

Member Communication Experience

How Stress is Killing Us and What We Can Do to Stop It

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The AEC industry has always been a stressful industry. There doesn't seem to be any respite. During the great recession, the stress was associated with a lack of work and financial pressures. In better times, the stress is associated with too much work and stretching resources beyond their capacity.

Some employees in the AEC industry work 60-, 80-, even 100-hour weeks, sometimes for extended periods of time. Take a look at some of the people who have been in the industry for a while. Some of them are overweight, look older than they are, and appear beaten down and worn out. Frequently, these workers develop stress-related illnesses and autoimmune diseases such as heart disease (one in three will die of this), high blood pressure, arthritis, and diabetes, which is fast becoming a major epidemic. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) predicts that by 2050, nearly one in three will have diabetes.

Too many of my friends in this industry have died at an early age mostly due to stress-related illnesses. I have lost friends to heart attacks, strokes, cancer, diabetes, and alcohol and tobacco-related illnesses. They ranged in age from 40 to 55. That is much too young to leave this earth. How many folks do you know that have died too soon from this stressful industry? How many do you know right now who are so stressed that you are worried about their health and well-being?

Workers use various band-aid methods (caffeine, nicotine, over-the-counter and prescription drugs) to control the symptoms



of stress such as headaches, stomach problems, allergies, pain, fatigue, decreased libido, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, difficulty sleeping, and irritability. I could not find any reliable statistics, but the improper work-life balance of most of the people in the industry certainly puts a strain on relationships and relationship difficulties and divorce are all too common.


In the United States, according to the IMS Institute for Healthcare Informatics, we were to spend \$610 billion annually on prescription drugs by 2021. In 2016, we filled 4.45 billion prescriptions. That's an average of 15 prescriptions per year for every man, woman, and child in America. The top drugs are analgesics (for pain), cholesterol medications, and antidepressants. According to the CDC, opioid prescriptions

quadrupled from 1999 to 2014. Deaths from these drugs increased similarly during this time period.

According to the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, per capita spending on healthcare in the U.S., the highest in the world, was \$10,348 in 2016 – 31% higher than Switzerland, the next highest country for healthcare spending. Some of these drugs, both over-the-counter and prescription, are taken to alleviate the symptoms of stress and stress-related illnesses. Recent studies also indicate that there may be a link between stress and obesity, a dire health issue in the United States and quite prevalent among the AEC folks.

Companies are beginning to wake up to this reality and address this issue. Using emotional intelligence, we can measure stress and burnout by measuring such traits as stress tolerance, self-actualization, interpersonal relationships, happiness, and optimism. Leadership program participants often complete a physical survey that tells us how their body is working. With these evaluations, we can determine if stress and burnout are problems and deal with them before they manifest themselves in the form of sickness, low productivity, absenteeism, and chronic disease.

We must educate our folks on the importance of basic stress management techniques. At Brent Darnell International, we teach basic breathing, mindfulness, and meditation techniques. We also teach yoga and put a major focus on sleep, nutrition, and exercise to combat these physical and mental manifestations of stress. Many of our participants report that they have stopped taking the drugs that they used to take to alleviate a symptom of stress.

If you have not implemented a wellness initiative at your company, I highly recommend that you do so. Teach your folks about the consequences of stress and how to take better care of themselves. In addition to decreasing absenteeism, chronic disease, and insurance costs, it will actually increase productivity and your bottom line. 



About the Author

Brent Darnell, the owner of [Brent Darnell International](#), has been teaching critical people skills and emotional intelligence to the AEC industry since 2000. Brent is a third generation construction professional. He graduated with a mechanical engineering degree from Georgia Tech and spent 18 years managing projects, such as the Brooke Army Medical Center and housing for athletes in the Olympic Village in Atlanta. In 2012 he was awarded Engineering News Record's top 25 newsmaker's award. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

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