

How to Reduce Workplace Stress

A 40-year-old marketing executive, highly stressed from deadlines and problems at work, developed ulcers and saw his hair turn prematurely gray. One morning, he said, "I'm sick, not happy, getting old and not doing this anymore." He quit his job and sold his mini-mansion, BMW, plane and boat. He and his wife bought a Volkswagen camper and traveled across the U.S. looking for their next home. They eventually settled in York Beach, Maine, where he writes books and enjoys life. His hair has turned brown again.

A sales manager who enthusiastically accepted a position at a major corporation on his first day was greeted by hostile staff members. They were angry because he got the job they each wanted. The rejection felt like a personal defeat. He became depressed and anxious, lost weight and started arguing with his wife. "All of a sudden, I was unsuccessful at my work, and it played a number on my head," says the executive, who's now the president of a high-tech recruitment firm in Pleasanton, Calif.

What these two executives had in common was stress that affected their health and personal lives. Stress can be as debilitating as heart disease, cause as much time off from work as the common cold and is more far-reaching than cancer. The leading source of stress for adults is their jobs.

The workplace holds a plethora of anxiety-producers. Many are from unpredictable sources such as sudden job losses, relocations, losing co-workers to downsizings or having multiple bosses in quick succession.

To reduce stress brought by such changes, employees need to assess their skills periodically, learn new ones, participate in professional or trade associations and stay current on industry trends. "By maintaining employability and support systems, you can be better prepared for the



next time your company downsizes, merges or changes focus," says Sue Aiken, chair of the graduate program in career development in the School of Management of John F. Kennedy University in Walnut Creek, Calif.

We can't eliminate stress, but there are ways to manage it. The following 11 tips can help you reduce your overall stress and ease specific sources of anxiety.

1. Maintain a sense of personal power. A study of high-pressure work environments by Essi, a San Francisco research firm, shows one factor that predicts which employees would become ill and which stayed healthy: people's perception of their personal power or lack of it. Personal power is defined as how much control you feel you have over your life, your ability to function and express yourself.
2. Ideally, your work environment will be an organization where colleagues and superiors listen to your problems and solutions and you're consulted when your role is redesigned, given the resources and information needed to perform the

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job and can contribute your ideas. Practice effective communication. Communication is essential for preventing and easing tensions. Whether you head a team or are a team of one, how effective you are at communication depends on how well you understand others' verbal and nonverbal messages. Pay attention to co-workers' gestures, tone of voice and posture.



3. Develop good working relationships. Trust, respect, understanding and compassion are necessary in any relationship. Co-workers have to function as a team and reach a common goal. But they often focus all their attention on their tasks and very little on how they treat each other. Good work relationships will relieve stress and can buffer you from other stresses. Spend five minutes of each hour considering how to get along with your co-workers.
4. Choose the right job. During interviews, ask the questions that help you make sure the job's right for you. Get a realistic picture of the company or department's culture, working relationships, problems and hidden agendas.
5. Be flexible. Recognize and accept that things change. If you need to hold on tightly to the status quo, you need to loosen up. Think of your organization as a space ship. It's constantly correcting its course "to go where no man has gone before" in the marketplace. You have to change with it. Be proactive. You're in a better position to maneuver if you are primed and ready.
6. Manage your anger. When you feel a surge of anger rising, back off and leave the scene as soon as

you can. Repeat in your mind: "let go" or "relax." Breathe deeply until you feel your tension leave. Ask what's the real reason for my anger? Gain perspective and plan your next step. Practice what you'll say and how you'll say it. Make sure you're calm and in control of your emotions. Approach the person with a win-win attitude and desire to resolve the problem and have a good working relationship.

7. Have realistic expectations. Don't set yourself up for disappointment or put yourself on an emotional roller coaster. Try to be optimistic and realistic at the same time. This outlook doesn't mean you shouldn't have desires or expectations. Just make sure you're not always longing for the impossible.
8. Adjust your attitude. Your attitude — how you make others feel about you and how you make them feel about themselves — can make or break your future. How's your attitude? Do you complain the moment something doesn't suit you, or do you take things in stride? Try to see yourself through the eyes of others. Do you make others happy or miserable? If you need to, make an attitude adjustment.
9. Tie up loose ends. Not being able to finish a task can be unsettling to those who like to shut doors and end sentences with a period. Most people need some kind of closure on projects, even the little ones. If you're on a treadmill where you're always beginning new tasks before finishing old ones, make a list of what's left hanging. This exercise can make projects seem more manageable. How can you structure your time to tie up those loose ends?



10. Take time to revive. People aren't built like machines. They can't run with their engines revved up continuously. Eventually they wear out. That's why there are coffee and lunch breaks. It's long

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been recognized that people need to take a little time off every few hours to revive. They return to their tasks with renewed enthusiasm.

11. If you can, try not to take work home. Every now and then a project may take some extra time, but work shouldn't be devouring your life.

By Gloria Dunn, president of Wiser Ways to Work (wiserwaystowork.com)

6 Soothing Ways to Ease Stress

Feeling stressed out? Learn to calm the stress in your life.

Some stress is actually good. Stress is a natural response to any demand. It can make you more alert, motivated and energetic. If you're in danger, your body's stress response can even help you stay alive.

But too much stress can be unhealthy. It can contribute to heart disease, obesity and high blood pressure, and can affect one's emotional health.

Give yourself a much-needed break from the stress. Here are six ways to soothe that stress:



Breathe. Deep breathing is a great way to relax.

- Start by sitting in a comfortable position.
- Put your feet on the floor and your hands in your lap. Or lie down if that makes you more comfortable.

