



Job and Workplace Stress

Both the stress we take with us when we go to work and the stress that awaits us on the job are on the rise – and employers, managers, and workers all feel the added pressure. While some stress is a normal part of life, excessive stress interferes with your productivity and reduces your physical and emotional health, so it's important to find ways to keep it under control. Fortunately, there is a lot that you can do to manage and reduce stress at work.

Coping with work stress today in the current climate

For workers everywhere, the troubled economy may feel like an emotional roller coaster. "Layoffs" and "budget cuts" have become bywords in the workplace, and the result is increased fear, uncertainty, and higher levels of stress. Since job and workplace stress grow in times of economic crisis, it's important to learn new and better ways of coping with the pressure. The ability to manage stress in the workplace can make the difference between success or failure on the job. Your emotions are contagious, and stress has an impact on the quality of your interactions with others. The better you are at managing your own stress, the more you'll positively affect those around you and the less other people's stress will negatively affect you.

Facts about work related stress

The average employee works seven hours a week for nothing.

Britons work the longest hours in Europe.

Only one in eight people who works long hours say they do so because they genuinely enjoy their jobs.

One-third of employees suffer sleepless nights due to stress.

55% of full-time employees say that work-related stress makes them bad-tempered at home.

More than two million workers say their bosses are so overworked they don't really have time to manage their staff properly.

More than 50% of people say they find it hard to cope with the pressure of work.

Work related stress – know the symptoms

When people feel overwhelmed, they may lose confidence, become irritable or withdrawn, making you less productive, effective and making work less rewarding. If the warning signs of work stress go unattended, they can lead to bigger problems.

Beyond interfering with job performance and satisfaction, chronic or intense stress can also lead to physical and emotional health problems. Symptoms of job and workplace stress:

- Feeling anxious or irritable

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- Depressed
- Loss of interest in work.
- Sleep disturbance
- Low energy
- Trouble concentrating
- Muscle tension
- Stomach problems
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of sex drive
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope

Common causes of excessive workplace stress

- Fear of redundancy
- Increased workload
- Change of job role and/or location
- Pressure to meet rising expectations
- Pressure to meet objectives
- Difficult relationship with superior or colleagues

How to reduce job stress by taking care of yourself

When stress on the job is interfering with your ability to work, care for yourself, or manage your personal life, it's time to take action. Start by paying attention to your physical and emotional health. When your own needs are taken care of, you're stronger and more resilient to stress. The better you feel, the better equipped you'll be to manage work stress without becoming overwhelmed.

Exercise - is known to increase energy levels, it can sharpen focus and relax the mind and body. For maximum stress relief, try to get at least 30 minutes daily. Activities can be broken up into two or three short segments.

Balanced diet - eating small but frequent meals throughout the day maintains an even level of blood sugar in your body. Avoid eating too much as this can make you lethargic.

Drink alcohol in moderation and avoid nicotine - alcohol temporarily reduces anxiety and worry, but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off. Similarly, smoking when you're feeling stressed and overwhelmed may seem calming, but nicotine is a powerful stimulant - leading to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety.

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Sleep - and worry can cause insomnia. But lack of sleep also leaves you vulnerable to stress. When you're sleep deprived, your ability to handle stress is then more difficult. Try to adopt a good sleep routine, by avoiding caffeine in the evening, over stimulating yourself, try a relaxing bath.

Talk about it - sometimes the best stress-reducer is simply sharing your stress with someone close to you, a supportive manager. The act of talking it out – and getting support and empathy from someone else – is often an excellent way of blowing off steam and reducing stress.

Counselling - talking to a counsellor can enable you to understand the cause of the stress as well as help to reduce the symptoms and help you to prevent from being stressed in the future. Check with your Human Resources Department to see if your place of work has an Employee Assistance Program, which can offer you counselling. If not your G.P may be able to help or you can arrange private counselling yourself.

Improving time management

You may also find it helps if you can manage your time more effectively. Here are some useful time-management ideas:

Don't over-commit yourself - avoid trying to fit too much into one day. We can underestimate how long things will take. If you've got too much on your plate, clarify the "shoulds" and the "musts." Put tasks that aren't absolutely necessary to the bottom of the list or get rid of completely.

Try to leave earlier in the morning - even 10-15 minutes can make the difference between rushing to your desk and having Time to ease into your day. Don't add to your stress levels by running late.

Plan regular breaks - make sure to take short breaks throughout the day to sit back and clear your mind. Also try to get away from your desk for lunch. Stepping away from work to briefly relax and recharge will help you be more, not less, productive.

Prioritize tasks - make a list of tasks you have to do, and work through them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early.

Break projects into small steps - if a large project seems overwhelming, make a step-by-step plan. Focus on one manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.

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Delegate responsibility - you don't have to do it all yourself, whether at home, school, or on the job. If other people can take care of the task, why not let them? You will be letting go of unnecessary stress in the meantime.

Try to avoid being the perfectionist - it is unrealistic to expect yourself to be perfect and by doing so you are putting yourself under more stress. When you set unrealistic goals for yourself or try to do too much, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Do your best is always best.

Clean up your act - if you're always running late, set your clocks and watches a few minutes fast to give yourself extra time. De-clutter your desk, just knowing where everything is saves time and cuts stress.

Change your negative thinking - if you see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself feeling low and unmotivated. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative-thinking colleagues. Give yourself a pat on the back about small achievements, even if no one else does.

Useful organisations

International Stress Management Association UK (ISMA)

Promotes sound knowledge and best practice in the prevention and reduction of stress and sets professional standards.

Centre for Stress Management

An international training centre and consultancy which runs modular courses in stress management, stress counselling, psychotherapy and coaching suitable for professionals wishing to gain more knowledge and skills in these subjects.

Suggested reading

Managing Workplace Stress

Steve Williams and Lesley Cooper (John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2002)

Work Stress

David Wainwright and Michael Calnan (Open University Press, 2002)

Strategic Stress Management

Valerie Sutherland and Cary Cooper (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)

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