

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing environmental stressors at work

Many jobs involve physical danger. Soldiers at war, police officers, firefighters, and miners know this all too well. Most of us do not have to face the possibility of death in our daily workplace. Most modern physical difficulties are the result of jobs that require us to stand or sit all day while maintaining high levels of concentration, situations that are both tiring and repetitive. Customer or client-facing positions bombard us with customer's physical and emotional demands and can leave us feeling exhausted at the end of the day. Some jobs require repetitive manipulation of industrial machinery or computers, which can sometimes result in repetitive motion problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Whatever the stress and strains associated with a given position are, they are worse for people who work "graveyard" shifts. Working all night and trying to sleep during the day keeps people out-of-sync both physically and emotionally.

Although there will always be some aspects of the physical workplace environment that cannot be smoothed away, some things about the work environment or the way that the work proceeds can be changed for the better. Try to identify stressful aspects of your work environment that could be made less stressful, and see about making those changes. If your hands bother you after using the computer all day, ask your human resources staff whether ergonomic adjustments for your desk and chair are possible. If the florescent lights at your workplace bother your eyes, bring your own lamp to work. Consider an inexpensive "white noise" device to block out distracting noises. Another helpful option to reduce environmental stress is to listen to soothing, relaxing music played at a background level. If this is not possible, try to learn to focus very intently on what you are doing, even listening to your own breathing. Slow, deep breathing can directly reduce the intensity of stress because we breathe faster and less deeply when we are stressed. However you are able to achieve it, concentration can significantly reduce the environmental stress you experience.

There are other small ways you can reduce work-associated stress as well. If your workspace is small, try to see if you can have a smaller chair to reduce crowding. Keep your space very neat and add a few personal touches. Substitute caffeine-free tea, herbal tea, or water for endless cups of coffee. Drinking water is useful in reducing stress, because dehydration can make you feel lethargic and tired, which in turn leaves you much more likely to feel stressed.

Making Your Lifestyle More Stress-Management Friendly

Do you exercise regularly? Do you get a full night's sleep? Do you drink excessive amounts of caffeinated beverages? Do you drink alcohol to excess? Do you frequently fight with your spouse or significant other? Are you having difficulty parenting your children?

Lifestyle habits such as not getting enough sleep, failing to exercise, or not knowing how to argue with your spouse constructively can make you more susceptible to stress at work. Your efforts towards correcting these problems and living a healthier lifestyle will go a long way towards making you more resilient and more capable of handling workplace stress.

Living a healthy lifestyle takes discipline and commitment:

- Commit yourself to exercising three or more times per week for at least 30 minutes at a time.
- Replace junk food and alcohol with fresh vegetables, lean meats, and whole grain breads.
- Practice relaxation exercises. Find time at least once a week for a relaxing soak or a game of golf. Take up yoga, Pilates, or basketball. Take a meditation seminar.

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- Train yourself to become relaxed through autosuggestion: When you do feel calm start to recognize the sensation and repeat a word (such as "calm") to yourself. Over time, this word will come to elicit a sense of relaxation-just don't forget to continue to think the word to yourself while you are in a relaxed state.
- Be conscious of your posture and physical carriage. Try to sit and stand straight with your shoulders back, down, and relaxed. Consider taking up yoga or Pilates, disciplines that help improve your posture as well as your body strength, flexibility, and resilience. Shake out your hands periodically to reduce stress in them and try to keep from gritting your teeth and furrowing your brow.

In short, there are many things that you can do to reduce workplace stress and they often have nothing to do with the workplace itself.

Don't hesitate to use the Human Resources department or your Employee Assistance Program facilitator to help you deal with spousal and parenting issues, problems with drugs or alcohol, and information on smoking cessation, exercise programs, and lifestyle changes. Take advantage of wellness opportunities that your workplace may offer. Take control of what you can change, and relax about what you cannot. Positive action will make your life much less stressful both at home and in the workplace.