

Stress at Work

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How to Reduce and Manage Job and Workplace Stress

In this difficult economy, you may find it harder than ever to cope with challenges on the job. 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 in today's uncertain 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.

You can learn how to manage job stress

There are a variety of steps you can take to reduce both your overall stress levels and the stress you find on the job and in the workplace. These include:

- **Taking responsibility** for improving your physical and emotional well-being.
- **Avoiding pitfalls** by identifying knee jerk habits and negative attitudes that add to the stress you experience at work.
- **Learning better communication skills** to ease and improve your relationships with management and coworkers.

Warning signs of excessive stress at work

When people feel overwhelmed, they lose confidence and become irritable or withdrawn, making them less productive and effective and their work less rewarding.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.

Signs and symptoms of excessive job and workplace stress

- Feeling anxious, irritable, or depressed
- Apathy, loss of interest in work.
- Problems sleeping
- Fatigue,
- Trouble concentrating
- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of sex drive
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope

Common causes of excessive workplace stress

- Fear of layoffs
- Increased demands for overtime due to staff cutbacks
- Pressure to perform to meet rising expectations but with no increase in job satisfaction
- Pressure to work at optimum levels – all the time!

Reducing 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.

Taking care of yourself doesn't require a total lifestyle overhaul. Even small things can lift your mood, increase your energy, and make you feel like you're back in the driver's seat. Take things one step at a time, and as you make more positive lifestyle choices, you'll soon notice a noticeable difference in your stress level, both at home at work.

Get moving

Aerobic exercise –perspiring -is an effective anti-anxiety treatment lifting mood, increasing energy, sharpening focus and relaxing mind and body. For maximum stress relief, try to get at least 30 minutes of heart pounding activity on most days but activity can be broken up into two or three short segments.

For more information, see [Making Exercise Fun](#).

Make food choices that keep you going and make you feel good

Eating small but frequent meals throughout the day maintains an even level of blood sugar in your body. Low blood sugar makes you feel anxious and irritable. On the other hand, eating too much can make you lethargic.

To learn more about food that have a calming effect, lift your mood and make you feel good, see [Tips for a Healthy Diet](#).

Drink alcohol in moderation and avoid nicotine

Alcohol temporarily reduces anxiety and worry, but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off. Drinking to relieve job stress can also start you on a path to alcohol abuse and dependence. 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.

Get enough sleep

Stress 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 compromised. When you're well-rested, it's much easier to keep your emotional balance, a key factor in coping with job and workplace stress.

For more information, see [Tips for a Good Night's Sleep](#).

Reducing job stress by prioritizing and organizing

When job and workplace stress surrounds you, you can't ignore it, but there are simple steps you can take to regain control over yourself and the situation. Your growing sense of self-control will also be perceived by others as the strength it is, leading to better relationships at work. Here are some suggestions for reducing job stress by prioritizing and organizing your responsibilities.

Time management tips for reducing job stress

- **Create a balanced schedule.** Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities and downtime.
- **Don't over-commit yourself.** Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. All too often, we underestimate how long things will take. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.
- **Try to leave earlier in the morning.** Even 10-15 minutes can make the difference between frantically 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.

Task management tips for reducing job stress

- **Prioritize tasks.** Make a list of tasks you have to do, and tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant as a result.
- **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.
- **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? Let go of the desire to control or oversee every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process.

Reducing workplace stress by improving emotional intelligence

Even if you're in a job where the environment has grown increasingly stressful, you can retain a large measure of self-control and self-confidence by understanding and practicing emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage and use your emotions in positive and constructive ways. It's about communicating with others in ways that draw people to you, overcome differences, repair wounded feelings, and defuse tension and stress.

Emotional intelligence in the workplace:

Emotional intelligence in the workplace has four major components:

- **Self-awareness** – The ability to recognize your emotions and their impact while using gut feelings to guide your decisions.
- **Self-management** – The ability to control your emotions and behavior and adapt to changing circumstances.
- **Social awareness** – The ability to sense, understand, and react to other's emotions and feel comfortable socially.
- **Relationship management** – The ability to inspire, influence, and connect to others and manage conflict.

Reducing stress in the workplace with emotional intelligence

The more emotional intelligence you have, the more stress you can avoid in the workplace. Fortunately, emotional intelligence is not something we're born with; it's something we can learn and develop.

To learn how to increase your emotional intelligence, read [Five Key Skills for Raising Your Emotional Intelligence](#).

The skill set that enables you to acquire these capabilities can be learned but requires the development of emotional and nonverbal ways of communicating that include:

- Learning to recognize your particular stress response and become familiar with sensual cues that can rapidly calm and energize you.
- Staying connected to your internal emotional experience so you can appropriately manage your own emotions. Knowing what you are feeling will not only add to your self confidence and improve your self control but enhance your understanding of others and help you build more satisfying relationships.
- Learning to recognize and effectively use the nonverbal cues that make up 95-98% of your communication process including eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture , gesture and touch. Its not what you say but how you say it that impacts others –for better or worse.
- Developing the capacity to meet challenges with humor. There is no better stress buster than a hardy laugh and nothing reduces stress quicker in the workplace than mutually shared humor. But, if the laugh is at someone else's expense, you may end up with more rather than less stress.
- Learning to navigate conflict by becoming a good listener and someone who can face conflict fearlessly with the expectation that differences resolved will strengthen the relationship.

Reducing workplace stress by breaking bad habits

As you learn to manage your job stress and improve your work relationships, you'll have more control over your ability to think clearly and act appropriately. You will be able to break habits that add to your stress at work – and you'll even be able to change negative ways of thinking about things that only add to your stress.

Eliminate self-defeating behaviors

Many of us make job stress worse with patterns of thought or behavior that keep us from relieving pressure on ourselves. If you can turn around these self-defeating habits, you'll find employer-imposed stress easier to handle.

- **Resist perfectionism.** No project, situation, or decision is ever perfect, and you put undue stress on yourself by trying to do everything perfectly. When you set

- unrealistic goals for yourself or try to do too much, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Do your best, and you'll do fine.
- **Clean up your act.** If you're always running late, set your clocks and watches fast and give yourself extra time. If your desk is a mess, file and throw away the clutter; just knowing where everything is saves time and cuts stress. Make to-do lists and cross off items as you accomplish them. Plan your day and stick to the schedule — you'll feel less overwhelmed.
 - **Flip your negative thinking.** If you see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative-thinking co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

Find Ways to Dispel Stress

- **Get time away.** If you feel stress building, take a break. Walk away from the situation. Take a stroll around the block, sit on a park bench, or spend a few minutes meditating. Exercise does wonders for the psyche. But even just finding a quiet place and listening to your iPod can reduce stress.
- **Talk it out.** Sometimes the best stress-reducer is simply sharing your stress with someone close to you. 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.
- **Cultivate allies at work.** Just knowing you have one or more co-workers who are willing to assist you in times of stress will reduce your stress level. Just remember to reciprocate and help them when they are in need.
- **Find humor in the situation.** When you – or the people around you – start taking things too seriously, find a way to break through with laughter. Share a joke or funny story.