

Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace

Most of us have felt “stressed out” at one time or another. When this feeling persists day after day, stress becomes chronic. Chronic stress can take a toll on our careers, on our quality of life and on our bodies, making us susceptible to a host of illnesses. In fact, what many of us don’t realize—and what medical researchers are confirming in study after study—is that our stress levels are directly linked to our physical well-being. Seventy-five percent of our visits to the doctor’s office concern stress-related ailments.

Common Sources of Stress

For many of us, stress is at an all-time high level. Some common sources of stress include financial worries, concerns about job security, heavy workloads and responsibility, job burnout, personality conflicts at work, the demands of work and family, troubled relationships, as well as care giving for a sick loved one or an aging parent.

How Stress Affects Us at Work

We all know that stress affects us at work. In fact, one in four people say they’ve missed work due to work-related stress. When we are under chronic stress, we often have trouble meeting deadlines, concentrating and making decisions. Our productivity and performance decrease as our stress levels increase. We also may become easily irritated and overwhelmed, and have relationship problems with colleagues. Many people who are over-stressed at work are unable to leave their job-related issues behind at night or they feel immobilized on the job. Stress can also mean more headaches, backaches and colds—and more sick days.

How Stress Affects Our Health and Wellness

Almost half of us suffer physically due to stress. Chronic stress can affect the body in a number of ways: It weakens the immune system, which can cause fatigue and make us more susceptible to colds and flu. It can also trigger a variety of ailments from gum disease to osteoporosis; cause premature aging; and lead to life-threatening illnesses like diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Whether the stress originates at the office or at home—or a little of both—we take it with us wherever we go. The good news is that we now know that caring for our minds as well as our bodies can keep us healthier, happier and more productive in all aspects of life. Here are some strategies you can use to better manage stress. These tips may seem like common sense, but few of us apply them to our daily lives. They will help if you use them.

- Treat your body right. Eating right and exercising can increase your tolerance to stress.
- Set realistic goals. Do what’s possible and carry on.
- Set and re-set your priorities. Take care of important and difficult tasks first, and eliminate unessential tasks.
- Take one task at a time. Divide large projects into smaller tasks, and make “to do” lists.
- Take five. Taking a short break can help slow down your mind long enough to improve your ability to deal with stress later.



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- Learn to relax or meditate. Studies show that just 10 to 20 minutes of quiet reflection or meditation a day can bring relief from chronic stress and increase your tolerance to it.
- Give yourself a break. No one is perfect. Striving to be the best in everything will lead to worry, anxiety and failure.
- Learn to say “no.” Slow down and be honest about what you can comfortably do.
- Be flexible. Make allowances for other people’s opinions and be prepared to compromise.
- Avoid excessive competition. Excessive competition can be dangerous emotionally and physically—not to mention damaging to your job.
- Manage your anger. Retreat before you lose control. Allow time for you both to cool down. You’ll both be better equipped to handle the problem constructively later.
- Be honest with colleagues. Make it plain you feel you’re in a bind. Chances are others feel the same. Don’t just complain—make practical suggestions for improvement.
- Talk it out with a loved one. Talking it out can help you see things more clearly, release negative feelings and get emotional support.

When to Seek Help

If you experience some or all of these signs of stress, and they persist, it may be time to seek help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness—taking care of yourself is a sign of strength.

- Constantly overwhelmed
- Strained relationships
- Poor work performance
- Overly emotional
- “Little things” set you off frequently
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Headaches and backaches
- Rise in blood pressure

Where to Get Help and Resources

- Employer-sponsored mental health or employee assistance benefits
- Your primary care provider or a spiritual or religious leader
- Your local Mental Health America affiliate

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