

# How Are You Coping?

*Stress is a Major Cause of Substance Abuse, and Superintendents Face More Job-Related Pressures Than Ever Before.*

By LARRY AYLWARD

*Golfdom*

Joe Moris rarely ate breakfast during his heavy drinking days, unless you count scanty daily meals of Roloids and breath mints. The long-time superintendent of the 3M Club of St. Paul in Lake Elmo, Minn., popped Roloids to relieve the piercing heartburn and sour stomach he experienced the

morning after a night of boozing. Moris munched on breath mints to hide the stale smell of beer on his breath.

"I ate a donut here and there, but I didn't eat a good breakfast on a weekday for about 10 years," he says.

Moris began work at 5:30 a.m. and often arrived with a hangover and functioned in a haze. When the workday ended at 2:30 p.m., Moris and other employees would gather and drink beer for an hour or longer.

Moris would then head to the local pub and drink for several more hours. Sometimes he would go to the bar's bathroom and force himself to throw up to clear his stomach so he could drink more beer.

Moris would stumble to his car and drive home. He would eat a TV dinner and be in bed by 10 p.m. He would rise at 4:30 a.m. and start over again.

## About Substance Abuse

One time Moris was called to work in the middle of the night because the course was flooded by heavy rain. He was still buzzing on beer from drinking earlier, but Moris manned a bulldozer to help control the flood. He ended up rolling the dozer down a 12-foot bank. Moris was frightened, but not hurt. He drank a few beers to calm his nerves before hopping back on the dozer.

"The incident didn't make me realize I had a drinking problem," Moris says. "My mind wasn't clear enough to think that."

Moris' life focused on drinking. "I couldn't imagine want-

ing to do anything without drinking," he says.

It's a cool spring day in early June and Moris, dressed comfortably in jeans and a long-sleeved buttoned-down shirt, sits behind his tidy desk in his modest office at the 3M Club, where he has been superintendent since 1975. Family photos adorn his desk and office walls.

It has been more than 21 years since Moris has had a drink, but he still remembers the uncouth things he said and did during his drinking days in the 1970s and early 1980s. Moris' shame for his actions and statements has diminished, but he has not forgotten those dark times.

Moris, 59, appears bright-eyed and confident-looking, but he grimaces when he talks about his drinking. He talks about his alcoholism candidly, though, because he doesn't want to see other superintendents crawl inside whiskey bottles and never come out.

Minnesota superintendent Joe Moris quit drinking more than 21 years ago. In 1989, he formed a group within the Minnesota GCSA to help other superintendents with substance abuse problems.

Moris is not insinuating that the golf course maintenance industry has a substance abuse problem. He shares his story because he wants to send a simple message to other superintendents: This is what can happen to you if you abuse alcohol and/or drugs.

There are no statistics that say one profession is more apt to substance abuse than another, says Steven Ey, medical director for the Betty Ford Center, the renowned treatment center located in Rancho Mirage, Calif. "Substance abusers come in all shapes and sizes, and from all career paths," Ey says.

But Ey points out that stress is a major risk factor for substance abuse and addiction. "Stress can contribute to problems with substance abuse and addiction," he says firmly.

Working as a superintendent may not be as stressful as working as an air-traffic controller, a corporate CEO or a police officer, jobs cited by Jobs Rated Almanac as three of the nation's most stressful occupations. But golf course maintenance has become an increasingly pressure-packed profession, especially at clubs where green committees and general managers expect nothing less than perfect conditions.

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**JOE MORIS**

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Of course, superintendents react differently to coping with increased pressure. One might thrive on it and perform his job even better. Another might go to the gym after work and burn off any angst caused by job stress. Another might head to the bar after work and drink six beers and a couple shots to relieve the tension.

What's important is how superintendents cope with stress over an extended period of time. If they're using drugs or their drinking is out of control and is causing problems at work or at home, then they're substance abusers, Ey says. They're putting themselves on a destructive path that can only get worse and lead to problems with their jobs, their families and their health.

## The Pressure Factor

There were days when he was superintendent at Lake Region Yacht & CC in Winter Haven, Fla., when Alan Puckett says he was so flustered with his job that he wanted to go to a bar after work and drink hard.

## Dealing with A Drinking Problem

"I was on egg shells all the time - it was very stressful there," says the 42-year-old Puckett, who left Lake Region about 2.5 years ago to become superintendent of The Club at EagleBrooke in Lakeland, Fla. "There were days I left the course angry, and I wanted to go and forget the world. Fortunately, those days were far and few between."

Mike Sosik, the owner, superintendent and general manager of Harrisville GC in Woodstock, Conn., has never had a drink or taken drugs. But Sosik, while he doesn't condone it, understands why some superintendents might choose alcohol and drugs to deal with stress.

"I've been in the profession for nine years, and it's getting more stressful because the demand for conditioning is going up," the 36-year-old Sosik says. "I can understand why superintendents turn to alcohol or drugs as an outlet because there's so much pressure on them."

It's difficult to measure how much more pressure superintendents are under than they were 20 years ago. But consider that many superintendents are playing Russian roulette with their greens. Because they're under pressure to increase green speed, they're lowering the height of cut on mowers to near-ridiculous levels and risking the greens' overall health.

They're also being pushed to maintain fairways and bunkers better. Today, some superintendents are required to mow fairways short to appease golfers, who demand tight and fast-playing courses. Superintendents are also instructed to present finely manicured bunkers with sand that's somewhere between firm and soft to provide the perfect lie.

More superintendents believe they're more prone to being fired today because of the increased scrutiny they're under to keep their courses in near-immaculate conditions. Many are also working more hours and on weekends because they're afraid not to be at their courses.

