

Mental Health Matters in the Workplace



Stress: Coping with Everyday Problems in the Workplace

Stress is a natural part of life. The expressions are familiar to us, “I’m stressed out,” “I’m under too much stress,” or “Work is one big stress.” Stress means different things to different people; however, it’s clear that most stress is a *negative* feeling rather than a *positive* feeling.

Stress can be both physical and mental

You may feel physical stress which is the result of too much to do, not enough sleep, a poor diet or the effects of an illness. Stress can also be mental: when you worry about money, a loved one’s illness, retirement, or experience an emotionally devastating event, such as the death of a spouse or being fired from work.

However, much of our stress comes from less dramatic everyday responsibilities. Obligations and pressures which are both physical and mental are not always obvious to us. In response to these daily strains your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This response is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high-pressure situation.

However, when you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without making adjustments to counter the

effects, you will feel stress which can threaten your health and well-being.

It is essential to understand that external events, no matter how you perceive those events, may cause stress. Stress often accompanies the feeling of “being out of control.”

How do I know if I am suffering from stress?

Remember, each person handles stress differently. Some people actually seek out situations which may appear stressful to others. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some people, while others may welcome the change. Some find sitting in traffic too much to tolerate, while others take it in stride. The key is determining your personal tolerance levels for stressful situations.

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral disorders which can affect your health, vitality, peace-of-mind, as well as personal and professional relationships. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses like insomnia, backaches, or headaches, and can contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease.

Tips for reducing or controlling stress

Success will not come from a half hearted effort, nor will it come overnight. It will take determination, persistence and time. Learn to accept or change stressful and tense situations whenever possible.

- **Be realistic.** If you feel overwhelmed by some activities (yours and/or your family’s), learn to say NO! Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle.

- **Shed the “superman/superwoman” urge.** No one is perfect, so don’t expect perfection from yourself or others. Ask yourself, “What really needs to be done?” How much can I do? Is the deadline realistic? What adjustments can I make?” Don’t hesitate to ask for help if you need it.
- **Take one thing at a time.** For people under tension or stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. The best way to cope with this feeling of being overwhelmed is to take one task at a time. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. The positive feeling of “checking off” tasks is very satisfying. It will motivate you to keep going.
- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. Twenty to thirty minutes of physical activity benefits both the body and the mind.
- **Hobbies.** Take a break from your worries by doing something you enjoy.
- **Healthy life style.** Good nutrition makes a difference. Limit intake of caffeine and alcohol (both disturb regular sleep patterns), get adequate rest, exercise, and balance work and play.
- **Share your feelings.** A conversation with a friend lets you know that you are not the only one having a bad day, caring for a sick child or working in a busy office. Don’t try to cope alone.
- **Give in occasionally. Be flexible!** If you find you’re meeting constant opposition in either your personal or professional life, rethink your position or strategy. Arguing only intensifies stressful feelings. If you know you are right, stand your ground, but do so calmly and rationally.
- **Go easy with criticism.** Try not expect too much of yourself and others. Remember, everyone is unique, and has his or her own virtues, shortcomings, and right to develop as an individual.

Where to Get Help

Help may be as close as a friend or spouse. But if you think that you or someone you know may be under more stress than just dealing with a passing difficulty, it may be helpful to talk with your doctor, spiritual advisor, or Employee Assistance professional. They may suggest you visit with a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or other qualified counselor.

Ideas to consider when talking with a professional:

- List the things which cause stress and tension in your life.
- How does this stress and tension affect you, your family and your job?
- Can you identify the stress and tensions in your life as short or long term?
- Do you have a support system of friends/family that will help you make positive changes?
- What are your biggest obstacles to reducing stress?
- What are you willing to change or give up for a less stressful and tension-filled life?
- What have you tried already that didn’t work for you?
- If you do not have control of a situation, can you accept it and get on with your life?

For More Information:

Contact the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee at 865-584-9125.

The Mental Health Association offers equally all services to eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin or disability.

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