

# Stress in the Workplace

## Managing Job and Work Stress



While some workplace stress is normal, excessive stress can interfere with your productivity and performance, impact your physical and emotional health, and affect your relationships and home life. It can even determine success or failure on the job. You can't control everything in your work environment, but that doesn't mean you're powerless, even when you're stuck in a difficult situation. Whatever your ambitions or work demands, there are steps you can take to protect yourself from the damaging effects of stress, improve your job satisfaction, and bolster your well-being in and out of the workplace.

## When is workplace stress too much?

Stress isn't always bad. A little bit of stress can help you stay focused, energetic, and able to meet new challenges in the workplace. It's what keeps you on your toes during a presentation or alert to prevent accidents or costly mistakes. But in today's hectic world, the workplace too often seems like an emotional roller coaster. Long hours, tight deadlines, and ever-increasing demands can leave you feeling worried, drained, and overwhelmed. And when stress exceeds your ability to cope, it stops being helpful and starts causing damage to your mind and body, as well as to your job satisfaction.

If stress on the job is interfering with your work performance, health, or personal life, it's time to take action. No matter what you do for a living, or how stressful your job is, there are plenty of things you can do to reduce your overall stress levels and regain a sense of control at work.

Common causes of workplace stress include:

- Fear of being laid off
- More overtime due to staff cutbacks

- Pressure to perform to meet rising expectations but with no increase in job satisfaction
- Pressure to work at optimum levels—all the time!
- Lack of control over how you do your work

## Stress at work warning signs

When you feel overwhelmed at work, you lose confidence and may become angry, irritable, or withdrawn. Other signs and symptoms of excessive stress at work include:

- Feeling anxious, irritable, or depressed
  - Apathy, loss of interest in work
  - Problems sleeping
  - Fatigue
  - Trouble concentrating
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- Muscle tension or headaches
  - Stomach problems
  - Social withdrawal
  - Loss of sex drive
  - Using alcohol or drugs to cope

## Tip 1: Beat workplace stress by reaching out

Sometimes the best stress-reducer is simply sharing your stress with someone close to you. The act of talking it out and getting support and sympathy, especially face-to-face, can be a highly-effective way of blowing off steam and regaining your sense of calm. The other person doesn't have to "fix" your problems; they just need to be a good listener.

**Turn to co-workers for support.** Having a solid support system at work can help buffer you from the negative effects of job stress. Just remember to listen to them and offer support when they are in need as well. If you don't have a close friend at work, you can take steps to be more social with your coworkers. When you take a break, for example, instead of directing your attention to your smartphone, try engaging your colleagues.

**Lean on your friends and family members.** As well as increasing social contact at work, having a strong network of supportive friends and family members is extremely important to managing stress in all areas of your life. On the flip side, the lonelier and more isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.

**Build new satisfying friendships.** If you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to—at

work or in your free time—it's never too late to [build new friendships](#). Meet new people with common interests by taking a class or joining a club, or by [volunteering your time](#). As well as expanding your social network, helping others—especially those who are appreciative—delivers immense pleasure and can help significantly reduce stress.

## Tip 2: Support your health with exercise and nutrition

When you're overly focused on work, it's easy to neglect your physical health. But when you're supporting your health with good nutrition and exercise, you're stronger and more resilient to stress.

Taking care of yourself doesn't require a total lifestyle overhaul. Even small things can lift your mood, increase your energy, and make you feel like you're back in the driver's seat.

### Make time for regular exercise

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Aerobic exercise, any activity that raises your heart rate and makes you sweat, is a [hugely effective way](#) to lift your mood, increase energy, sharpen focus, and relax both the mind and body. Rhythmic movement, such as walking, running, dancing, drumming, etc., is especially soothing for the nervous system. For maximum stress relief, try to get at least [30 minutes of activity on most days](#). If it's easier to fit into your schedule, break up the activity into two or three shorter segments.

And when stress is mounting at work, try to take a quick break and move away from the stressful situation. Take a stroll outside the workplace if possible. Physical movement can help you regain your balance.

### Make smart, stress-busting food choices

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Your food choices can have a huge impact on how you feel during the work day. Eating small, frequent and healthy meals, for example, can help your body maintain an even level of blood sugar. This maintains your energy and focus, and prevents mood swings. Low blood sugar, on the other hand, can make you feel anxious and irritable, while eating too much can make you lethargic.

