

SICK AGAIN?



STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/MIKE BARRETT

York businesses try fitness centres, wellness fairs, stress management programs to keep you happy and productive

BY MICHAEL POWER
Staff Writer

The new gym and health centre at Smucker Foods of Canada scores a perfect 10 with workers, employee Mary

Lott says. "We've gone from having nothing to all of this," the Markham company's executive assistant says.

"All of this" means a fitness centre that opened last May and includes free weights, three treadmills and a rowing machine. There is health information on the walls of the gym, dubbed the Apple A Day Wellness Centre.

As part of a healthy kickoff to the year, the company also held a wellness fair in January offering blood sugar and blood pressure screening.

"Speaking as an employee, it's gone over very well," she says of the company's healthy focus. "Everything has changed in terms of health and wellness."

Efforts to keep you healthy and,

therefore, at work and productive, are nothing to sneeze at.

Absenteeism due to stress costs Canadian employers \$3.5 billion a year. Mental health problems, which include worker burnout, depression and stress, run up an annual bill of \$33 billion.

Employees lost an average 7.7 work days last year due to illness and disability, Statistics Canada reports.

The benefits of keeping employees healthy wasn't lost on Smucker Foods, communications manager Katherine O'Neil says.

"There are costs associated with it, but it will do a lot in terms of work-life balance and morale," she says.

"I think that at the end of the day, it's clear the healthier employees are, the more productive they are."

And employees in today's workforce have no shortage of stress, says Mona Hughes, a public health nurse with York Region Health Services.

Baby boomers still raising families often find themselves saddled

with caring for aging parents, too, Ms Hughes says.

Also, workers these days must deal with what Ms Hughes calls "techno-stress".

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Pagers, e-mail, blackberries and cell phones make it tough for employees to put work aside, even when at home, she says.

"Often what employees are expressing is that they are experiencing a lot of work-life conflict," she says. "There isn't a transition where people can focus on other

things. There's almost like a chronic fatigue is setting in and people often don't have time to take a break."

That fatigue often leads to workers staying home due to colds and the flu, she adds.

York Region Health Services runs the Workplace Wellness Program to help employers keep workers healthy.

It includes consultations, workshops and a newsletter sent three times a year to companies in the region interested in improving employee health.

York Region and the Health and Long-Term Care Ministry pay for the program and companies don't have to shell out for the services.

As part of the program, Ms Hughes visits companies to help tailor a stress management program for employees.

That involves pinpointing causes of stress among employees, which can include financial woes, chronic illness or trouble balancing work and home lives, she says.

Employers must look at the full picture — and not just one factor

such as stress or nutrition — when trying to keep workers healthy, public health nurse Teija Cumming says.

Companies should also tailor health and wellness programs to what employees care about, she says, noting there's not much point arranging fitness classes if employees won't show up.

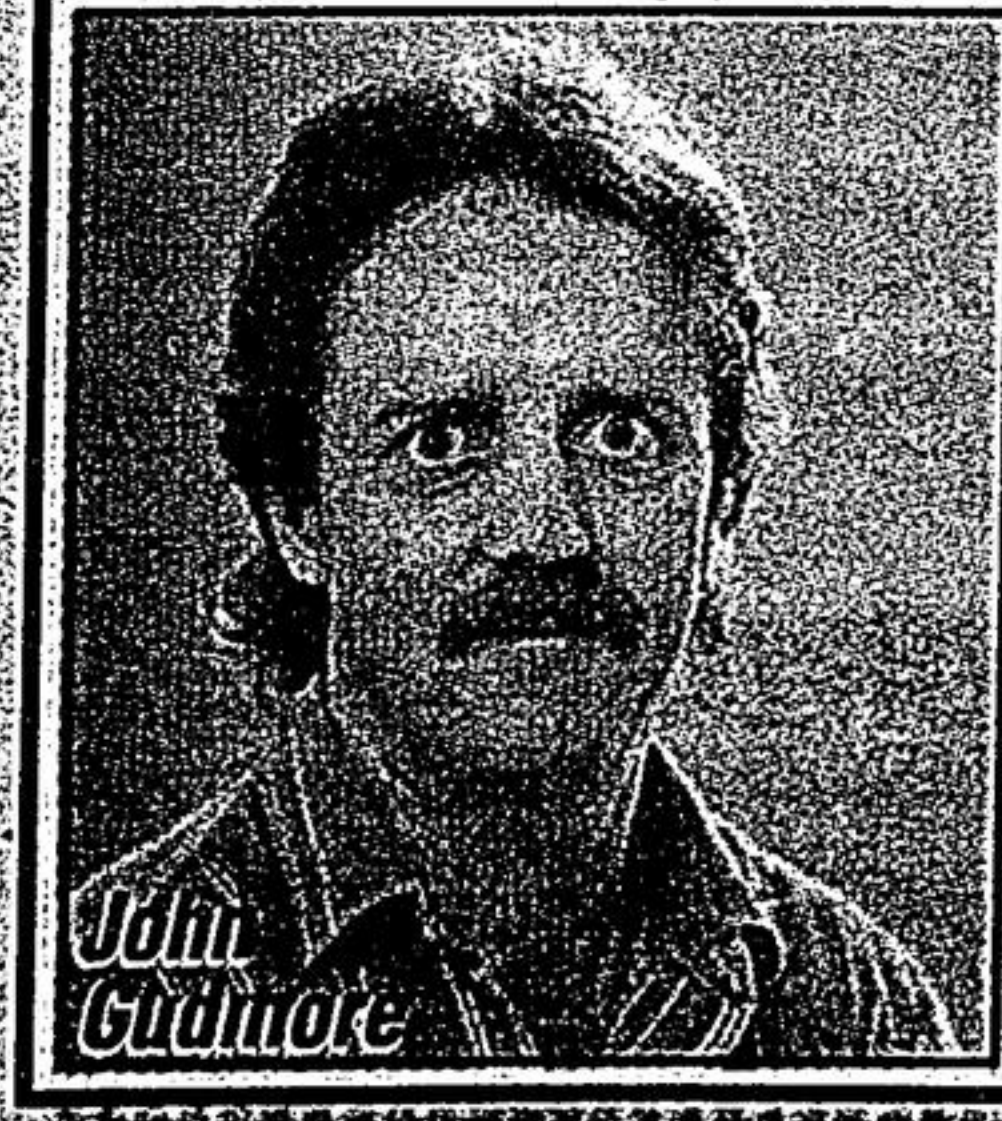
"Just posting pamphlets on a bulletin board isn't going to fix the problem," she says.

Not every company has to open an on-site gym. Office wellness committees can organize walking programs at lunch or try to get healthier food in vending machines, Ms Cumming says.

Most companies see an increase in productivity among workers about a year after starting a wellness program, she says.

"But it takes several years for a company to see the financial benefits of that," she adds.

Employers interested in the Workplace Wellness Program can call the region at 905-762-1282.



John Guimore

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