Flexible does not mean permanently contactable, and it does not mean the willingness to work as long as it takes, as often as it takes, to keep a client happy. Indeed, such an approach is better described as the rigid determination to place work ahead of all else than a flexible approach to balancing work and life.

While some managers may believe that anything less than a willingness to abandon family and other commitments “to get the job done” represents a lack of commitment, the irony is that such an approach to management is typically associated with high rates of turnover and absenteeism and low levels of creativity and innovation. The culture of “just getting it done” crowds out a culture of identifying better ways of doing it.

The longer-run costs, for both firms and for society, of the epidemic of stress, anxiety and lack of sleep caused by work are even greater. Research by beyondblue, the national

depression and anxiety initiative, shows a strong link between exposure to stress and sleeplessness to the onset of serious mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The financial cost of depression has been estimated in the billions of dollars but the impact on personal and professional relationships is incalculable.

Thirty years ago some industries were notorious for their cavalier approach to safety. A combination of cultural change, regulatory change and fear of litigation, however, has led to a substantial reduction in the number of physical accidents in the workplace.

But the incidence of mental health problems is rising, and there is clear evidence that exposure to long and irregular hours of work increases the chances of developing anxiety and depression. What is less clear, however, is what to do about it.

The first thing for employees and managers to do is to talk clearly about their preferences and constraints, but it can be hard to be the first to admit that the culture in an organisation is getting you down. To that end, national Go Home On Time Day on November 21 helps individuals and organisations start those conversations.

The next thing for individuals and employees who are already suffering from anxiety and depression as a result of their work is to reach out for help. Ironically many people are more likely to reach for better time management apps for their smartphone than to download resources from organisations like beyondblue on how to cope.

And finally, we need to reward good employers in the best possible way; we need to ensure that they attract the best staff. For all of the claims about being “flexible” and an “employer of choice” it can be hard for employees to choose between potential employers.

Given the strength of the link between satisfaction with working conditions and wellbeing, governments should seek to ensure that employees are much better informed about the workplace culture and practice of potential employers. This could be achieved by requiring all organisations that employ more than 100 staff to publish the results of an externally conducted, and nationally consistent, survey of employee satisfaction. The collection and publication of such data would provide significant benefits to both potential employees seeking a new job and existing employers who provide a healthy workplace culture.

*Dr Richard Denniss is the Executive Director of The Australia Institute, a Canberra based think tank. [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)*