Stress Management Resources

Articles, webinars, action plans, videos and resources about stress and other behavioral health topics can be accessed via the Live and Work Well website at liveandworkwell.com; enter access code: 00832.

Also, contact OEAP at 800-221-6327 for consultation services.

- Close your eyes. Imagine that you are in a calm, peaceful place.
- Hold that picture in your mind.
- Inhale slowly and deeply. Exhale the same way.
- Continue the slow breathing for at least 10 minutes.

Relax your muscles. By alternately tensing and then relaxing different muscles, you can calm your mind. You can also learn where you hold tension in your body.

- Get comfortable. Loosen your clothes. Take your shoes off.
- Take some slow, deep breaths. Spend a few minutes just relaxing.
- Focus your attention on your right foot. Slowly tense the muscles as tightly as you can. Hold the squeeze for a count of 10.
- Relax your foot. Concentrate on how it feels as the tension drifts out.
- Keep relaxing for a moment. Continue your deep, slow breathing.
- Now direct your attention to the left foot. Do the same thing, tensing the muscles for 10 seconds, then releasing.
- Continue throughout the rest of your body. Focus on one area or muscle group at a time. This will get easier with practice.

Say yes to yoga. Yoga is a mind-body practice that developed out of ancient Indian philosophy. It combines movements, poses and deep breathing. Yoga may help with anxiety and may improve strength, flexibility, balance and stamina.

There are many different types of yoga. Some are more physically demanding than others. If you are just starting out, look for a class for beginners, or look for labels like "gentle" and "for stress relief". If you are unsure what type of yoga is best for you, ask a teacher or call a studio. And let your health care provider know about any yoga classes or other physical activities you are involved in. Ask if you can observe a class before making a commitment.

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Try tai chi. Sometimes called "moving meditation," tai chi is a mind-body practice that began as a martial art in China. It involves moving your body slowly and gently while breathing deeply. Tai chi emphasizes concentration, relaxation and the circulation of energy through the body. The goal is to focus on the present moment.

If you have ever seen a group of people practicing slow, coordinated movements in a park, you've probably observed tai chi.



Meditate. How much of your stress is due to worrying about the future? You can find relief by practicing "mindfulness meditation". It's a way of staying focused on the present with a simple, repetitive action. Some people choose their breathing. Others find a word or phrase to repeat. Still others may watch a candle.

To practice mindfulness meditation:

- Find a quiet spot. You need a place away from distractions.
- Get comfortable. Sit on the floor or a chair, keeping your back straight. Don't lie down — you might fall asleep.
- Choose a focus point. You may look at an object or repeat a word. You may choose to concentrate on something inside: a peaceful scene in your mind. Maybe it's a quiet beach, a mountain or a field of flowers.
- Don't get down on yourself. You may get distracted by other thoughts. That happens. Don't worry that you're not doing the meditation "right." Refocus and continue.
- Practice all these forms of stress relief in a safe environment. Don't attempt them if you are driving, taking care of children or are involved in an activity

that requires extreme mental alertness (such as operating machinery).

Get a massage. Like tai chi and yoga, massage therapy dates back thousands of years. In ancient Greece, Hippocrates called it "the art of rubbing". Many therapists use oil or lotion on the skin. They may stroke, knead or tap your body.

There are many different kinds of massage and different places to get one. You can find massage therapists in private offices, studios, spas and gyms. They may offer treatments that last just a few minutes or an hour or longer. It can help to get a recommendation for a specific massage therapist. Ask about their training, years of experience and type of massage therapy they practice.

Some studies have shown that massage can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, heart rate, depression and pain.

Massage should not be done in areas of fractures, blood clots, recent surgery or open wounds. If you are pregnant or have cancer, talk to your health care provider before getting a massage.

By Emily Gurnon, Contributing Editor, Copyright © 2013 myOptumHealth.

Stress Management Action Plan

One way to begin managing your stress is by identifying those tasks and issues that are stressful. Sometimes there are ways to adjust the situation to reduce the stress and sometimes you have to recognize what you cannot control and work to let go of the stress.

Step 1.

Make a list of all the things that are giving you stress. This may include a special project at work, your child's report card, or your financial situation.

Step 2.

Identify all of the things that you cannot control and cross them off the list.

Step 3.

With your remaining factors, think of ways that you can change the situation or reduce the stress. Many times, just identifying one small action that you can do will significantly reduce the stress.

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Step 4.

Review the items that you cannot control. These are a source of unnecessary stress. When you notice yourself feeling anxious about these, remind yourself that there are some things that are out of your control.



Here's an example to help you get started: You may feel stressed about an upcoming project at work. This project has many tasks and you worry that you won't complete it on time. You also worry that your supervisor won't like what you prepare.

Step 1.

Make a list of your stressors.

Completing special project.

Supervisor won't like special project.

Step 2.

Next you assess what you cannot control. Though your goal may be to create a project that both you and your supervisor are proud of, there is only so much that you can do. You are not in control of how your supervisor feels or perceives your work. You can meet the standards he outlines, but you cannot change how he feels.

Step 3.

Brainstorm what you can do to ensure that you can complete the project. You may decide to create a detailed project plan that outlines all the steps and deadlines for each. Breaking it into manageable pieces makes the project less overwhelming and will essentially reduce some of your stress.

Step 4.

Remind yourself that you are doing what you can with what you can control. When you find a method of breaking down projects into tasks, stress may seem less overwhelming.

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Fateema Fisher, Leslie Hannah and Michael Keels have joined the Ohio Employee Assistance Program as EAP consultants.

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