Manage your work stress before it manages you

Everyone deals with stress at work at one time or another. In fact, a 2012 survey by the American Psychological Association found that 65% of Americans list work as their top stressor. Unfortunately, even short-term stress can have negative effects on your health, including headaches, stomach issues, irritability, and sleep problems. Chronic stress can contribute to a variety of serious health problems, including anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, insomnia, a weakened immune system, diabetes, and heart disease. Managing stress, including work-related stress, is vitally important to improving your health. Although managing stress at work can be challenging, there are positive ways you can cope.

What’s stressing you out at work?
Finding out the source of your stress is the first step in coming up with solutions. Since most everyone will encounter job stress, it’s important to identify situations that create excessive stress and learn skills for coping with them. Stress often results from the following areas:

- **Job tasks** — Do you have an excessive workload? Lack of challenging work? Too little variety? Do you have adequate training and knowledge of new tasks or expectations?
- **Company culture** — Have you noticed a change in management style with higher expectations? Poor communication of policies and performance expectations? Lack of control over your work?
- **Personal relationships** — Do you experience bullying or harassment? Lack of support from co-workers? Little team spirit? Do you have knowledge about how the work you do contributes to the big picture for work expectations?
- **Career concerns** — Is lack of opportunity for advancement getting you down? Do you have a sense that the future of your job is uncertain?

You might also find it helpful to keep a written journal to track your stressors, paying attention to the circumstances, people involved, cause of your stress (or your best guess), emotional or physical triggers for you, and your reactions. This can help you see patterns and areas you might start thinking about making improvements to reduce stress. Learning ways to manage your stress through new coping skills may be very helpful.

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for you. Find out how others that you admire handle and manage their stress.

Once you’ve identified the areas that may be causing you stress, you can begin to problem-solve. For example, maybe you are stressed by your excessive workload, but could delegate some of your tasks to others. Some people may have difficulty delegating work as they feel they must do all the work by themselves for it to be perfect. Try to ease up on expecting everything to be perfect as this is an unrealistic expectation. Learn to see when perfection is essential and when perfection may be getting in your way. By expecting perfection, you may also be holding up work from you that others depend on to get their part done, which can create more stress. For example, maybe you arrive to work late often because you hit traffic, but you could wake up a little earlier or take a different route to work.

If you think you need additional training for tasks at work, speak up and ask for help from your manager. Because a great deal of training in today’s work culture is online, you might have to search out to find what you need and then let your manager know.

You might be able to change some work conditions; others you’ll probably have to cope with. Learning to manage your reaction to stressful situations can dramatically improve your overall quality of life. You may benefit from speaking with a professional counselor, who can help you identify areas that need changing, cope with the stress, and find a satisfying life/work balance. He or she can help you to understand the reason you respond to stress the way you do that you may not even be aware of. Awareness is the first step to finding healthier ways to handle change and manage stress.

Three ways to reduce the effects of stress

1. **Strive for balance between work life and personal life.** If you’re a “workaholic,” work issues may tend to get blown out of proportion. If you build a healthy personal life with family and friends, you’ll be better able to put work situations in the proper perspective and enjoy the love and support of those around you. Take advantage of your Employee Assistance Program (Ohio EAP) services. The Ohio EAP can link you with the necessary services that you may need. If you are uncertain, ask your human resources representative about any of these services.

   Create some boundaries for yourself to separate your work life and personal life. For example, turn off your phone during dinner or make a rule not to check your email after 9 p.m. These guidelines can vary based on your preferences, but make sure to have some time in your day that is work free.

   If you’re spending too many hours at work, talk to your supervisor about how you can get work accomplished in a more reasonable amount of time, bringing better balance to your life. As much as possible, set aside some time for yourself to do an activity or hobby you enjoy. It’s also important to spend time with friends and family. The more satisfying your personal life, the more productive you’ll be at work.

