Promoting good mental and physical health in the workplace

For many of us, our working day is spent in an office where we sit at a desk, staring at a computer screen and not moving for long stretches of time. It's no wonder so many of us suffer from:

- Lower back pain
- Shoulder and neck pain
- Headaches and migraines
- Carpal tunnel syndrome (pain and numbness caused by a pinched nerve in the wrist)
- Eye strain
- Stress-related illnesses, such as anxiety and depression

European researchers found that people who work 10 hours or more every day have a 60 percent greater risk of cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks and angina. We then get on the bus or into our cars and sit through the commute home. Then, after preparing dinner, we usually spend the evening sitting in front of a TV or another computer screen. This sedentary lifestyle is wreaking havoc with our physical and mental health. It's increasing our risks of:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease and stroke
- Osteoarthritis
- Certain cancers
- Mood disorders, such as depression

Even exercising before or after work is not enough to counteract the harmful effects of sitting for most of the day. This may explain why so many people struggle with weight, don't get enough exercise, manage stress in unhealthy ways such as tobacco use, alcohol or drug abuse, prescription medications, and also experience depression and anxiety.

Well-being at work

Most organisations are recognising the financial and human costs of poor employee health. Onsite gyms, subsidised gym memberships, in house weight loss programmes, health and wellness committees and comprehensive Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) are just some of the things they're doing to help employees stay physically and mentally healthy.

But there are also things *you* can do to promote good mental and physical health in the workplace. Here are a few suggestions:

Get up and move. Not only will your muscles thank you, but moving will improve your circulation, re-energising you for that afternoon meeting. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park your car further in the lot, get off the bus one or two stops before you need to and walk. Go for a brisk 20-minute walk at lunch.

Deskercise. Take a short break to do some gentle stretches at your desk or trade your chair for an exercise ball. There are dozens of exercises you can do at your desk, including stapler curls, leg lifts, some simple yoga poses and squats.

Connect with people. Forming close relationships and enjoying regular social interaction has been shown to reduce stress and improve mental health. Go for lunch with a workplace friend. Organise a group of co-workers to go on a lunchtime walk. Chat with someone over coffee. Stay in touch with family and friends through email or text.

Have healthy snacks on hand. Keep nuts and granola bars in your desk drawer or car, and bring in fresh fruit to munch on. This will help you avoid the temptation of the office vending machine.

Avoid fast food lunches. It's easier to manage your weight and eat healthy foods if you brown bag it every day. If your team is ordering lunch in or going out for a group lunch, choose the healthiest option available.

Stay hydrated. That 3:00 p.m. drop in energy can be due to dehydration, so drink plenty of water throughout the day. Fruits like oranges, grapefruit, grapes, watermelon, and apples can also help you stay healthy and hydrated.

Avoid long stretches of long days. We often focus on getting a project done at any cost but aren't aware of the negative impact it's having on our health until our stress is at a really high level and it's affecting our mood.

Take vacations. Ongoing stress can impair our immune systems and increase our risks of developing physical and mental illnesses. Vacations help get our minds off work and recharge our batteries in a healthy way. Having loving relationships is essential to good physical and mental health, and vacations give us that time to reconnect with our spouse, family members and friends.

Know your limits. Remember that ongoing stress can lead to a host of physical and mental ailments that can take a long time to resolve. So listen to your brain and your body. Know when you need to take a break, have a holiday or seek help. If you're feeling overwhelmed, talk to a trusted friend or contact your EAP for professional help.

Finally, make health part of your corporate culture. Join your health and safety committee, encourage others to join your lunchtime walk, or even ask for healthy snacks for the vending machine. Sometimes organisations need someone like you to help champion and promote good mental and physical health efforts in the workplace.