

Building Workplace Resilience

Worker burnout is often a function of how you react to large amounts of stress. You may react to negative stress by feeling overwhelmed, irritable and worried. The key to preventing burnout and developing workplace resilience is to find ways to neutralize the stress or turn it into positive stress (where you feel motivated and excited).

Understanding Stress

Stress is a normal response to life changes. The ability to react to stress is crucial for human survival. Each of us possesses an innate "fight or flight" response mechanism to potentially harmful or dangerous situations.

When faced with stress, the adrenal glands secrete stimulating hormones; extra glucose is burned for energy; the heart rate accelerates; blood is channeled to working muscles; and your brain releases epinephrine, cortisone and other hormones to get you ready for the challenge.

Causes of Work-related Stress

Causes of stress vary from person to person, and not everyone feels anxiety from the same stressors (causes of stress). For example, some people thrive in work environments where they have to meet fast-approaching deadlines each day, such as in the news industry. Other people find working under these conditions to be extremely stressful.

Sources of work-related stress commonly cited by employees include:

- Long or difficult commutes to work
- Disagreements with co-workers or supervisors
- Having a disagreeable or difficult co-worker
- Experiencing verbal abuse
- Feeling overworked
- Feeling unappreciated
- Having difficult deadlines to meet
- Feeling underpaid
- Job insecurity
- Feeling tasks are monotonous, repetitive or redundant
- Diminished benefits
- Working long hours

- Having to take work home to complete
- Fear of physical violence in the workplace

Impact of Stress

While stress can keep you sharp and alert, prolonged stress can strain the body. Unrelieved tension builds up, causing an array of physiological and psychological symptoms that may include:

- A weakened immune system (lower white blood cell count)
- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- Back and muscular pain
- Cardiovascular disorders
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Concentration difficulties
- Chronic fatigue
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Depression
- Panic attacks

Job stress also may lead to:

- Deterioration in work relationships
- Decreased productivity
- Low workplace morale
- Work absenteeism
- Substance abuse

Identifying and Coping with Job-related Stress

Stress causes a variety of physical and emotional changes in people. Managers (and employees) should be trained to recognize the common signs of stress and burnout in other people.

If you are aware and conscious of these signs, you can implement specific changes in day-to-day activities to minimize (or even eliminate) job-related stress from your workplace.

Signs of Stress

Stress can manifest itself in a multitude of different physical or emotional changes in a person.

Physical signs of stress include:

- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- A weakened immune system (making it harder for the body to fight viruses and bacteria)
- Back and muscle pain
- Grinding teeth
- Feeling lightheaded
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- Rashes, itching and hives
- Weight gain or loss
- Increase in drinking, smoking or drug use

Emotional signs of stress include:

- Forgetfulness
- Excessive nervousness, anxiety and worry
- Increased anger and hostility
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Difficulty communicating
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Withdrawal from social interaction

Ways to Manage or Eliminate Stress

For people who feel stressed, there are things to do to minimize the stress and anxiety. Here are some suggestions for coping with job-related 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? Go for a walk? Taking notes can help you find patterns among your stressors and your reactions to them.
- **Develop healthy ways to cope:** Do your best to make healthy choices when you feel the tension rise. Physical activity, such as yoga can be very beneficial. Getting enough good-quality sleep is also important for effective stress management. 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. Also, make time for hobbies and favorite activities.
- **Learn to manage your workload:** It is important to pitch in and help out when asked, but do not overextend yourself. For those tasks for which you are responsible, be sure to prioritize them and

schedule them on a calendar. Plan each day so that you set realistic goals for getting your work done and meeting your deadlines. You can accomplish this by breaking bigger projects into smaller tasks. Also, try doing unpleasant tasks first so you can get them out of the way.

- **Create work-life balance:** People often 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.
- **Adjust your work environment:** Is your workspace arranged in a way that prevents you from getting your work done? Perhaps you need a comfier chair, more sunlight, more space, more privacy or a more comfortable work wardrobe. Come up with a list of reasonable suggestions for change, and ask your supervisor if they will allow you to pursue them. You can also hang a favorite art poster or bring a plant to change your environment.
- **Take time to disconnect:** It can be a challenge but do not think about work when you are not there. 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 are not able to take time off, get a quick boost by turning off your smartphone and focusing your attention on nonwork activities for a while. Try to spend a few minutes each day doing something just for you: exercising; reading; watching a movie; working on a craft or project; or exploring new parks, shops and restaurants in your neighborhood.
- **Talk with your supervisor:** Employers do not want to have a burned-out workforce. High job-related stress levels lead to high job turnover rates. Job turnover costs employers money. Your supervisor or HR department may have some suggestions for minimizing the stress you feel at work. The purpose of this is not to list complaints, but rather to come up with an effective plan for managing the stressors you have identified, so you can perform at your best on the job.
- **Seek help:** Leaning on your support system, such as trusted friends or family members, can help improve your ability to manage stress. Your employee assistance program can also help manage stress through online content, available counseling, and referrals to mental health professionals. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by work stress, you may want to talk to a mental health professional who may have ideas and possible solutions to help reduce and eliminate work-related stress.

Here when you need us.

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