

Network to Work Meeting – August 2019

RESOURCE DOCUMENT – Workplace Wellness

Managing Stress in the Workplace

Stress in the Workplace: Managing Job and Work Stress

While some workplace stress is normal, excessive stress can interfere with your productivity and performance, impact your physical and emotional health, and affect your relationships and home life. It can even determine success or failure on the job. You can't control everything in your work environment, but that doesn't mean you're powerless, even when you're stuck in a difficult situation. If stress on the job is interfering with your work performance, health, or personal life, it's time to take action. No matter what you do for a living, or how stressful your job is, there are plenty of things you can do to reduce your overall stress levels and regain a sense of control at work, improve your job satisfaction, and bolster your wellbeing in and out of the workplace.

When is workplace stress too much?

Stress isn't always bad. A little bit of stress can help you stay focused, energetic, and able to meet new challenges in the workplace. It's what keeps you on your toes during a presentation or alert to prevent accidents or costly mistakes. But too often the workplace can seem like an emotional roller coaster. Tight deadlines and ever-increasing demands can leave you feeling worried, drained, and overwhelmed. And when stress exceeds your ability to cope, it stops being helpful and starts causing damage to your mind and body—as well as to your job satisfaction.

Common causes of workplace stress include:

- Lack of control over how you do your work
- Pressure to perform to meet rising expectations
- Pressure to work at optimum levels—all the time!
- Fear of losing your job

Stress at work warning signs

When you feel overwhelmed at work, you lose confidence and may become angry, irritable, or withdrawn. Other signs and symptoms of excessive stress at work include:

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

Here are some tips for managing your stress.

Taking Steps to Manage Stress

- **Track your stressors.** Keep a journal for a week or two to identify which situations create the most stress and how you respond to them. Record your thoughts, feelings and information about the environment, including the people and circumstances involved, the physical setting and how you reacted. Did you raise your voice? Get a snack from the vending machine? Go for a walk? Taking notes can help you find patterns among your stressors and your reactions to them.
- **Reach 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 sympathy—especially face-to-face—can be a highly-effective way of blowing off steam and regaining your sense of calm. The other person doesn't have to "fix" your problems; they just need to be a good listener.

Having a solid support system at work can help buffer you from the negative effects of job stress. Furthermore, having a strong network of supportive friends and family members is extremely important to managing stress in all areas of your life. The lonelier and more isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Develop healthy responses.** Instead of attempting to fight stress with fast food or alcohol, do your best to make healthy choices when you feel the tension rise. Exercise is a great stress-buster. Yoga can be an excellent choice, but any form of physical activity is beneficial. Also make time for hobbies and favorite activities. Whether it's reading a novel, going to

concerts or playing games with your family, make sure to set aside time for the things that bring you pleasure.

Getting enough good-quality sleep is also important for effective stress management. Skimping on sleep interferes with your daytime productivity, creativity, problem-solving skills, and ability to focus. The better rested you are, the better equipped you'll be to tackle your job responsibilities and cope with workplace stress.

Build healthy sleep habits by limiting your caffeine intake late in the day and minimizing stimulating activities, such as computer and television use, at night. Turn off screens one hour before bedtime. The light emitted from TV, tablets, smartphones, and computers suppresses your body's production of melatonin and can severely disrupt your sleep. Avoid stimulating activity and stressful situations before bedtime such as catching up on work. Instead, focus on quiet, soothing activities, such as reading or listening to soft music, while keeping lights low.

- **Establish boundaries.** In today's digital world, it's easy to feel pressure to be available 24 hours a day. Establish some work-life boundaries for yourself. That might mean making a rule not to check email from home in the evening, or not answering the phone during dinner. Although people have different preferences when it comes to how much they blend their work and home life, creating some clear boundaries between these realms can reduce the potential for work-life conflict and the stress that goes with it.

Also, don't over-commit yourself. Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. 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.

- **Take time to recharge.** To avoid the negative effects of chronic stress and burnout, we need time to replenish and return to our pre-stress level of functioning. This recovery process requires "switching off" from work by having periods of time when you are neither engaging in work-related activities, nor thinking about work. That's why it's critical that you disconnect from time to time, in a way that fits your needs and preferences. Don't let your vacation days go to waste. When possible, take time off to relax and unwind, so you come back to work feeling reinvigorated and ready to perform at your best. When you're not able to take time off, get a quick boost by turning off your smartphone and focusing your attention on non-work activities for a while.
- **Learn how to relax.** Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing exercises and mindfulness (a state in which you actively observe present experiences and thoughts without judging them) can help melt away stress. Start by taking a few minutes each day to focus on a simple activity like breathing, walking or enjoying a meal. The skill of being able

to focus purposefully on a single activity without distraction will get stronger with practice and you'll find that you can apply it to many different aspects of your life.

