

Stress, fatigue, and the custom applicator

Stress is a fact of life for people in many occupations, including those who apply pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture. Some pressure on the job can keep you on your toes, but too much stress can damage your health. Prolonged stress can increase your chances of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, and digestive problems like ulcers. Stress also affects your immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to colds, the flu, and other infections.

Little research has been done to document the cost of stressed-out, tired workers in the custom application business. We do know that workers in other high-stress occupations have higher rates of turnover and absenteeism, and more accidents and injuries. During the past several years, we have been interviewing custom applicators about how they view stress. Our research indicates that stress and fatigue have the potential to lead to serious problems, such as misapplications, spills, and other costly mistakes.

What applicators can do

The recommendations that follow come directly from successful applicators. These techniques are also supported by research as being effective in other work settings as well.

1. Eat right, eat often

Your body needs a constant supply of high-grade energy. Make sure to include a couple servings of fruits and vegetables to munch on during the day. Limit your intake of fatty meats, candy bars and sugar. An occasional cup of coffee or a can of soda is probably OK for most people, but make sure you drink lots of water – eight glasses a day, at least – to keep you refreshed.

2. Keep your sense of humor

Make sure you talk out stressful issues with the right people. If the problem is communications with customers or co-workers, make sure you follow the chain of command within your company.

What managers can do

The recommendations that follow come directly from successful co-op and fertilizer plant managers and other key decision makers. In visiting successful facilities, we learned that communication and teamwork were key factors to success.

1. Buy lunch for your applicators

Several companies report that linking up with a local restaurant or deli to provide boxed lunches and dinners is a great stress reliever for applicators. It also saves time.

2. Schedule time off

It's tough to give applicators much time off once the busy season hits, especially if the weather is good and the competition is fierce. But applicators say that even a couple hours off on a Saturday morning or afternoon provides a great stress relief valve. Don't underestimate the value of even short breaks to let applicators deal with personal interruptions in their work schedule.

3. Talk, talk, talk things over

We've consistently heard that being an applicator (and being a manager) is a tough, tiring job. The stress can also take its toll on families. Try to recognize the stresses your applicators face and provide the resources necessary to help them deal with their stress. Be willing to listen to applicator concerns, and involve employees in solving stressful problems.

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