



# Let's Talk

SUMMER 2010

HEALTHY BODIES | SOUND MINDS | A SAFE PLACE TO WORK

## MYTH-BUSTING:

### WHY YOUR STOMACH HURTS

Many people still believe that stress causes ulcers. But about 20 years ago, Australian scientists Barry Marshall, MD, and Robin Warren, MD, discovered that stomach ulcers were caused by a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*), and could be cured in about two weeks with antibiotics. This discovery was one of the most significant medical breakthroughs of the late 20th century and the researchers were awarded a Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2005.

We know that about ninety percent of ulcers are caused by an infection with *H. pylori*. But misperceptions continue to dominate beliefs about the cause of ulcers. Many people continue to suffer unnecessarily while trying to manage chronic gastric discomfort with over-the-counter antacids, believing the cause to be stress or spicy food.

Ulcers are not caused by stress, spicy foods, or a rich diet. However stress and some foods might irritate an ulcer that is already there. If you have persistent stomach distress, skip the antacid and see your doctor instead. Your doctor can administer tests to properly diagnose and treat the symptoms and cause.

Find out more from the National Digestive Diseases Clearinghouse at

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hpylori/>

## MULTITASKING: A MULTI-WASTE?



**DOWNSIZING AND ROLE EXPANSION** have resulted in workers having to do more with less. The typical workday starts with a full e-mail inbox and is replete with (virtual and physical) interruptions, and priority “drop everything” projects. To manage the sheer volume of work and to get more done, many people try to do several things at once – they are *multitasking*.

**CHANNEL SURFING** In computing, where the term originated, “multitasking” describes a processor that can perform several tasks simultaneously. Unlike computers, people don’t really multitask. While it may seem simultaneous, what really happens is a shifting of focus from one task to another in rapid succession. It would be more accurate to say that multitasking is more like juggling with three balls. Researchers who study multitasking call this task-switching.

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## FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH (FOH)

The Occupational Health Provider of Choice for the Federal Government

FOH’s mission, improving the health, safety, and productivity of our Federal employees, is our priority. Created by Congress in 1946, FOH is a non-appropriated service agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). FOH offers a full range of occupational health services—including Clinical, Wellness/Fitness, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Work/Life, Organizational Development, and Environmental Health and Safety programs—exclusively to federal employees.



# The SCOOP

## PROTECT YOUR HEART

### BRUSH AT LEAST TWICE A DAY

People who brushed their teeth less than twice a day had an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and heart attack, according to a study published in the May 27th, issue of the Journal BJM.

The Scottish Health Survey followed over 11,000 participants for eight years. After analyzing blood tests, lifestyle, and information on dental hygiene habits, researchers discovered that people brushing less frequently than twice a day carried a 70 percent greater risk of heart disease. According to researchers, this higher risk is likely due to the systemic health problems associated with chronic gum infections.

Low frequency tooth brushing allows food debris to collect in gum pockets and decompose. As debris and bacteria builds up over time, it can irritate and inflame the tissues surrounding the teeth. It is this long-term inflammation that is believed to increase cardiovascular risk. This is because of the burden it places on the whole body to fight a perpetual, low-grade infection – often for years.

What can you do? Prevention is key - for many people, this means visiting a dental hygienist for a cleaning and getting a dental check-up every six months. Your dentist may suggest that you visit more or less often depending on health issues, oral health proficiency (how well you floss), and how fast tartar builds up on your teeth. Between dental visits, don't forget to brush (and floss) after all meals. This habit for life may lower your risk of heart disease.

*“Multitasking: A Multi-Waste?” continued from page 1*

## TUNE IN/TUNE OUT

To perform two or more tasks concurrently, the brain must briefly reorient as a person shifts their attention back and forth. This refocusing takes time and uses valuable mental resources. It takes effort for the brain to tune-out one thing and tune-in to another. This is why driving while talking on a cell phone can be so dangerous. As the brain switches back and forth from driving to listening and talking, response capability is delayed.

Another result of task-switching is more mistakes. Also, projects actually take longer – often twice as long according to researchers at the Brain, Cognition, and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan.

## PRACTICE DOES NOT MAKE PERFECT

Are there people who are simply better than others at multitasking? It doesn't seem so. Compared to their “one-thing-at-a-time” counterparts, heavy multitaskers are more easily drawn in by all the extraneous information in front of them. They also find it harder to focus while tuning out distractions according to a Stanford University study published in the September 29th issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORKPLACE

While it's difficult to quantify the long term effects of an overreliance on multitasking as a work style, one potential effect is lowered productivity. This may be hard to imagine because everyone *looks so efficient* when they are multitasking. Multitasking also affects quality of thought. High *quality* ideas and conclusions cannot arise from a brain that is constantly distracted and toggling from task to task.

