

Job Stress in Difficult Times

Even under normal circumstances, everyone experiences some amount of stress in their occupation. In extraordinary times such as we are currently facing, stress will likely be a problem for most if not all of us. Over time, stress can affect job performance, impair physical and mental health and cause strains on your relationships. Although job stress may be unavoidable, it can be manageable when you adopt the appropriate techniques and attitude.

Understanding Stress

Stress is a normal response to life changes. An ability to react to stress is crucial for human survival. Each of us possesses an innate “fight or flight” response mechanism to potentially harmful or dangerous situations. When faced with stress, the adrenal glands secrete stimulating hormones; extra glucose is burned for energy; the heart rate accelerates; blood is channeled to working muscles; and your brain releases epinephrine, cortisone and other hormones to get you ready for the challenge.

While stress can keep you sharp and alert, prolonged stress can strain the body. Unrelieved tension builds up, causing an array of physiological and psychological symptoms that may include:

- A weakened immune system (lower white blood cell count)
- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- Back and muscular pain
- Cardiovascular disorders
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Concentration difficulties
- Chronic fatigue
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Depression
- Panic attacks

Job stress also may lead to:

- Deterioration in work relationships
- Decreased productivity
- Low workplace morale
- Work absenteeism
- Substance abuse

Common Causes of Job Stress

Job stress often is caused by:

- Job insecurity (downsizing, co-worker terminations)
- Lack of creativity and flexibility in your position
- Deadline pressures
- Excessive workloads
- A workplace change (e.g., department restructuring, office relocation)
- A leaner workforce and limited resources
- Stressed co-workers and bosses
- Intimidating technology
- Information overload

Ways to Cope with Workplace Stress

If you feel yourself getting stressed about your job, try these tips to decrease your stress level and improve your performance:

- **Identify your stressors.** By recognizing the reasons behind your stress, you can learn to feel more in control and work to change the stress. Determine whether the stress you experience at work is due to worries or conflict at home.
- **Avoid setting too many lofty goals.** Set realistic expectations, and attempt challenges that are doable.
- **Anticipate boss and co-worker stress.** Prepare a few responses to stressful situations that may be presented to you by a supervisor or co-worker. For example, instead of reacting hastily to a question or request by a co-worker, ask whether you can get back to the person with your decision at a later time.

- **Learn to delegate responsibilities.** If you are a manager, empower your subordinates to take on more responsibilities and make more decisions. Encourage this as an opportunity for growth and training for a possible future promotion. Divide extra tasks fairly and reasonably.
- **Be more assertive in your responses to requests.** Be honest, but tactful. Learn to seek alternatives or to say no when necessary.
- **Examine your schedule.** Is your work schedule compatible with your home/personal life? Perhaps you can try a different shift, vary your work days or arrange to work from home on certain days.
- **Redefine your role.** Work with your supervisor on revising your job description to include more creative, empowering and satisfying duties.
- **Consider a different position, department or work location.** Ask your boss if this is possible.

Here are some suggestions for getting organized to eliminate clutter and reduce stress. These tips are especially important as we all begin to resume our workplace routines:

- **Organize your workspace.** Rearrange it for maximum efficiency. Create lists and schedules to help you meet deadlines.
- **Tackle one task at a time if possible.** List your duties in order of priority, and complete one at a time. This can make you feel more organized and in control, leading to a sense of greater accomplishment.
- **Learn time-management techniques.** Take a class or read books on how to better manage your time.
- **Do not procrastinate.** Tackle your most difficult projects first. Putting them off may lead to increased anxiety and stress.

Relaxation and exercise are effective ways to reduce stress. Follow these ideas:

- **Take occasional breaks.** Listen to your body. If you feel tired, nervous, tense or have achy muscles, take a break. Step away from your work for a few minutes, or practice relaxation techniques to recharge your mind and body. Do not work through lunch; take a real break.
- **Take breaks between meetings.** Try not to schedule too many meetings back to back.
- **Practice yoga and stretching exercises.** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible, and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Create an exercise routine.** Use your lunch break to work out or go for a brisk walk, or exercise before or after work. Exercise has been proven to work off stress by burning off excess adrenaline and relieving tension.
- **Practice breathing exercises.** Drawing slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm promotes a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide than chest or shoulder breathing. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this while lying on your back.
- **Practice progressive muscle-relaxation techniques.** These involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. For example, make a fist, and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand, and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, limbs, etc.
- **Try meditation.** By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly.
- **Attempt imagery techniques.** Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; you also can let your mind go blank. Try the infinity exercise: draw and continue to trace the infinity sign slowly without losing eye contact. Alternate drawing hands, then trace the sign with both hands. Draw the sign in the air with your fingertips if you do not have pen and paper. This exercise stimulates peripheral vision and produces a calming effect.
- **Ergonomically improve your workspace.** A more supportive, comfortable chair, desk and computer accessories may reduce physical stress.
- **Socialize with co-workers.** Do not be an island; strike up interesting conversations with fellow employees to release tension.
- **Take advantage of paid days off.** Consider spreading your days off over several weeks instead of taking them all at once.
- **Minimize taking work home.** Enjoy your time away from work, and use it to recharge yourself. Teach yourself to be efficient at work so that you can enjoy your time at home.

- **Get involved with hobbies.** Join a work-sponsored sports team. Take an art class. Stay active with your children's sports and activities.
- **Learn to laugh more at life.** Try to find humor in negative outcomes. Relieve tension by laughing at your mistakes and faults and working to improve them.
- **Consider counseling.** Talk therapy with a professional can release pent-up anxiety and prove to be an effective outlet for discharging unhealthy stress.

Remember that stress affects not only job performance, but also career satisfaction. Be aware of the consequences stress is imposing on your life, and make a commitment to reduce your stress level.

Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress

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