

# *Stress and Depression at Work*

## **Overview**

Understanding stress and depression and how they can affect your work.

- How much stress is too much?
- Understanding the causes of stress
- Identifying your stress
- Coping with pressure
- Depression and finding help

Most of us find our jobs stressful at times. We may feel we have too much to do, not enough support or available resources, or problems with managers or co-workers. We may also have problems at home that make it hard to concentrate or stay productive at the workplace. Often these feelings of stress are temporary. They go away after we have met an urgent deadline, finished a major project, or resolved a family crisis.

But sometimes feelings of stress linger and may begin to affect your job performance, your relations with others, or even your health and well-being. Symptoms of stress can also be indications of depression or another medical, psychological, or neurological disorders. In this article you'll read about stress and depression, how they affect your work and well-being, and how and when to seek help when you need it.

## **How much stress is too much?**

Many people need to feel some stress to do their best on the job. Work is a little like physical fitness -- if you never push yourself, you won't make progress. But if you push yourself too hard, you may burn out before you reach your goals. In order to succeed, you need to keep your level of stress from getting out of control.

Some of the signs of stress, or that you're pushing yourself too hard, include:

- feeling tired a lot of the time
- trouble falling asleep, interrupted sleep, or oversleeping
- eating too much or having no appetite
- feeling very sad or "down"
- crying or feeling tearful frequently
- trouble focusing or concentrating
- muscle aches or tight muscle tightening, especially in the neck, back, or shoulders
- avoiding family or friends
- headaches, stomachaches, or backaches
- jaw clenching or teeth grinding

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- overuse of alcohol or drugs
- being less productive at work, or having to work longer hours to finish your usual tasks
- an inability to relax
- on edge or generally feeling tense
- feeling nervous, frustrated, or irritable
- criticizing or snapping at people

### **Understanding the causes of stress**

If you are feeling stressed at work, it's worth taking the time to figure out what's causing your stress. Some of the traits that often help people succeed at work, such as energy and ambition, can become harmful if taken to extremes. Ask yourself:

- Do you feel that you have too much work or that you're always "on overload"?
- Has your organization adopted new technologies or ways of doing business that are hard for you to use or learn?
- Are you having trouble getting along with a manager, co-worker, customer, or client?
- Are you concerned about changes in your industry or organization and worried about what the future holds for people with your experience?
- Do you have unhealthy habits, such as a poor diet or not getting enough sleep, that may make it harder to deal with the pressure you're under?
- Have you faced a major change at home, such as a divorce or serious family illness, that has added to your stress?
- Do work constraints make it hard to deal with personal concerns or responsibilities?

### **Identifying your stress**

One way to begin to cope with the pressures you face is to make a list of all your sources of stress. Then identify the most important ones and deal with these first. For example:

- *If have too much work, you might ask your manager to help you set priorities. What should you focus on when you feel overloaded? Are your deadlines always firm or could they sometimes be extended?*

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- *Would training help ease your workload?* Does your company have an on-site training center or do you have to be externally trained? How do you go about requesting this?
- *What training is actually available for you?* Do you know what skills you need training in? Are they skills you need to brush up on or are they new skills that you need to start to learn?
- *If the company has reorganized, were these stressors present all along?* Is the stress you're feeling related to a long standing issue or are the stressors directly related to what's going on now?
- *If you're a manager, do you need to increase your skills?* Has your role been expanded or changed? Do you now feel the need for additional management skills training?

Your sources of stress will be easier to manage if you know what they are and deal with them in order of importance instead of trying to find solutions to all of them at once. You may also gain a sense of control and accomplishment from listing the steps you could take to ease your pressures and checking them off as you complete them or even giving yourself small rewards as you make progress.

#### **Coping with pressure**

Most jobs involve some stress, and many involve quite a lot of it. A study by the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company found that one-fourth of all employees view their work as the number one source of stress in their lives. The following tips can help you cope.

#### **At work**

- *Deal with the situation directly.* Avoid complaining to co-workers, customers, or others who can't help you solve the problem. When you need a fresh perspective or an outlet for your frustrations, talk to a trusted mentor or friend who works in your industry or line of work to help you come up with a solution strategy.
- *Talk to your manager first.* Be honest. If you feel overwhelmed or concerned that you may miss deadlines, let your manager know. Propose solutions instead of just griping. Let your manager know if you might benefit from more training, using a new software program, or having a more flexible schedule.
- *Consider meeting with human resources (HR) if you think your manager is a source of your stress.* Find out if you can meet confidentially with someone in your HR department if you believe your manager is causing your stress or if a problem remains unresolved after you have discussed it with your manager. HR may be able to suggest ways to handle the situation or tell you about helpful resources your manager hasn't already suggested. The program that provided this publication can also offer support and resources on coping with stress at work.