Instead of multitasking, try some of these suggestions to manage a high volume workload. Use **TO-DO LISTS** organized by categories (e.g., pending, waiting for a response, etc.).

- ▶ **KEEP A NOTEBOOK** to capture notes on projects and tasks. Date each page.
- ▶ **DIVIDE WORK INTO DAILY “TIME SLICES”** and allow shorter periods in between for checking e-mail or miscellaneous work. This might be the hardest to adhere to, but will give you the most return for your effort.
- ▶ **FIRST THINGS FIRST.** Tackle priorities at the start of the day. Don't put them off or you'll get busy and run out of time.
- ▶ **USE A PHYSICAL INBOX** in addition to your virtual one. Use it to set aside work that comes in during a task slice. Process your inbox during a designated task slice.
- ▶ **MANAGE “INCOMING.”** Turn off ALL distractions during a task time slice. Close e-mail (resist the urge to peek), mute the phone, and let calls go to voicemail. You should let others know how often they can expect to receive responses from you.
- ▶ **PLAN FOR INTERRUPTIONS.** When interruptions happen, stop to note your “stopping” point (use your notebook) so you won't waste time trying to figure out where you left off when you resume.

Multitasking isn't all bad, but for some tasks it may be counterproductive. Try calculating the potential impact of errors and rework, and then decide if the task merits your full attention. It may be that by doing less at one time, you might actually accomplish more.

# HEART DISEASE

## ALMOST HALF OF U.S. ADULTS ARE AT RISK

Forty-five percent of Americans age 20 and over are living with high cholesterol, hypertension, or diabetes, all of which are associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease (CHD) – the leading cause of death in the U.S. These disturbing statistics were released in an April 2010 report on the Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Unfortunately, most people have these conditions but don't know it. Typically asymptomatic, these conditions often progress completely undetected for years while damaging the heart, blood vessels, and organs – until finally severe symptoms become evident.

### HYPERTENSION

Blood pressure rises and falls throughout the day, but when it stays elevated over time it is called hypertension or high blood pressure. High blood pressure is dangerous because not only does it force the heart to work too hard, the high force of the blood flow can harm blood vessels throughout the body. A blood pressure reading is made up of two numbers. The first (top) number is a measure of systolic pressure and measures how much the blood pushes against the vessel walls during a heartbeat. The second (bottom) number is the diastolic pressure. It measures the pressure in blood vessels in between beats – while the heart relaxes.

### HIGH CHOLESTEROL OR HYPERCHOLESTEROLEMIA

Cholesterol is produced by the body and is necessary for many bodily functions, but too much cholesterol in the bloodstream can build up over time and impede the flow of blood. Usually, the higher your total cholesterol level, the greater your risk for heart disease, but this is affected by a variety of factors including age, health, activity level, heredity, and gender.

### DIABETES

Diabetes, which causes excess glucose (blood sugar) to build up in the blood, exacts fierce damage throughout the body – much of it irreversible. We need glucose to supply energy to fuel muscle contractions and metabolism, but chronically high levels can damage the linings of blood vessels and compromise blood flow in the eyes, kidneys, arms, and legs. Long-term untreated diabetes can do permanent injury and is the leading cause of new blindness in adults.

Both forms of diabetes (type 1 and type 2) allow glucose to build up in the bloodstream from the body's inability to either produce or metabolize *insulin* – the hormone that controls blood sugar levels.

### KNOW YOUR RISKS AND TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH

High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes work differently but all contribute to CHD by harming the cardiovascular system in some way. Get tested routinely so you can identify and treat potential health problems before they develop or worsen. Then you can take informed action to prevent illness and improve your quality of healthy living.

If you need help, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide tools, support, and advice for long-term lifestyle change. Read the CDC report at [www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db36.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db36.pdf)



### FEDERAL INFORMATION LINKS

White House Blog  
[www.Whitehouse.gov/blog](http://www.Whitehouse.gov/blog)

Organ and Tissue Donation Initiative  
[www.OrganDonor.gov](http://www.OrganDonor.gov)

Influenza Information from CDC  
[www.CDC.gov/flu](http://www.CDC.gov/flu)

CDC Disaster Preparedness  
[www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters](http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters)

### NATIONAL HEALTH OBSERVANCES

July 1 - 31  
UV Safety Month  
[www.geteyesmart.org](http://www.geteyesmart.org)

August 1 - 31  
National Immunization Awareness Month  
[www.cdc.gov/vaccines/events/niam/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/events/niam/default.htm)

August 1  
National Minority Donor Awareness Day  
[www.nationalmottep.org/nmdad.shtml](http://www.nationalmottep.org/nmdad.shtml)

# The Psychological Contract

The relationship between employees and employers is typically governed by union-management contracts and the statutory standards for fair and equitable work. But there is another type of contract that can be even more important: the *psychological contract* – the implicit agreement about what employees and their organizations should expect to give and receive as part of the employment relationship.

