

Is your job killing you? Stress, lack of autonomy, ability can lead to depression, death

19 May 2020



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As millions continue working from home during the pandemic or are required to report to jobs as essential employees, many have raised questions about how these work conditions impact our health—and not just as they relate to COVID-19.

A new study from the Indiana University Kelley School of Business finds that our [mental health](#) and mortality have a strong correlation with the amount of autonomy we have at our job, our workload and job demands, and our cognitive ability to deal with those demands.

"When job demands are greater than the control afforded by the job or an individual's ability to deal with those demands, there is a deterioration of their mental health and, accordingly, an increased likelihood of death," said Erik Gonzalez-Mulé, assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resources at the Kelley School and the paper's lead author.

"We examined how job control—or the amount of autonomy employees have at work—and cognitive ability—or people's ability to learn and solve problems—influence how work stressors such as time pressure or workload affect mental and physical health and, ultimately, death," he said. "We found that work stressors are more likely to cause depression and death as a result of [jobs](#) in which workers have little control or for people with lower cognitive ability."

On the other hand, Gonzalez-Mulé and his co-author, Bethany Cockburn, assistant professor of management at Northern Illinois University, found that job demands resulted in better physical health and lower likelihood of death when paired with more control of work responsibilities.

"We believe that this is because job control and cognitive ability act as resources that help people cope with work stressors," Gonzalez-Mulé said. "Job control allows people to set their own schedules and prioritize work in a way that helps them achieve their work goals, while people that are smarter are better able to adapt to the demands of a stressful job and figure out ways to deal with stress."

The study, "This Job Is (Literally) Killing Me: A Moderated-Mediated Model Linking Work Characteristics to Mortality," appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. It is a follow-up to previous research the pair published in 2017, which was the first study in the management and applied psychology fields to examine the relationship between job characteristics and mortality.

The researchers used data from 3,148 Wisconsin residents who participated in the nationally representative, longitudinal Midlife in the United

States survey. Of those in their sample, 211 participants died during the 20-year study.

"Managers should provide employees working in demanding jobs more control, and in jobs where it is unfeasible to do so, a commensurate reduction in demands. For example, allowing employees to set their own goals or decide how to do their work, or reducing employees' work hours, could improve health," Gonzalez-Mulé said. "Organizations should select people high on cognitive ability for demanding jobs. By doing this, they will benefit from the increased job performance associated with more intelligent employees, while having a healthier workforce.

"COVID-19 might be causing more mental health issues, so it's particularly important that work not exacerbate those problems," Gonzalez-Mulé said. "This includes managing and perhaps reducing [employee](#) demands, being aware of employees' cognitive capability to handle demands and providing employees with autonomy are even more important than before the pandemic began."

More information: Erik Gonzalez-Mulé et al, This job is (literally) killing me: A moderated-mediated model linking work characteristics to mortality., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000501](#)

Provided by Indiana University

APA citation: Is your job killing you? Stress, lack of autonomy, ability can lead to depression, death (2020, May 19) retrieved 12 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-job-stress-lack-autonomy-ability.html>

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