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It's true: Your boss can make you sick

By **CHEN MAY YEE**, Star Tribune

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Employers may have long suspected it, but now they can quantify it: People who are unhappy at work take more sick days.

In a work environment rife with dissatisfaction and lacking in trust, Minnesotans who stay home sick remain off the job more than those with the same health issues who work in a more pleasant place. Over a month, those in that "negative work environment" stayed home 1.25 more days, according to a new poll on American well-being.

It may not sound like much, but it adds up to 15 days a year.

That's one of the first nuggets emerging from data collected for a new Well-Being Index co-created by Gallup and Healthways Inc., a Tennessee-based disease-management company with a big operation in Eagan.

The first national Well-Being Index was released in April. Minnesota is the first state for which data are being analyzed. The goal is to do the same for each state and eventually every country.

"Employers are very interested in this data because human capital is one of their largest expenses," said Amy Neftzger, a Healthways researcher.

Pain and suffering

Since the beginning of the year, researchers have polled 160,000 people nationally by phone and continue polling 1,000 more a day. That includes 2,800 Minnesotans.

In assessing their own well-being, Minnesotans were about average. Six percent said they were suffering compared to 5 percent nationally. Fifty-two percent said they were struggling compared to 50 percent nationally. Forty-two percent said they were thriving compared to 45 percent nationally. Researchers said the differences were not statistically significant.

When it came to health, Minnesotans did better. Twenty-nine percent of Minnesotans polled said they had no ailments at all, compared to 23 percent nationally. Just 19 percent had four or more disease conditions, compared to 26 percent nationally.

The most common ailments in Minnesota were neck and back pain. Nationally, it was high blood pressure.

No more lousy bosses?

The idea for the poll springs from a growing body of research showing that health is about more than the lack of disease. It is affected by factors such as your financial security, your social network and whether you are appreciated.

It's not just doctors and social scientists who are paying attention. Employers are increasingly concerned about workers' health, not just to keep up productivity but also because they bear a significant portion of medical costs.

Gallup-Healthways pollsters asked people about their job satisfaction, whether bosses were authoritative or collaborative, whether there was openness and trust, and whether individual strengths were recognized. Of full-time Minnesota employees, 18.4 percent reported working in a negative environment compared to 20.3 percent nationally.

Among those with four or more medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, those working in the negative environments stayed home more than those in more positive environments.

Healthways hopes to use the data to design new wellness coaching and disease management programs. Chief innovations officer Bill Gold stressed that it's early, but he thinks the implications could be far-reaching.

"The lousy supervisor will no longer be tolerated," he said.

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