The psychological contract is a two-way arrangement. The organization expects loyalty and commitment to organizational goals while employees have expectations about promotion, career development, and support with personal problems. The psychological contract and its relationship to related effects on employee productivity and morale has become an important concept in our world of changing organizational structures.

## WHY ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS IMPORTANT?

Organizations have downsized and mission accomplishment rests on the contribution of employees who must now carry more weight. As an organization's primary business drivers, both the capabilities and needs of employees should be integrated into strategic planning to better maximize their energies, knowledge, and creativity.

Managers can benefit from understanding the psychological contract and using it as a framework for monitoring employee attitudes and priorities on those dimensions that we know influence performance: *satisfaction, commitment, trust, and loyalty*.

## CONSEQUENCES OF A PERCEIVED BREACH

Employees often develop a sense of obligation and loyalty to the organization. But when they believe that management hasn't lived up to promises (implied or otherwise) it may lead to loss of trust and thoughts about leaving the organization, which researchers call *turnover intention*.

Employees may also react with reduced work effort, which can have a tangible financial impact on the workplace. If many employees are affected, the productivity loss can be significant. See the box below for a calculation of the potential impact of reduced work effort.

### CALCULATION OF REDUCED WORK EFFORT

*Number of employees affected, multiplied by average number of hours of reduced effort (per week, per employee), multiplied by average hourly wage or monthly salary of affected employees, multiplied by number of weeks that reduced effort continues.*

Example: Reduced work effort can amount to one hour less being worked each week. If 100 people are affected, then losses can reach 400 hours per month. Over a six-month period, organizational losses could add up to at least 2,400 hours.

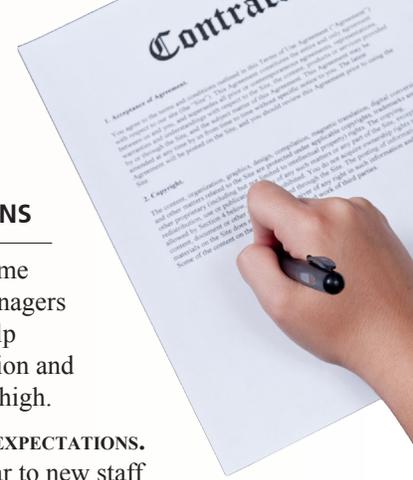
It can take six months to recover from the effects of a perceived violation as measured by the time it takes to re-establish trust and resume efforts or for the organization to introduce new processes to fulfill the work that was previously accomplished.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Below are some strategies managers can use to help keep motivation and commitment high.

- ▶ **MANAGE EXPECTATIONS.** Make clear to new staff what they can expect from the job; don't make unrealistic promises.
- ▶ **MEASURE EMPLOYEE ATTITUDES.** The state of the psychological contract can be measured in terms of job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intention. Assess attitudes to identify changes that can improve performance.
- ▶ **PROVIDE EXPLANATIONS.** When perceived violations are inevitable, as in reorganizations, avoid negative outcomes by listening to concerns and explaining the situation clearly.
- ▶ **USE THE EAP.** Pay close attention to employees' reactions and act before negative reactions take hold. Consult with the EAP, which is especially designed to deal with such emotions as anger, stress, and depression.

Though subjective, the psychological contract is based on generally accepted workplace expectations. Every employee appreciates fairness and good communication. Managers appreciate employees who are loyal, committed, and productive. Understanding and effectively managing the psychological contract can help organizations thrive by fostering mutual trust and cooperation.



## U.S. Department of Health and Human Services | Federal Occupational Health

The FOH Federal Consortium EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training, and consultation to Federal employees and agencies throughout the United States. For administrative details about the program, contact Jeffrey Dunlap at 301-443-7589 or e-mail at [Jeffrey.Dunlap@foh.hhs.gov](mailto:Jeffrey.Dunlap@foh.hhs.gov). To visit us on the Web, go to [www.FOH4You.com](http://www.FOH4You.com).

Help is available all day, all week, all year.  
800-222-0364, TTY: 888-262-7848

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For questions regarding the newsletter, contact Haydee Gelpi at 954-776-6500 or e-mail at [Haydee.Gelpi@foh.hhs.gov](mailto:Haydee.Gelpi@foh.hhs.gov)