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Managing to make people sick

An employee sees his doctor three times a year for about 15 minutes each time. He sees his boss 260 times a year for about 8 hours each time. Guess who has a bigger impact on his health?

His boss wins that contest easily. The impact comes from many factors, but perhaps the most important are the subtleties of work autonomy and status in the hierarchy. Countless studies have shown that subordinate employees have worse health than their higher-ups.

For example, at work, both the manager and his employees have higher blood pressure. **But when the manager goes home, her blood pressure goes down while her employees' pressures stay high.** The answer is not that she naturally copes with stress better: back when she was rank-and-file, her blood pressure responded the same way as her peers.

The worker may have more emotional stress from the work day, and likely has less control over the workload, schedule, priorities, and other details. Having constant – though not necessarily high – stress wears down a person's health: studies prove that emotional stress handicaps the immune system.

It's not just that stressed employees get the flu more often. They get everything and they get it worse. **Workers in lower level and lower paid jobs had more heart disease**, and were three times as likely to die as the senior level administrators, according to a landmark study of British civil servants.

The explanation is not that the higher level employees took better care of themselves. **The boss and the worker could have the same poor health habits, and the worker would *still* suffer more illness.** When female monkeys were all fed the same high fat diet, the lower status monkeys had four times as much hardening of the arteries as the high status monkeys. A highly paid executive who smokes a pack a day has a 30 percent lower chance of getting lung cancer than his secretary who smokes just as much.

Social economic status – a complex blend of education, salary, occupation, and attitudes – plays a big role in a person's health. **The most successful health management programs recognize these factors, set achievable goals, and save employers money.**

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