

Transcript Details

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Increasing Workplace Wellness for Positive Productivity

Dr. McDonough:

We spend a lot of our time at work, and certainly, at work there are pressures, there are obligations, a lot of things we deal with; and certainly, one of the things we deal with is stress, and maybe when we're at work we just don't eat that well. You get the idea. Sometimes we just don't treat ourselves correctly when we're at work.

Hi, I'm Dr. Brian McDonough, and welcome to Primary Care Today on ReachMD. And today our topic is Increasing Workplace Wellness and the relationship with, perhaps, feeling better and also decreasing workplace violence. As stress has occurred, we see more of these issues.

My guest today is Joy Stephenson-Laws. Joy Stephenson-Laws is founder of Proactive Health Labs. It's a revolutionary, nonprofit healthcare company that provides education and tools needed to achieve optimal health. She's also the author of *Minerals - The Forgotten Nutrient: Your Secret Weapon for Getting and Staying Healthy*.

But when we talk about this and we talk about work, there's a lot of pressure there; there's a lot of wellness issues. Tell me what we're doing wrong.

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

I think one of the things that we definitely can do better is educating our staff. There are so many wellness issues that our staff at work are not aware of, and as employers I think it behooves us to recognize that the more educated they are about their health and how to stay well, the more productive our staff will be and more benefit to us as employers. And wellness is not just about getting a flu shot. It's more than that. And honest, being educated about our health has to do a lot with understanding our medications that we take, what the side effects are going to be, what those medications are doing; if the medications are robbing our bodies of certain minerals or nutrients that we would ordinarily need to stay well, what we can do to put them back—simple things, like if we take antibiotics, down the road we might need to supplement with probiotics or identify those foods that are necessary to replace the good bacteria. So there are so many things that employees may not know, and I think education is a big—plays a big role. Education about our health plays a big role in making us better employers and employees.

So, for example, one of the things that came up recently was women who go through that period in life such as menopause. Our moods change, we get depressed, and that affects the workplace as well. Well, there are things that we need to learn about ourselves to, perhaps, feel better about ourselves, and all that, obviously, falls under the category of education, and those are the things that we try and make the workplace aware of so that they can pay better attention to their health and understand how their bodies work and the need to be so much more aware about our nutrition, aware about what nutrients are, what they do, how they affect our lives, things like that. So in a nutshell, that's what we're about.

Dr. McDonough:

Joy Stephenson-Laws is our guest, and she is a healthcare attorney; she's a business owner. And if you look at these numbers—and this is one of the reasons why I wanted to do this interview—according to the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration, approximately 2 million workers are victims of workplace violence every year, and the number is increasing. Even more alarming is that homicide is the fourth leading cause of workplace death. It's really expensive. The cost is about \$55 billion when you add it all together. And when we look at these numbers, I mean, they are dramatic. We have a lot of physicians who listen to this show. They are obviously taking care of patients who either work in the workplace or are employers. They also have their own people working for them in their own organizations. Tell me a little bit about some of the things you can do to make it a healthier environment. Like you said, it's not just wellness and taking vitamins and eating fruit. There's a lot more to it.

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

Of course, of course. There are things like, as I started to say before, if you're taking medications, you have to be aware what the potential side effects can be, or if you're an employer and you have a snack bar or you have a vending machine in your organization, just be aware that there are certain foods that are going to make it more likely that your staff don't produce really well, so just little things like those. If you see somebody who is stressed out, if you're constantly having deadlines... For example, I have a law firm, and that's one of those areas—you know, law is very stressful, so you have to be aware of that and make sure that you put things in place. For example, identify when the staff is going to be stressed out and, perhaps, have more fruits and vegetables in the kitchen as opposed to candy bars, not having soda in the vending machine, having them take breaks, make sure that they get home at a certain time, put proper staffing in place so that things aren't done at the last minute, that you're more proactive about deadlines so that you don't wait until the last minute to do things. There are so many things that we can do within the workplace to reduce the likelihood of stress playing such a big role in our lives.

And, obviously, one of the other things we need to understand is, while we cannot prevent stress, we can make sure that we are better equipped to handle stress, and one of the ways to be better and handle stress better is to move, to exercise, to perhaps eat better, to make sure that we're nutritionally balanced, to make sure that whatever factors we can control in our lives when it comes to diet, medications and nutrition, that we do so. And then that's where education comes into play. So there are many things that we as employers can do to make sure that our workplace is a lot better and friendlier so that our employees don't go bonkers.

Dr. McDonough:

You know, you brought us something in your work, in your writings, which I find very interesting. And most companies have employee assistance programs, especially bigger companies, and they build them up. But one of the things you said which I thought was really interesting is, "Most of these initiatives, while well-intentioned, fall short of the goal of producing long-term benefits. Instead, the initial groundswell of enthusiasm for the programs tend to wane after a few weeks or months with both employers and employees." And it's really interesting you say that, because I almost find that always with patients. When I'm a patient or if I'm treating patients, "You've got to lose weight; you've got to exercise," and everybody gets all excited, and then it starts to wear off. This seems very similar.