2. **Make your health a priority.** Even though making time for your health seems even more difficult when you’re stressed, a healthy lifestyle will go a long way toward helping you manage stress. Even small steps will go a long way in increasing your energy and decreasing stress. Try sweating out your negative feelings through regular exercise. Tobacco products contain nicotine which is a stimulant — If you smoke, work with your doctor to try to quit. Avoid foods that can increase your stress, which might vary from person to person. Although it is tempting to eat sugary or refined carb “comfort foods,” drink alcohol, or drink caffeinated or energy drinks when stressed, these foods and drinks can make you feel worse. Foods with a lot of refined carbs or sugar, such as pasta or desserts, give you a short burst of energy, but then both your mood and energy crashes later. Caffeine has a similar effect. Excess alcohol can cause anxiety as it wears off and might interfere with sleep. Instead, eat in a way to give yourself steady energy.

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Eat balanced meals with all the food groups, including lean protein, whole grains, low or fat free dairy, fruits, vegetables, and small amounts of healthy fats. Also be sure you are staying well hydrated. Water is a good, no calorie option.

Getting enough sleep is also important to keep up your energy and manage stress. Try to set yourself up for a good night’s sleep by limiting caffeine and computer and TV time in the evenings. For those who are sensitive to the effects of caffeine, that could mean cutting off any caffeine or stimulants after noon. And yes, even chocolate contains stimulants.

3. **Rely on a support network of coworkers, family, and friends.** Even if your work environment is not particularly conducive to making friends, go out of your way to build a support system of co-workers you feel comfortable with. Try to avoid complaining and gossiping. Avoid negative people as much as you can as this may interfere with your own productivity. Instead, focus on working together to build a more supportive workplace.

Whenever possible, make friendships with levelheaded people in your own industry, and use them as “sounding boards” for problems and challenges. Finding a business mentor can also help you solve work problems that cause stress. Networking within your industry is a great way to find mentors and be a mentor while socializing at the same time. And don’t forget to rely on your family and friends to provide support during difficult times.

If stress from work is overwhelming, reach out for support from your doctor or a counselor. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness or failure, especially in situations too difficult to handle alone. Try not to compare yourself and your stress level to others. What may be stressful for one person may be exciting and challenging to another.

**Tips for getting through the “daily grind”**

**At work**

- **Take regular breaks.** Even a 10-minute walk around the block can help clear your head and provide new perspective. A good way to work exercise and movement into your workday is to schedule “walk and talk” meetings with others.

- **Prioritize.** Work on tasks in order of importance. Try to work on unpleasant tasks earlier in the day, so you aren’t dreading that task all day. Doing this also gives you a sense of accomplishment to start off your day.

For larger tasks or those that require concentration, try to block out your time to avoid interruptions. Define your work priorities with your manager and work team so you are all in agreement. If you find yourself losing focus, ask yourself, “Is what I’m doing now helping or hurting my goals and priorities?”

- **Break projects into smaller tasks.** Then, focus on finishing one step at a time. End your workday by writing down your priorities for the following day.

- **Clean up your workspace.** If you have trouble finding things when you need them, consider reorganizing your desk or your computer files. Being able to find documents and supplies when you need them saves time and helps prevent stress. If you are not naturally organized, find someone who is and ask them for assistance. Many people never learn or are taught how to organize. This can then create a sense that living life in chaos is the natural state over which you have no control.
Outside work

**Express your feelings.** You can write your feelings down in a journal or express your feelings in other ways such as dancing, talking with friends or family, painting, or playing music. Take advantage of reasonably-priced classes through your community education program. It may help to expand your interests and expose you to new hobbies.

**Slow down.** Too many of us cram our days off work with constant chores and never stop to smell the roses. Give yourself permission to take a leisurely walk or sit on the couch and read a book once in a while — or even take an afternoon nap at home.

**Learn relaxation techniques.** Consider learning techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation, visualization, or deep breathing. Many local hospitals and community education centers offer classes in these techniques or in stress management.

**Have a sense of humor.** Take time to share jokes with your friends or family, read the comics in the newspaper, or watch a silly TV show or movie. Enroll in a program that sends you an appropriate “joke of the day” by email. Laughter really is good medicine, even for stress.

Sources:
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How to choose a counselor

What is Counseling?
Counseling, also referred to as therapy or psychotherapy, is the process of working with a professional to help you achieve desired life goals. Oftentimes, people seek out counseling because they have run into a rough spot in life. For example, you might be struggling to adjust to a life transition, feeling more depressed, or engaging in harmful behaviors such as gambling or using alcohol or illegal drugs. Upon meeting with your counselor, you will work to identify the problem areas of your life and begin to work toward achieving the changes necessary to get the lifestyle that you desire.

