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Improve job quality and health.

Healthy Work Strategies

Stress Check: A national policy in Japan for prevention of workplace stress

In 2014, a “Partial Amendment of the Industrial Safety and Health Act” revised a 2010 Japanese law that had mandated a workplace program for screening for mental disorders in workers during an annual exam. The amended policy did not require screening for mental disorders in workers. The policy, called the Stress Check Program, went into effect on December 1, 2015 in workplaces with 50 or more employees.

The program had three components:

- Workers had the option to take an **annual stress survey** and receive the survey results in order to increase their awareness of work-related psychological stress
- Workers with high levels of stress were given the option to request that the employer arrange a **meeting with an occupational health physician** to discuss the results
- Employers could use group data or team data and analyze the stress surveys to **improve the psychosocial work environment** by improving workplace communication, reducing work hours, or improving work methods

The Stress Check Program was the first mandated workplace policy related to mental health in Japan’s history. What was unique about the program compared with those in other countries was its focus on the job stressors of individual workers. In European countries, the standard practice – referred to as “psychosocial risk management” – involves measuring psychological risks at work that cause stress, and creating ways to prevent and manage those factors. (See <https://oshwiki.eu/> and <https://osha.europa.eu/>.) Some of the scientific evidence about the program’s components – such as physician visits – did not have strong proof of effectiveness in preventing work stress. However, it was decided to include the 3 components of the new program, as long as the standard risk management approach to prevent work-related stress was included in the Stress Check Program.

When the program went into effect in December 2015, a team of researchers surveyed 3,891 Japanese workers using an online questionnaire (a stratified random sample selected from a web survey site with more than a million members). A year after the initial survey, 2,492 of those workers who were employed answered a 2nd survey. Of those 2,492 workers, more than half the workers had not taken the Stress Check Program survey nor experienced workplace improvements (Table 1). 40% took the stress survey but did not experience workplace improvements, and a total of 5% experienced workplace improvements. Improvements in workers' self-reported work performance scores were not found in any group.

Table 1. Status of 2,492 Stress Check program participants in a one-year follow-up study

	Experienced workplace improvements	Experienced no workplace improvements
Took stress survey	2%	40%
Did not take survey	3%	54%

The only group to experience significantly reduced psychological distress was the group who took the stress survey and also experienced improvements in the workplace - only 2% of all those that were surveyed. Earlier research suggested that making workers aware of their stress levels by itself did not reduce psychological distress. But adding a component that improved the workplace and actively involved workers in that process seemed to improve psychological distress significantly.

One of the study articles (Kawakami & Tsutsumi, 2016) stated: "There is some uncertainty concerning the program's effectiveness in promoting worker mental health. First, no specific procedures are defined for some of the components of the program. In particular, improvements in the work environment, which is one of the evidence-based measures in this program, is not adequately detailed."

In 2017, another research team in Japan designed a study to find out if the Stress Check survey was a good predictor of long-term paid sick leave. The team identified workers with the highest levels of job stress at a large financial services company. They found that highly stressed workers were more likely to take long-term paid sick leave.

References:

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3. Tsutsumi, A., Shimazu, A., Eguchi, H., Inoue, A., & Kawakami, N. (2017). A Japanese Stress Check Program screening tool predicts employee long-term sickness absence: a prospective study. *Journal of occupational health*, 17-0161.