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

Mm-hmm, that's so true. And I guess many times when people talk about workplace wellness, they're thinking, "Oh, maybe I'm a little bit overweight; I need to lose weight." It's more than that. It's not about getting your Fitbit and you get all excited and all your staff goes on walks or they take the stairs or they go to a gym. That definitely wanes after a couple weeks because it's a lifestyle change that involves not only physical activity; it involves being educated about your health in such a way that you can actually make long-term changes in your lifestyle, and it's not just about weight. It's, for example, understanding that water is important, so in the workplace, as an employer, make sure that your staff has access to water—and good quality water, not just having access to sodas, Diet Cokes or whatever. It's important for them to understand the important role that water plays as a critical nutrient in our body and why we need it. It's important to understand that every so often your employees need to get out and go leave their desk area and take a walk so that they can relax, get fresh air, breathe, and come back so that they can be more productive. So it's just explaining to staff members why they need to do these things, not that if somebody tells you that you need to do it or you heard that you're supposed to do it. Tell them why and constantly check in.

I know this might be simplistic, but understand that there are critical nutrients that we need to live, and these are the things that keep us healthy. And that's one of the things Proactive Health Labs is about, is explaining to people that it's not about having enough protein or carbohydrates or even water. There are things like fats and minerals and vitamins. We wrote about minerals for a reason, and the reason we did that is because things like depression... You know, illnesses like depression, there are many studies that show that illness is affected by certain minerals. And it's not just about having too little of the minerals. You can have too much. So the important need for testing, these are all things that are important for staff to understand and learn about themselves so that it can be helped and be more productive and less depression in the workplace.

Dr. McDonough:

My guest is Joy Stephenson-Laws. She is a lawyer. And I'm Dr. Brian McDonough, your host on Primary Care Today here on ReachMD. And I wanted to ask you, a lot of people are interested—they are interested in wellness, they are interested in workplace and those sorts of things, but my question is: Why did you take it to this level? What was it that made you even more interested in helping?

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

Oh my goodness. Well, I'm an employer, and I saw the difference that it made in my workplace when my staff was educated about taking care of themselves. It affects productivity in a very positive way. The healthier your staff, the healthier you are as an employer.

You have less stress. You have more productivity. You have happier staff. It makes a huge difference in their mentality on a daily basis. So it was something that affected me personally, and it affected me... By making changes within my own organization, it affected me positively. And I figured if it worked for me, it should work for others as well. And when you read about all the incidences in the workplace that were negative, be it depression, be it violence, these are things that I think as a society we want to reduce, and the more steps we take to make the workplace more friendly, my personal belief is that there will be less violence.

Dr. McDonough:

We only have a couple minutes left, but I wanted to ask you... I mean, we've seen it with these episodes at schools, which are just devastating, but we also see in the workplace a growing number of incidents where people come in with guns and they shoot people, and they've got these semiautomatic weapons—I mean, whatever you want to say—a lot of people getting hurt. Is this related to changes in the stress? Is this just the environment we live in? Have you been able to see any connection between whether it's the way we're working—because we didn't see this happen at this kind of level 15, 20 years ago?

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

Yes, that's correct. My personal belief is that when people take action like that, it's because they are imbalanced. You get super angry, you lose self-control a lot easier when you're not balanced. And by balanced I mean both physically and mentally balanced, nutritionally balanced, etc. There are so many things that can happen to your personality. You can get depressed, you can get anxious, you can get annoyed really easily if you don't take care of yourself and be aware of how your lifestyle affects your moods, and that's one of the reasons why we focus so heavily on nutrition and activity, because those 2 things play a huge role in keeping you balanced, physically and emotionally balanced. Nutrition does a whole bunch in making sure that you're balanced, and it's important at different stages to do various tests to determine whether or not you're balanced and to make efforts to identify those foods that you can eat or get medications or whatever to keep you balanced. So I do think with the rising rates of obesity, which has increased since, perhaps, years ago, I think that leads a lot to many of the issues that we have as it relates to being balanced.

Dr. McDonough:

Joy Stephenson-Laws, I want to thank you for joining us on Primary Care Today on ReachMD. I really appreciate your taking the time. Any final points you want to make or something we didn't talk about?

Ms. Stephenson-Laws:

No, just in general how important it is as consumers to make sure we learn as much as possible about our bodies and utilize the valuable information that we get from our healthcare partners, such as doctors and nurses, to take care of ourselves; but as much good as they do, it's also incumbent on us as consumers to learn as much as we can so that we can ask intelligent questions when we go see our personal doctors.

Dr. McDonough:

Our guest has been Joy Stephenson-Laws. I'm Dr. Brian McDonough. I want to thank you for listening to Primary Care Today here on ReachMD. If there is anything you didn't hear, you want to hear it again, you can always download the podcast at ReachMD.com. Thank you so much for listening.