

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

Working on Workplace Stress

Deadlines looming, a full in-box, personality clashes, customers breathing down your neck… Any one of these situations could be enough to raise your blood pressure and, of course, your stress levels.

And while a little stress has been shown to actually improve performance and motivate, too much of it can do the opposite. Excessive job stress can stop you in your tracks, leave you feeling exhausted and unable to effectively deal with day-to-day responsibilities.

While it's impossible to completely free yourself from workplace stress, the information below will help you understand what it is, why it happens and what steps you can take to better control it.

Positive vs. Negative Stress

Positive stress can drive people to do their best and sometimes, most productive work. As a matter of fact, when people seek out opportunities that encourage them to reach higher and do better, it's often the effects of positive stress that helps them rise to the challenge.

Negative stress on the other hand, can be physically and emotionally harmful. It not only slows progress, but can also block it out entirely. It surfaces when a person experiences a negative physical or emotional response to a perceived conflict between the demands of the job, and the amount of control that he or she feels over meeting those demands.

Spotting Stress Signs

So when are you getting too much of a bad thing? Though stress is seemingly silent, it usually sends out some or all of the signals listed below. These signs are the body and mind's way of letting you know it's time to get serious about tackling stress.

Emotional Stress Signals

- Feeling helpless
- Over-reaction to seemingly small issues
- Anger towards people making demands
- Being overly self-critical
- Trouble concentrating on tasks
- Extreme negativity
- Feeling overwhelmed or not "knowing where to start"
- Feeling suspicious of the motives of co-workers and clients
- Depression

Physical Signals

- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling run down or exhausted
- Memory loss
- Headaches

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- Frequent colds or flu
- Insomnia
- Shortness of breath
- Sudden weight loss or gain

Stress Soothers

Though your work environment impacts the types of stressful situations that you're exposed to, your perception of each situation and response to it plays an important role. The stressful event or task is less important than how you choose to respond to it. Below are several key strategies to help ease anxiety and lessen stress.

Become a stress detective. Before stress can be reduced it must be identified. Look closely at both your work and home life and spot any recurring themes or hotspots. Are you dragging stress from home to your work or vice versa? Is your stress caused by unrealistic demands from others? By your own expectations? A combination of both? Taking good honest stock of your stress and how it relates to your job is the first critical step to depressurizing the situation.

Ask for assistance. Many people continue to say, "yes" to the impossible, slowly raising their anxiety to a boiling point. Over-achievers often fall into this trap because to ask for help is to give up control and risk a less-than-perfect result. But by accepting the help of others, flaws and all, you'll not only unload some of the workload, but also come to appreciate the beauty of different perspectives and even imperfection.

Fire your inner critic. Stop paying attention to those negative voices telling you that you're not good enough or that the task ahead is impossible. Work instead on replacing, "This is impossible!" with, "How can I make this work?" Empower yourself and overcome feelings of helplessness by focusing on the possible.

Clean up your surroundings. Having trouble finding your phone under all the files on your desk? Make an effort to rid your workspace of annoyances that can clutter your mind and "up" your stress levels. Re-organize your office to make information more accessible and free up additional space in your work area. Improving your physical environment can help to lower your stress levels.

Break it down into manageable chunks. If you focus on the mountain of work ahead of you, it might just send you running for cover. While it's important to know the big picture, setting and concentrating on smaller, attainable goals along the way can help you stay on track and stop you from feeling overwhelmed.

Move it or gain it! Physical activity isn't just good for the waistline: regular exercise is one of the easiest and most effective ways to rid the body of stress' grip. Several studies show that exercise boosts your brain's production of natural mood lifters and encourages the release of neurotransmitters, which help you keep your mental and physical cool.

And you don't have to be a slave to the treadmill to benefit. Whether it's a stroll at lunch, a yoga class after work, or ice-skating with the kids, the effects are the same: improved mental and physical function and a more optimistic outlook.

Set boundaries. Learn to say "no" to extra tasks that push your workload over the edge. Though you may think you'll earn the boss' praise for organizing the office Spring Social, missing an important meeting because you're busy fussing over table settings will definitely wipe out any potential brownie points earned.

Connect with the outside world. It's easy to get so caught up in the billion things to do at work that you neglect your life outside it. Whether it's a 20-minute walk in the park with a friend, enrolling in a photography class or volunteering for a local food bank, getting reacquainted with other facets of your

life will put job strain in perspective and help you feel whole again.

Accept change. Acknowledge the possibility that your workday may not unfold as you imagined. Uncertainties and change are not necessarily a negative part of your day; they simply require the application of different strategies.

Seek support from your doctor, a professional or a stress management specialist who can provide you with the tools to help you pin down stress sources and manage them more effectively.

The reality of a high-speed, do-more-with-less modern work culture means most people are confronted with a range of these stressors daily. But these little stress battles don't have to take their toll on your physical and emotional well-being. With caution, care and self-understanding you can not only tackle on-the-job stress, but also harness this energy to motivate and energize your career.