



HR SOLUTIONS

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Managing Stress at Work

With the challenging economic times, most employers have experienced some sort of decline in business, reduction in force, hiring or pay freeze. Hence, fear for job security is high, workloads have increased, & company expectations are higher. To make matters worse, a recent Florida State University business school study shows bosses have become more demanding, & politicking, sucking up, & backstabbing in the office are on the rise. These factors alone have employee stress levels going through the ceiling. Of course this doesn't account for normal stresses employees experience at home like financial pressures, marital conflict, health challenges & other stressors of life. Stress is everyone's problem. It can be triggered by war talk, terrorism fears, family challenges, personal debt, or any of the common tensions on the job—50-hour weeks, demanding bosses, or concerns about workplace violence.

Stress Consequences

A certain amount of daily stress is normal. Stress is simply your reaction, either positive or negative, to change, according to the *Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine*. When stress places prolonged or extreme pressure on your coping mechanisms, it can become a clinical problem requiring professional help. Continuing high levels of stress can wreak havoc on the digestive & nervous systems, leading to irritable bowel syndrome, recurrent headaches, & heart attacks. The psychological symptoms often come in the form of burnout (losing interest in work) & depression. From an employment standpoint it can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism & employee burnout or disengagement.

Stress Defined

“Stress is the internal, physiological reaction to external events,” says Bruce Cryer, CEO of HeartMath. Dozens of times a day, he says, stress-triggering events cause the body to produce hundreds of biochemical changes. Stress comes from how you perceive your situation. The very thoughts you have can worsen your stress reaction, says Dr. Jeff Brantley. For example, one day your boss emerges from a long, closed-door meeting looking upset. Then she emails you requesting a meeting. Do you immediately think you're going to be fired? “Your mind thinks catastrophe, which triggers your body to go into a stress reaction,” Brantley says. When outside factors, like toxic work environments are present, biological responses such as higher blood pressure & more serious response occur according to Dr. Peter Schnall of the University of California. It is in the best interest of employers to limit stress at work & find ways to help employees cope with

stress in their lives. There are a number of ways companies can help reduce & control stress.

Company Stress Control Techniques

Track Key Indicators – Efforts to impact stress should be linked to business outcomes to get any real attention. Show how reducing stress in sales can increase sales output & you'll have everyone's attention. Track productivity, absenteeism, & turnover to provide measures to monitor as you begin stress control techniques.

Stress Assessment – It's crucial to determine at the onset what your employees perceive as the root causes of their stress, before jumping in with a stress management program. Conduct an employee opinion survey, do interviews, or in some other way get input from employees.

Balance Work & Family Life – Where possible, encourage greater balance between work & family. Encourage employees to take weekends, vacation days, & breaks. People need to disconnect from work, by spending time with their families or following a passion, not chained to email or the phone every day.

Supervisor Training – Authoritarian, non-communicative supervisors & those lacking in good interpersonal skills create unnecessary stress in the work environment. It is stressful being managed by someone who doesn't know how to manage & perhaps compensates for their insecurity by being controlling. Train leaders how to interact & work with employees to create less stress & increased productivity.

Work Control, Expectations & Accountability – When possible give employees control over work outcomes & help them see how what they do impacts customers & the business. Set clear, realistic expectations & give regular feedback helping employees feel accountable, knowing where they stand. Give recognition showing appreciation whenever possible.

Avoid “Firefight” Mode – We all have times when we have to put forth the extra effort to meet an approaching deadline or solve a challenging customer problem. It's a problem when this becomes the typical day, not the exception. Manage workloads & time pressure when there are down times, to balance out the stressed times. Get out of firefight mode!

Organize, Plan & Prioritize – Disorganization, lack of planning, & unclear priorities create unnecessary stress. Organize work flow & work areas. Plan out company, team, & individual work strategy, clearly defining key performance indicators, due dates & expectations every quarter, if not monthly, weekly, & in some cases daily. Identify & focus on the most important action priorities - this quarter, this week, & today. Organize & streamline your routine tasks. Create a “stop doing list” to eliminate or delegate low priority tasks wherever possible. Make

sure employees have a strong voice in setting expectations & work plans. Involvement gives them control & reduces stress.

Build Job Security— Although we never want to promise complete job security, you can do the following to increase job security perception:

- Share positive company results & business changes.
- Increase the amount of communication with employees.
- Celebrate small wins & progress.
- Recognize accomplishments.
- Train & develop employees.
- Involve employees in things that impact them & in coming up with new ideas, cost containment, & ways to make improvement.