**Minimize sugar and refined carbs.** When you're stressed, you may crave sugary snacks, baked goods, or comfort foods such as pasta or French fries. But these [“feel-good” foods quickly lead to a crash](#) in mood and energy, making symptoms of stress worse, not better.

**Reduce your intake of foods that can adversely affect your mood**, such as caffeine, trans fats, and foods with high levels of chemical preservatives or hormones.

**Eat more Omega-3 fatty acids to give your mood a boost.** The [best sources](#) are fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines), seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

**Avoid nicotine.** Smoking when you're feeling stressed may seem calming, but nicotine is a powerful stimulant, leading to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety.

**Drink alcohol in moderation.** Alcohol may seem like it temporarily reduces your worries, but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off and adversely affect your mood.

### Tip 3: Don't skimp on sleep

You may feel like you just don't have the time get a full night's sleep. But skimping on sleep interferes with your daytime productivity, creativity, problem-solving skills, and ability to focus. The better rested you are, the better equipped you'll be to tackle your job responsibilities and cope with workplace stress.

**Improve the quality of your sleep** by making [healthy changes to your daytime and nightly routines](#). For example, go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends, be smart about what you eat and drink during the day, and make adjustments to your sleep environment. Aim for 8 hours a night, the amount of sleep most adults need to operate at their best.

Turn off screens one hour before bedtime. The light emitted from TV, tablets, smartphones, and computers suppresses your body's production of melatonin and can severely disrupt your sleep.

Avoid stimulating activity and stressful situations before bedtime such as catching up on work. Instead, focus on quiet, soothing activities, such as reading or listening to soft music, while keeping lights low.

## Stress and shift work

Working night, early morning, or rotating shifts can impact your sleep quality, which in turn may affect productivity and performance, leaving you more vulnerable to stress.

- Adjust your sleep-wake cycle by exposing yourself to bright light when you wake up at night and using bright lamps or daylight-simulation bulbs in your workplace. Then, wear dark glasses on your journey home to block out sunlight and encourage sleepiness.
- Limit the number of night or irregular shifts you work in a row to prevent sleep deprivation from mounting up.
- Avoid frequently rotating shifts so you can maintain the same sleep schedule.

- Eliminate noise and light from your bedroom during the day. Use blackout curtains or a sleep mask, turn off the phone, and use ear plugs or a soothing sound machine to block out daytime noise.

### Tip 4: Prioritize and organize

When job and workplace stress threatens to overwhelm you, there are simple, practical steps you can take to regain control.

#### Time management tips for reducing job stress

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**Create a balanced schedule.** All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities and downtime.

**Leave earlier in the morning.** Even 10-15 minutes can make the difference between frantically rushing and having time to ease into your day. If you're always running late, set your clocks and watches fast to give yourself extra time and decrease your stress levels.

**Plan regular breaks.** Make sure to take short breaks throughout the day to take a walk, chat with a friendly face, or [practice a relaxation technique](#). Also try to get away from your desk or work station for lunch. It will help you relax and recharge and be more, not less, productive.

**Establish healthy boundaries.** Many of us feel pressured to be available 24 hours a day or obliged to [keep checking our smartphones](#) for work-related messages and updates. But it's important to maintain periods where you're not working or thinking about work. That may mean not checking emails or taking work calls at home in the evening or at weekends.

**Don't over-commit yourself.** Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

#### Task management tips for reducing job stress

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**Prioritize tasks.** Tackle high-priority tasks first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant as a result.

**Break projects into small steps.** If a large project seems overwhelming, focus on one

manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.

**Delegate responsibility.** You don't have to do it all yourself. Let go of the desire to control every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process.

**Be willing to compromise.** Sometimes, if you and a co-worker or boss can both adjust your expectations a little, you'll be able to find a happy middle ground that reduces the stress levels for everyone.

### **Tip 5: Break bad habits that contribute to workplace stress**

Many of us make job stress worse with negative thoughts and behavior. If you can turn these self-defeating habits around, you'll find employer-imposed stress easier to handle.

**Resist perfectionism.** When you set unrealistic goals for yourself, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Aim to do your best; no one can ask for more than that.