Jim Nicol, certified superintendent of Hazeltine National GC in Chaska, Minn., believes a superintendent might turn to alcohol or drugs to escape family problems attributed to working too many hours and not being at home with family members.

"Not taking off work and leading somewhat of a normal life can create problems within the family," Nicol says. "Then it just snowballs."

In his nine years as CEO of the GCSAA, Steve Mona says he's noticed that pressure on superintendents has gradually increased because golfers' expectations for improved turf conditions has surged. "I'm concerned about the rising expectations and the impact they're having on our members," he says.

In some cases, superintendents are putting pressure on themselves, Mona says. "Many superintendents admit they're constantly trying to raise the bar [on golf course maintenance], which reduces their margins for error and raises their stress levels."

That's detrimental, Mona adds.

"While superintendents are well-educated and dedicated, the fact is they don't have ultimate control over the golf course - Mother Nature and the man upstairs do," he says. "They cannot logically achieve perfection."

## Dealing With It

You don't need alcohol or drugs to cope with stress from your job. Several superintendents suggest a variety of healthy activities to help deal with added pressure.

Tom Athy, certified superintendent of the Omaha (Neb.) CC, and Mona say exercise is a great stress reliever.

"I try to run on the treadmill on the days I experience the most stress," Athy says. "[The workout] helps eliminate some of the stress and helps me sleep better."

Running on the treadmill has also helped Athy lose about 25 pounds since January. "When you get older, you become more health-conscious," he says.

Mona runs daily and starts each morning with a short routine of sit-ups and pushups. "You can feel [the stress] melt away," he says of exercising's impact on tension.

Sosik says his family, including his wife and three young children, help him deal with stress after a long day. "As soon as I get home, I see my wife and kids, and I forget about what happened at work," he says.

Sosik talks to his wife, Christine, about problems at work. He says she's a great listener. "As soon as I walk in the door, Christine knows if I've got something on my mind."

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Puckett, 42, doesn't have a family to go home to, but he does have a mountain bike, a fishing pole and his golf clubs. Those activities help him relieve stress. Puckett says his involvement in organizations associated with the profession, including his local Florida association and a local First Tee program, help him cope with tension. He also says working in his yard is a great stress reliever, even after a long day on the course.

"You just can't go home and have a drink and think about work," Puckett advises. "That will eat you up."

Mona says the GCSAA addresses the issue of substance abuse by conducting seminars on stress management. "We teach more productive ways to deal with inherent stress rather than abusing alcohol or drugs," he says.

Ey's advice for a stressed-out superintendent who can't stop drinking is to check into a treatment center.

## Blowing Off Steam?

At the GCSAA's annual conference and show, superintendents are seen drinking in bars and restaurants and having a good time. They are also apt to down a few beers during local and regional chapter meetings. So what's wrong with them blowing off steam? Nothing, answers Ey, as long as superintendents are not overdoing it and endangering others, such as by driving drunk.

There's a fine line between blowing off steam by drinking with friends in a bar and substance abuse, Ey says. The fine line is about occurrence. A superintendent is not blowing off steam if he's drinking six beers and smoking a joint every night. He's abusing alcohol and drugs and is at risk for addiction, Ey says.

Puckett says he enjoys partaking in the 19th hole after a round of golf at a chapter meeting. It's therapeutic to get away from the course and talk shop with his peers.

"We have a beer or two and talk about the common problems we have at our golf courses," Puckett says. "It's not a sit-down drunkfest."

Even though Mona says superintendents are under more stress than they were when he began as CEO in 1993, he hasn't noticed that they're drinking more at GCSAA functions.

"I don't leave our national conference saying we have a hard-partying group," Mona says. "I've noticed no increase in alcohol use."

Athy says he's known superintendents who liked their beer too much, but they later realized that drinking heavily wasn't healthy.

"They discovered that there's not much future in burning the candle at both ends."

While alcohol still plays a role in industry social settings, it isn't as prevalent as it once was, Moris says. "In the '60s, alcohol was far more accepted in our profession."

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## Road to Ruin

Moris says he began drinking as a teenager to mask his low self-esteem, something that hindered him well into his adult life. Moris drank when he attended monthly superintendent meetings because he says he felt inferior in front of his more career-oriented peers.

Even though he was out drinking the night before, Moris would always be the first one to work the next morning. He also says he never missed work because of his drinking. Getting to work early and not calling off was Moris' way of convincing himself he didn't have a substance abuse problem. That was vital because he didn't want to even think about quitting drinking.

"That's the last thing I wanted to do," Moris says. "Drinking was my life."

Moris only drank beer in the early '70s, but later in the decade he began drinking more wine, vodka and martinis. He wonders if he would have "graduated" on to drugs such as cocaine if he hadn't stopped drinking.

It took a six-week rehabilitation program to convince Moris he had a problem. His advice to others who wonder whether they have substance abuse problems is simple. "If alcohol and drugs are causing a problem, then they probably are a problem," Moris says.

Moris says he was "ornery as hell" after he quit drinking on March 4, 1981. He realized he had no friends because his old friends were his were drinking partners. But after about a year of sobriety, he began gaining more confidence in himself and his self-esteem improved. Moris could look in the mirror and smile at himself, something he never did before.

In 1989, Moris formed a group within the Minnesota GCSA to help other superintendents with substance abuse problems. Moris wanted members of the association to know they could come forward anonymously to receive help.

Looking back on his drinking days, Moris realizes that alcohol nearly led him down a road to ruin.

"All the problems I had and drank to escape were always there the next day - and worse," Moris says. "Alcohol and drugs aren't going to hide your problems. They will only make them worse."