



## WORK TO LIVE

# People with these types of jobs live longer — study

Your work environment can influence how long you live.

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People spend a **third** of their life working. Stress, or discrimination related to work, is also known to inflict serious **emotional toll** over the years. The question is: How does the coexistence of these two facts affect one's health? Can a job actually cut life short?

To answer this pivotal question, researchers recently tracked over 3,000 working people over 20 years, documenting their mental and physical health, mortality rates, and job dimensions.



They discovered that work stressors are more likely to cause depression and death when one's job means they have little control over their day, or when one has a limited capacity to solve their own problems.

Meanwhile, people can stay relatively mentally and physically healthy if their job is intensely demanding — if they have a high degree of autonomy. But if those job demands come without any control of day-to-day work activities, people are more likely to suffer negative consequences.

The study also found that if someone has high cognitive ability — the ability to learn or solve problems — they are also protected against the negative health effects of too much or too intense of work tasks.

"Job demands, which can be perceived as stressful experiences, hurt mental health and result in a higher likelihood of death when employees don't have resources to deal with the stress," co-author Bethany Cockburn, a workplace stress researcher at Northern Illinois University, tells *Inverse*. "To deal with these stressors, employees need adequate job resources and or adequate cognitive ability."

Based on the study, published in May in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Cockburn and her colleagues say that both managers and employees can do more to prevent an unhealthy imbalance of job demands and psychological resources.

**Stress test** — To figure out how job demands and work-related dimensions impact mortality as well as physical and mental health, Cockburn and co-author **Erik Gonzalez-Mulé**, a researcher at Indiana University Kelley School of Business, harnessed data from 3,148 people living in Wisconsin who participated in the nationally representative, longitudinal **Midlife in the United States** survey. On average, study participants were 44 years old, reflecting the average age of US employees.

The researchers followed that group over two decades, from 1995 to 2015, and tracked their mental and physical health, mortality, cognitive ability, and job-related data through a litany of surveys and tests. Specifically, the team captured the groups' job demands such as workload and time pressure, as well as their job control — how much they could schedule their own work or make decisions.

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During the 20-year study period, 211 people in the group died.

Data analysis revealed grim insights: Job demands were linked to an increase in mortality due to poor mental health when job control or cognitive abilities were low.

People with high job demands and low levels of control were 70 percent likelier to have depression than those with high or low job demands and high control. This same group was likelier to die prematurely.

Researchers saw a lower likelihood of death via better physical health when job control was high.

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live - based on the findings, people tend to live longer when they have control over their work, even if their job is intensely demanding.

Cockburn explains that autonomy and cognitive ability may buffer people against work stressors by helping people have the skills and job resources to meet job demands. Autonomy may also provide the opportunity to restructure or change their jobs to be able to meet demands.

"In meeting these challenges, people might experience less stress because of the resulting positive feelings of accomplishment and self-confidence," Cockburn says. "On the other hand, not having the resources to meet challenging job demands seems to make things much worse. Individuals are more likely to have poorer mental health and a higher likelihood of mortality."

The results echo a 2016 study from the same team: That paper found that job demands were positively linked to the likelihood of death in low control jobs, and negatively linked to the likelihood of death in high control jobs.



Companies should keep these job-related facets in check to avoid jeopardizing employees' health, Cockburn advises. She argues that health and well being should also be at the center of the hiring process.

"Employers need to understand that when they make decisions like understaffing jobs they may be putting the mental health and lives of their workers at risk," Cockburn says.

If companies can't give employees more control, they should reduce job demands to ensure workers aren't overly stressed, she says. Employers should structure jobs so they provide

“good” stress (like fast-paced work) only when they are providing job control to meet those challenges.

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This may require adequate staffing or giving more time to complete tasks. Employers should also consider providing access and work time to use services that support employees' physical and mental health, like access to gyms and mental health counseling, Cockburn says.

On the employee side, if you are stuck in a job with little autonomy and mounting demands, Cockburn says there are ways to protect against potentially damaging consequences.


"To protect your physical health, you should look for jobs that provide challenges that you have the skills and job resources to accomplish," she explains. "To protect your mental health, look for employers who value your well-being by not asking you to work in an under-resourced job, which might cause you to have too large of workloads or work too fast."

She also suggests considering talking to a counselor or therapist about your experiences.

"The effects of stress can sneak up on us over time, so taking your experiences seriously right away and talking to a professional might help ward off some of the effects of high stress and low control," Cockburn says.

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**HOW THIS AFFECTS LONGEVITY** — Lack of control or ability at work is linked to depression and early death, regardless of job demands. 

**WHY IT'S A HACK** — Enabling employees' autonomy and hiring people with higher cognitive abilities can help people avoid this harmful cycle.

**SCIENCE IN ACTION** — If people are in a job with little control, they can try "job crafting" — seeking out projects that feel meaningful or align with one's values. It can also be helpful to talk to someone, a friend, or mental health professional about what's going on before stress starts damaging your physiology.

**HACK SCORE OUT OF 10** —  (8/10 work-life balance)

**Abstract:** Research in applied psychology has found that job demands affect employee health outcomes. However, less is known about the mechanisms linking job demands to more distal health outcomes, such as death, and how other job characteristics (i.e., job control) and individual differences (i.e., cognitive ability) might buffer these relationships. Accordingly, we drew from theories from the work stress and medical literatures to argue that job control and cognitive ability moderate the positive relationship between job demands and the probability of mortality, via the mediating effects of poor physical (i.e., allostatic load) and mental health (i.e., depression) indicators. We tested our hypotheses using a 20-year time-lagged design in a sample of 3,148 individuals with mental health data (and a subsample of 754 with physical health data) from the Midlife in the United States Survey. We found that job control and cognitive ability buffered the positive relationship between job demands and poor mental health. Unexpectedly, we found that job control, but not cognitive ability, moderated the relationship between job demands and physical health, such that job demands were related to *better* physical health under conditions of high control, and unrelated to physical health under conditions of low control. In turn, physical and mental health mediated the moderated (by job control and cognitive ability) job demands-mortality relationship. Our findings suggest that job demands relate to death differentially via physical and mental health, and that these relationships are bounded in unique ways by job control and cognitive ability. (PsycInfo Database Record (c) 2020 APA, all rights reserved).



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