



The Group Solutions Sit-Down

Workplace Disability Prevention Mini-Series: Ergonomics

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Kristen 00:07

Workplace injuries happen every day. From sprains, strains, and tears to migraines and chronic pain, workers in all occupations and industries are exposed to a broad range of injury risks. And each year, these risks leave millions of workers unable to do their jobs on a short-term or long-term basis. In fact, according to the National Safety Council, there were 105,000,000 days lost due to work-related injuries in 2019. Which cost businesses \$53.9 billion in wage and productivity losses alone. The good news is that through workplace disability prevention and identifying at-risk employees before a disability occurs, we can help prevent disabilities or reduce their severity and shorten the duration of an absence. I'm Kristen Osburn, a marketing strategist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions. In this five part mini-series, I sit down with Cassie Mills, a certified rehabilitation counselor and ergonomic specialist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions, to discuss workplace disability prevention and the key steps that employers can take to help their employees stay healthy and productive at work. In this episode we'll be focusing on ergonomics.

Hey there Cassie, welcome back The Group Solutions Sit-Down.

Cassie 01:37

Hey there Kristen, thank you for having me back.

Kristen 01:39

Well, Cassie, I know you mentioned ergonomics briefly in the musculoskeletal disorder episode of this mini-series, but since we're diving in a little deeper here, in this ergonomics focused episode, help me understand exactly all of what ergonomics entails.

Cassie 01:57

Sure, happy to. So the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA, defines ergonomics as the science of fitting workplace conditions and job demands to the capabilities of the working population. So to say that in lay terms, for us to really understand what ergonomics means, it's really it's the study of the kind of work you do, the environment you work in, and the tools used to do your job. So for example, think about when you're sitting at your desk, if you are sitting at a desk, the angle of your computer monitor, the height of your desk, or the type of chair you sit in. Are your eyes strained at the end of the day? Are your shoulders, upper back sore? Do your wrists hurt from typing? These are all things we consider as part of ergonomics to ultimately eliminate discomfort and the risk of injury due to working.

Kristen 02:52

Okay, so my blue light glasses I've got on... sounds like that's helping me. But my, you mentioned in the last episode, a chicken neck, which I find myself doing frequently, so I think, Cassie, as we talk here, this whole time, I'm going to be setting up a little bit straighter, which is good. But you know, I actually admit that these are all things that are a struggle for me, because I work from home. And I used to have a sit stand desk, made it a little bit easier, but I really do catch myself hunched over quite a bit. And I imagine that, you know, given the pandemic, a much larger portion of the population, now working from home, is probably experiencing similar issues. I'd be curious to hear how you've seen this shift in our society- moving to work at home- really impacting larger workplace ergonomics?

Cassie 03:43

Yeah, so Kristen, the shift has been huge. According to Stanford Institute, and their recent research they did during the COVID shutdown, 42% of the US labor force is now working from home full-time! That means only about 26%, mostly those essential workers, as we know, are working on their business premises. That's almost twice as many employees are working from home as compared to in the workplace. So you can see by sheer numbers, the US is now I work from home economy. Which for those like me who've worked at home for seven years, we've adjusted to our environment over time so the shift really has not been a problem. But for those who had to move home in the blink of an eye and are now sitting at their kitchen table trying to work from a stool, there's a lot of challenges that come with that. Ergonomics plays a really important part in how we feel and how we perform our jobs daily. And beyond that, we also see in our line of work that good ergonomics can also decrease stress and potential injuries, as well as increase productivity, focus, and improve overall health.

Kristen 04:49

Wow, ok so, Cassie, I imagine then that the long term impacts of poor ergonomics can actually lead to chronic pain and sounds like then missed work, loss in productivity, really a lot of those things that we just talked about with the musculoskeletal disorder episode.