While there are many people who can help in these situations, it is important to know what type of professional you will be working with. The following four professions are all regulated by the state in which you live and must have a valid license in their respective field to practice.

• Counselor/Therapist: Someone who has received a master’s degree in counseling, or a similar field. This title means that they have thoroughly studied counseling tools, theories, and interventions, including the proper way to work with various mental health issues.

• Psychologist: Someone who has received a doctorate in psychology. This requires more schooling beyond a master’s, and sometimes means that they can also do testing (that can be beneficial in certain cases).

• Psychiatrist: Someone who has received their doctorate, but unlike psychologists, received it in the medical practice. Psychiatrists are the only providers who can prescribe medications. Some Psychiatrists provide counseling as well, but many times this is a separate person.

• Social worker: Someone who has received a degree in social work. Social workers often provide counseling, but they also focus on causing change in the community, including legislative efforts, and work to help their consumers find the right resources in their community to help them. Social workers might have a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree.

There are other professions that offer similar results. For example, life coaches or speaking with a pastor can be very beneficial. However, these positions are not always as regulated or as informed about the mental health needs of the people seeking services.

Questions to ask
Once you have decided that you want to speak with someone, it can be valuable to do a little research before contacting them. Looking online and or asking people who you trust can offer some ideas about where to start. Picking the right counselor for you will help make your experience more enjoyable, and more productive.

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Here are some questions to ask when you are trying to pick a counselor:

- Ask yourself: “Who do I want to speak to?”
  - Would you rather speak to someone of the same gender? Same age? Same ethnicity? Picking someone with whom you will feel the most comfortable can help you to open up and get the most out of your sessions.
  - Do you want to incorporate your religion/spirituality? Counselors should never force their beliefs on you, but if you feel it is important to include your faith or belief system into your counseling, you can look for someone who has expertise in those services.

- Do you have a preference for the type of licensed professional you want to speak with? Each profession offers something a little different, and it might matter to you exactly who you speak with based on needed services. Keep in mind that service costs will likely vary based on the type of licensure that they have.

- Questions to ask a potential counselor:
  - Do you have a specific population that you prefer to work with?
  - Do you offer faith-based services?
  - What license do you have?
  - How long have you been working in this field?

- Ask yourself: “How am I going to pay for this?”

  If you have insurance coverage, a great first place to start is by contacting your insurance company to see what type of behavioral health/mental health services they cover. Often, they will refer you to a list of providers that they will help pay for. It is common that insurance coverage only lasts for so many sessions per year, so be sure to ask about their policy.

  If you do not have insurance, you will be paying “out of pocket.” Counselors should discuss their fees with you before you engage in treatment. Many offer a sliding scale fee, which adjusts the cost of a session as based on your income, to help make sessions affordable. You could also search for non-profits or community-based programs that offer scholarships or use grants to help fund services.

- Questions to ask a potential counselor:
  - What insurance do you work with?

  - What are the fees associated with your services?
  - How do most people pay for services?

- Ask yourself: “How do I think I can achieve my goals?”

  The answer to this question will help you focus in on what theoretical approach you want your counselor to have. Most counselors will have a specific way that they choose to engage their clients. For example, a counselor might focus more on behavior, thoughts, or feelings. It is possible to focus on all three. There are countless ways to do this, so asking up front can help you prepare for what your sessions will look like.

- Questions to ask a potential counselor:
  - What theories do you use? What does that mean?
  - What does a session with you look like?
  - How often will we meet?

Contacting potential counselors is the best way to select the best counselor for you. Aim to select someone with whom you feel comfortable but will challenge you in the areas you know you want to change. If you are unsure, keep searching. Or, pick someone to get you started – you can always transfer to another counselor at a later time.

For help in identifying counselors who are in-network (which would allow you to save money) and/or are near to you, contact the Ohio Employee Assistance Program at oeap@das.ohio.gov or at 1-800-221-6327.

Sources:
http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/choose-therapist.aspx (Opens in a new window)
https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freudian-sip/201102/how-find-the-best-therapist-you (Opens in a new window)
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