- **Better manage your tasks.** Tackle high-priority tasks 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. And if a large project seems overwhelming, break it into small steps, focusing on one manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.

Don't hesitate to delegate responsibility. You don't have to do it all yourself. Let go of the desire to control every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process. Finally, be willing to compromise. Sometimes, if you and a co-worker or boss can both adjust your expectations a little, you'll be able to find a happy middle ground that reduces the stress levels for everyone.

- **Break bad habits.** Recognize your self-imposed negative thoughts and behaviors that can make stress worse.

Resist perfectionism. When you set unrealistic goals for yourself, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Aim to do your best; no one can ask for more than that.

Flip your negative thinking. If you focus on 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 co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

Don't try to control the uncontrollable. Many things at work are beyond our control, particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control, such as the way you choose to react to problems.

Look for humor in the situation. When used appropriately, humor is a great way to relieve stress in the workplace. When you or those around you start taking work too seriously, find a way to lighten the mood by sharing a joke or funny story.

Clean up your act. If your desk or work space is a mess, file and throw away the clutter; just knowing where everything is can save time and cut stress.

- **Look for satisfaction and meaning in your work.** Feeling bored or unsatisfied with how you spend most of the workday can cause high levels of stress and take a serious toll on your physical and mental health. Even if you're not in a position to look for another career that you love and are passionate about, you can still find purpose and joy in a job that you don't love. Even in some mundane jobs, you can often focus on how your contributions help others, for example, or provide a much-needed product or service. Focus on aspects of the job that you do enjoy, even if it's just chatting with your coworkers at lunch. Changing your attitude towards your job can also help you regain a sense of purpose and control.

Stress Management During the Job Search

When you're searching for a job, you almost always have other issues begging for your attention. Stress builds up when you don't deal with issues. Keep your job search on track by paying attention to all aspects of your health. Here are some healthy ways to handle stress:

- Get organized. Create a structure for your job search.
- Exercise daily. Walk, run, jog, swim, bike, dance, etc.
- Eat healthy. Eat three balanced meals a day.
- Avoid unhealthy habits. Limit junk food, sugar, caffeine, and watching television. Avoid alcohol, drugs, and smoking.
- Rest. Get plenty of sleep.
- Write. Write in a diary or journal for 20 minutes each day. Record your thoughts and feelings about your job search, what you learn, and your progress.
- Attend job support groups or clubs. Share ideas and tips, and accept and give praise.
- Be flexible. Stay open to new ideas, think creatively, and take risks.
- Take one thing at a time. Prioritize and make one change at a time, because many changes at once add stress.
- Reward yourself. Do something for yourself when you accomplish certain job search activities and goals. For example, take some time to be alone or to learn something new.
- Accept. Take what you cannot change, change what you can, and forgive yourself and others.
- Volunteer. Doing something for others increases your self-esteem, network, and skills.
- Find humor. Watch children at play, and find time for play.
- Manage time. Keep schedules, set goals and time tables, and use a calendar.
- Meditate. Reflect on your own spiritual truths or on peaceful thoughts.

Techniques for Coping with Stress

1. RELAXATION:

- a. Counting to 10
- b. Deep breathing
- c. Squeeze a stress ball
- d. Relaxation audio / video
- e. Schedule relaxing activities:
 - i. Take a bath
 - ii. Go for a walk
 - iii. Positive and relaxing hobbies
 - iv. "me" time
- f. Take a one-minute vacation
- g. Visual / mental imagery

2. POSITIVE MENTAL ATTITUDE:

- a. Learn to be grateful for what you have (change your perspective)
- b. Enjoy your achievements (appreciate what you've accomplished so far)
- c. Plan good things for your future
- d. Learn to accept the things you can't change
- e. Cognitive reframing ("Is it really that bad? Am I blowing things out of proportion based on emotion?")
- f. Positive Self Talk
- g. Resolve cognitive dissonance (Is something in your conscience causing stress?)
- h. Resolve conflict / let go (Let go of resentments. Do you need to learn to forgive?)
- i. Anger management (anger and stress go hand in hand; coping with anger will help stress to decrease).

3. SUPPORT:

- a. What people or other supports are available when you feel stress or anxiety?

Adapted from:

"Stress in the Workplace", by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D et al, HelpGuide.org International, June 2019
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-in-the-workplace.htm>

"Coping with Stress at Work", American Psychological Association, updated October 2018
<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/work-stress>

"Stress Management During Job Search", Minnesota State Careerwise,
<https://careerwise.minnstate.edu/jobs/stressmanagement.html>