Employee Assistance Programs—Offer a variety of employee programs, like: EAP, exercise, personal time off, counseling, etc.

Employee Training— Train employees in being respectful, preventing harassment, working as a team, & in how to resolve conflict, to further control stress at work.

Stress Management Training— A worksite program that focuses on stress, anxiety & coping measurement along with small-group educational intervention can significantly reduce illness & health care utilization. Training can include how to deal with change, physical symptoms of stress, stress triggers, fight-or-flight syndrome, & relaxation techniques, as well as efforts to persuade employees to develop multiple solutions for problems. Label training as performance enhancement & require it for all employees. This takes away any negative implications associated with stress management. Invest in stress reduction training for employees, helping them understand root causes, how to react to stress, & an individual strategy for managing stress. Train in the following personal stress controls:

Personal Stress Controls

- 1) How to mentally step out of yourself during or soon after a stressful situation, such as deep-breathing exercises, guided imagery, breaks, venting, or music therapy.
- 2) Change your response & calm your mind. Keep a list of everything in your day that causes stress. Pinpoint how every item on the list makes you feel & then ask yourself, “Is my reaction appropriate or over the top?” Understand where your emotions are coming from to find a healthier way to deal with them.
- 3) Eliminate the source of your stress. Find ways to regain a sense of control over your time & your surroundings. For example, if you must endure a two-hour commute in rush hour traffic to arrive at the office by 9 AM, start your workday earlier so you avoid the worst time to travel. If you have difficulties with your colleagues, shut your office door or talk them to resolve conflicts.
- 4) Vent to someone you trust, who listens & provides positive encouragement. In many instances, it is a good idea to speak with your supervisor. As odd as it sounds, the supervisor has a lot riding on your ability to cope with stress & can be a strong resource.
- 5) Relieve tension & clear your head by doing something physical. Wear yourself out on the treadmill, go on a strenuous hike, do laps in the swimming pool — whatever you need to do. The activity will get your endorphins pumping (the brain chemicals that make us feel good) & focus your mind on your body instead of your stress.

- 6) Start setting aside enough hours for a full night’s sleep, plus extra time each week for tension-relieving activities & self-reflection.
- 7) Single out a few good friends & family members to lean on. Research shows when lonely people are stressed, they experience higher blood pressure & more insomnia than those who have a strong social network.
- 8) Take time out for a moment to disengage from a situation, practice a breathing exercise, stretching, or relaxation, & then you’ll have a new perspective on where you are & what you have to accomplish. Take regular breaks, on a daily basis, walk around & get some fresh air every 90 minutes. Do some deep breathing or shoulder shrugs at your desk, or even just close your eyes for one minute. Relaxing is critical for creative thinking, strong relationships, & good health.
- 9) Recognize your body’s reaction to stress. Does your heart rate go up? What about your behavior patterns? What about your impact on others?
- 10) Exercise & nutrition— Regular exercise not only improves your health, it lowers your stress levels. Proven benefits include increased feeling of being in control, strengthened self-esteem, better regulation of emotions, & deeper relaxation.
- 11) Set boundaries— Turn off your computer & cell phone during personal or family time. If the people you love are truly important to you, then show them *every day* with your words, thoughts & actions.
- 12) Stop being tyrannized by your emotions. The Mayo Clinic suggests the following: **Rethink your standards**— if your failure to achieve perfection causes continual guilt & frustration, redefine what success means. **Reframe your situation**—for instance; weather delays your flight to an important business meeting. Instead of stewing about the disruption to your schedule, which you can’t control anyway, take advantage of the extra time to prepare for your presentation or catch up on sleep. **Reassess the significance of the problem**—will it matter tomorrow? Next week? A year from now? Emotion magnifies the difficulty of a problem in the moment; perspective shrinks it. Make sure you give yourself a steady dose of the latter.
- 13) Exercise & nutrition— regular exercise not only improves your health, it lowers your stress levels. Proven benefits include increased feeling of being in control, strengthened self-esteem, better regulation of emotions, & deeper relaxation.

Although stress is part of life, manage it so it does not negatively impact your work environment, employees and your health.

By Ken Spencer, President & SR Consultant
HR Service, Inc., (801) 685-8400, email:
Ken@HRServiceInc.com. WWW.HRServiceInc.com

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