Cassie 05:07

Yeah, absolutely, Kristen. So ergonomics really can try to help decrease those musculoskeletal disorders from actually happening in the first place or even catching them early on. So I work a sedentary job, I am mousing and typing pretty much constantly all day. I've been doing this job for about 11 years. And before that, I did not have a sedentary job. I was moving around, I never really sat for more than 30 minutes at a time. So as I started this job, very quickly, early on, I found with using a standard keyboard I was having a lot of wrist pain on my right wrist. So right on the outside, it just after typing several hours, it would just get really painful and had trouble kind of moving it around and things like that. So I switched to, did some research, talked to my employer, and switched to an ergonomic keyboard which drastically decreased that pain and made productivity actually go up because I wasn't in pain, I felt much better. But given over an 11 year span, as you can see, a lot of times these conditions can take a long time to actually develop. So putting ergonomics in place from the very beginning, or when you first feel some sort of twinge of discomfort, is really the time you

should speak up. Is when employees or employers should really be focusing on that very first time. Through the years I've done a lot of, like I said, mousing and typing and ended up with carpal tunnel and cubital tunnel on my right arm. So I did have to end up having surgery. But over these 11 years I've learned to mouse with my left hand. I'm actually much better at mousing with my left hand than right now. So it's a shift in focus and how you use your body and doing your job.

Kristen 07:00

Yeah, wow, I also love that it's called mousing, Cassie. And with our last episode and the musculoskeletal disorders and talking about chicken necks and giraffe necks, I'm noticing an animal theme really related to ergonomics and musculoskeletal disorders.

Cassie 7:18

Absolutely!

Kristen 7:20

Well, I guess this is why I now I realize that me having my mouse pad that has that squishy wrist guard, that's actually ergonomics and not just a fun added little element. So that's great. Well tell me Cassie, you shared a lot of what can happen as a result of poor ergonomics, or the importance of good ergonomics, and some of the pain that you've experienced as a result, so give us some hope here. Tell me, what kind of steps can employers take to really support their employees and make a shift in ergonomics to help keep them healthy, happy, and ultimately at work?

Cassie 08:00

Absolutely. So some of these will be very similar to our last episode when we talked about the musculoskeletal disorders. So one, use those Ergo break apps that we talked about, actively try to take anywhere from one to three, max five minutes to do stretching, changing positions. So like I said, make it normal to take breaks throughout your day, resources for stretches. So in my case, it was my forearm that I had a lot of trouble with from the elbow to the wrist. So every 30 minutes, I would stop and do stretches for my forearm and wrist and elbow. And that definitely helped with the condition and the pain and the discomfort. Printable things that they can see every day, we work on a computer. So we're staring at the screens all day. So maybe they do want something that they can print off and have like off to the side that they can look at, as a reminder to check their posture throughout the day, to ensure that they're sitting properly at their desk, if that's where they're working. Send out maybe weekly emails about ergonomics, focusing on a specific piece of equipment and how to use that properly. You could always also have an ergonomic checklist with the appropriate equipment for the job in the new hire packet. So when I said start from the very beginning, I mean, start from the very beginning... in that new hire packet, or when somebody is setting up their workstation as a brand new employee, go through an ergonomics assessment and make sure everything is set up properly for them. Another thing that you could do that I think would be really interesting is surveys sent out monthly or quarterly to employees to really see what their pain points might be around regarding their workstation or the equipment they're using. And then one thing that I really like that a lot of people don't know is education on Windows accessibility. Windows has actually wonderful accessibility built into the computer. So if you need to use speech to text, zoom things, other things that people need for accessibility on a computer. It's already actually built into the computer and that's the best place to start to see how that might help somebody before thinking about needing something else.

Kristen 10:08

Wonderful. Well, Cassie, it was so great to have you back on the show. And once again, you've given me a lot of good reminders... Definitely looking at my desk right now and all the things that I can probably adjust for better ergonomics. So my back and shoulders and everything thanks you. Listeners, make sure you tune in to the other four parts of our workplace disability prevention series, where we'll also be discussing

musculoskeletal disorders. We referenced those a little bit here. And then our next episode, we'll talk about accommodations connected, again very much to a lot of what Kathy was just saying with some of the equipment, and we'll also talk about mental health and migraines and just continue our overall discussion on helping employees stay healthy and productive at work

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