**Flip your negative thinking.** If you focus on the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

**Don't try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things at work are beyond our control, particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control, such as the way you choose to react to problems.

**Look for humor in the situation.** When used appropriately, humor is a great way to relieve stress in the workplace. When you or those around you start taking work too seriously, [find a way to lighten the mood](#) by sharing a joke or funny story.

**Clean up your act.** If your desk or work space is a mess, file and throw away the clutter; just knowing where everything is can save time and cut stress.

### **Be proactive about your job and your workplace duties**

When we feel uncertain, helpless, or out of control, our stress levels are the highest. Here are some things you can do to regain a sense of control over your job and career.

**Talk to your employer about workplace stressors.** Healthy and happy employees are more productive, so your employer has an incentive to tackle workplace stress whenever possible. Rather than rattling off a list of complaints, let your employer know about specific

conditions that are impacting your work performance.

**Clarify your job description.** Ask your supervisor for an updated description of your job duties and responsibilities. You may find that some of the tasks that have piled up are not included in your job description, and you can gain a little leverage by pointing out that you've been putting in work over and above the parameters of your job.

**Request a transfer.** If your workplace is large enough, you might be able to escape a toxic environment by transferring to another department.

**Ask for new duties.** If you've been doing the exact same work for a long time, ask to try something new: a different grade level, a different sales territory, a different machine.

**Take time off.** If [burnout seems inevitable](#), take a complete break from work. Go on vacation, use up your sick days, ask for a temporary leave-of-absence—anything to remove yourself from the situation. Use the time away to recharge your batteries and gain perspective.

## Look for satisfaction and meaning in your work

Feeling bored or unsatisfied with how you spend most of the workday can cause high levels of stress and take a serious toll on your physical and mental health. But for many of us, having a dream job that we find meaningful and rewarding is just that: a dream. Even if you're not in a position to look for another career that you love and are passionate about—and most of us aren't—you can still [find purpose and joy in a job](#) that you don't love.

Even in some mundane jobs, you can often focus on how your contributions help others, for example, or provide a much-needed product or service. Focus on aspects of the job that you do enjoy, even if it's just chatting with your coworkers at lunch. Changing your attitude towards your job can also help you regain a sense of purpose and control.

## How managers or employers can reduce stress at work

Employees who are suffering from work-related stress can lead to lower productivity, lost workdays, and a higher turnover of staff. As a manager, supervisor, or employer, though, you can help lower workplace stress. The first step is to act as a positive role model. If you can remain calm in stressful situations, it's much easier for your employees to follow suit.

**Consult your employees.** Talk to them about the specific factors that make their jobs stressful. Some things, such as failing equipment, understaffing, or a lack of supervisor feedback may be relatively straightforward to address. Sharing information with employees

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can also reduce uncertainty about their jobs and futures.

**Communicate with your employees one-on-one.** [Listening attentively face-to-face](#) will make an employee feel heard and understood. This will help lower their stress and yours, even if you're unable to change the situation.

**Deal with workplace conflicts in a positive way.** Respect the dignity of each employee; establish a zero-tolerance policy for harassment.

**Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs.** Get employee input on work rules, for example. If they're involved in the process, they'll be more committed.

**Avoid unrealistic deadlines.** Make sure the workload is suitable to your employees' abilities and resources.

**Clarify your expectations.** Clearly define employees' roles, responsibilities, and goals. Make sure management actions are fair and consistent with organizational values.

**Offer rewards and incentives.** Praise work accomplishments verbally and organization-wide. Schedule potentially stressful periods followed by periods of fewer tight deadlines. Provide opportunities for social interaction among employees.

## Recommended reading



[Stress Management](#): Enhance your well-being by reducing stress and building resilience - Harvard Medical School Special Health Report

[STRESS... At Work](#) - Causes of stress at work and how to prevent it. (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health)

[Stress at Work](#) (PDF) - Help and advice for dealing with job and workplace stress. (Acas)

[Coping with Stress at Work](#) - Common sources and the steps you can take. (American Psychological Association)

[Workplace stress management strategies for business managers](#) - Actions you can take to relieve stress for your staff. (Bupa)



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[Job Burnout: How to Spot it and Take Action](#) - Find out if you're at risk of workplace burnout and what to do if you are. (Mayo Clinic)

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