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- *Control what you can in your environment and try to become better organized.* Reduce the clutter at your desk or work station or in your cubicle. Use headphones or take other steps to reduce noises that bother you. Develop a better system for responding to calls, e-mails, or other daily tasks that are adding to your pressures. Even very small changes can make you feel more in control at work.
- *Picture yourself staying calm.* Close your eyes and “see” yourself staying calm before you start work each day. You might also do this before you begin activities you find stressful, such as making presentations. You may find it helpful to picture yourself in a relaxed and peaceful setting such as a beach or garden. If you have a computer at home or work, consider using a screensaver that shows this kind of scene and that will help to remind you to use the technique. You can put a calming photo on your desk to help you relax if you don’t use a computer.
- *Breathe deeply.* Inhale slowly through your nose, then exhale slowly through your mouth. Try to do this 10 times once or twice a day at work. This can help to reduce stress all day. It’s a good idea to practice deep-breathing at home, too. This will help you develop a habit you can also use at work or anywhere else.

#### In your personal and work life

- *Learn to say “no.”* Cut back on some after-work activities that aren’t a priority so you have more time to relax when you get home. You don’t need to give a reason for turning down a request or invitation. Just say, “Thanks for thinking of me, but I have another commitment.”
- *Get regular exercise.* Thirty to sixty minutes of exercise most days of the week is a proven way reduce stress. Go for walk on your lunch hour to “burn off” some of the tension you feel. See if you can find a co-worker who would like to become your exercise buddy. This may make exercising more fun and motivate you to stick to your routine.
- *Take other steps to maintain your health.* Bring a healthy lunch or snacks to work. Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs. Get regular medical checkups.
- *Learn some simple yoga or meditation techniques.* Many bookstores and libraries have books and videos on yoga or meditation for beginners. You may want to start with *The Relaxation Response* (Harper Paperbacks, 2000) by Herbert Benson, M.D., a classic guide to using meditation and other relaxation techniques to relieve stress and improve your overall health.
- *Take advantage of your commuting time.* There are many wonderful books, serene music, and recordings on meditation and stress reduction techniques that you can listen to while commuting to and from work. Contact the program that provided this publication for more information.
- *Spend time each day on an activity that makes you feel relaxed and happy.* Listen to your favorite music. Play with a pet or read a story to a child. Call an upbeat

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friend who always makes you feel good. Activities like these can “clear your head” and enable you to return to your concerns feeling more refreshed.

- *Take vacations.* Getting away can recharge your batteries and help you see all the pressures from a different point of view. According to a survey by the Families and Work Institute, people who don't take vacations because they believe they have too much work feel even more overworked and pressured than people who make the time to go away.
- *Be realistic and keep things in perspective.* When people are stressed, they have a tendency to think in terms of “always” and “never”. Don't project into the future and think nothing will ever change. Try to stay in the present and deal with whatever you are able to change and try to not to focus on what you're not able to do anything about.

### **Depression and finding help**

Symptoms of stress can also be indications of depression. Depression affects nearly 1 out of 10 people in the U.S. each year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Some of the signs of depression include:

- a decrease in productivity or performance
- taking more sick days or being late more than usual
- unprovoked outbursts of anger
- having less energy or getting tired easily
- loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities
- isolating oneself from friends and family members
- feeling worthless or feeling very guilty for no reason
- changes in appetite or weight
- memory difficulties and difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment
- frequent crying episodes
- suicidal thoughts or talk of suicide (seek professional assistance immediately)

Talk to a mental health professional if you have any of these symptoms for more than a few weeks or if they are interfering with your personal or work life or your relationships. It is important to remember that depression is treatable and that it can have many causes besides stress. A professional can help you identify the cause of your condition and find the appropriate treatment for you.

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The best way to cope with depression is to work closely with a trained professional until you find a treatment that works for you. Research shows that about 80 percent of the people who get help for depression benefit from treatment. The program that provided this publication may be able to help you find a mental health professional.

If you are experiencing stress or depression, take steps now to find the support that will enable you to stay healthy, productive and to feel better.

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