



Stress in the Workplace

Managing Job and Workplace 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 mean the difference between success and 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

- ▶ 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When you feel overwhelmed at work, you lose confidence and may become angry, irritable, or withdrawn.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:

Signs and symptoms of excessive workplace stress

- Feeling anxious, irritable, or depressed
- Apathy, loss of interest in work
- Problems sleeping
- Fatigue
- Trouble concentrating
- 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.

Tips for cultivating supportive relationships at work and beyond

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](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm). Meet new people with common interests by taking a class or joining a club, or by [volunteering your time](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm). As well as being a great way to expand your social network, being helpful to others—especially those who are appreciative—delivers immense pleasure and can help to 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

Aerobic exercise—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](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm). 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

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, keeping your energy and focus up, and avoiding 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](#) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-carbs.htm) 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, alcohol, 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](#) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) 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 temporarily reduces worry, but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off.

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 leaves 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.

- ▶ Try to [improve the quality of your sleep](#) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day, even on weekends. 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 can affect productivity and performance and leave you more vulnerable to stress.

- Adjust your sleep-wake cycle by exposing yourself to bright light when you wake up at night, using bright lamps or daylight-simulation bulbs in your workplace, and then wearing 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 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

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. Don't add to your stress levels by running late.

Plan regular breaks. Make sure to take short breaks throughout the day to take a walk or chat to a friendly face. 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](/articles/addictions/smartphone-addiction.htm) 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

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 can both bend a little at work, 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 around these self-defeating habits, 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-thinking 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](/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm) (/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm) in the workplace. When you or those around you start taking things too seriously, find a way to lighten the mood by sharing a joke or funny story.

Clean up your act. If you're always running late, set your clocks and watches fast and give yourself extra time. If your desk is a mess, file and throw away the clutter; just knowing where everything saves time and cuts 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 rattle 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 then be able to point out that some of the things you are expected to do are not part of your job description and gain a little leverage by showing 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](/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm) (/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm), 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 take perspective.

Look for satisfaction and meaning in your work

Feeling bored or unsatisfied with what you do for large parts of the day 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 change careers to something 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 what you do helps others, for example, or provides 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. For more, read: [Finding the Right Career](/articles/healthy-living/finding-the-right-career.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/finding-the-right-career.htm).

How managers or employers can reduce stress at work

Having your employees suffering from work-related stress can result in lower productivity, lost workdays, and a higher turnover of staff. As a manager, supervisor, or employer, though, there are things you can do to 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.
- ▶ [Communicate](/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm) with your employees one-on-one. Listening attentively face-to-face will make an employee feel heard and understood—and help to lower their stress and yours—even if you're unable to change the situation.
- ▶ Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs.
- ▶ Be sure the workload is suitable to employees' abilities and resources; avoid unrealistic deadlines.
- ▶ Get employee input on work rules, when possible. If they're involved in the process, they'll be more committed.
- ▶ Deal with workplace conflicts in a positive way.

Clarify expectations

- ▶ Share information with employees to reduce uncertainty about their jobs and futures.

- ▶ Clearly define employees' roles, responsibilities, and goals.
- ▶ Make management actions fair and consistent with organizational values.

Offer rewards and incentives

- ▶ Praise good work performance verbally and organization-wide.
- ▶ Respect the dignity of each employee; establish a zero-tolerance policy for harassment.
- ▶ Show that individual workers are valued and appreciated and that job stress is taken seriously.
- ▶ Schedule potentially stressful periods followed by periods of fewer tight deadlines.

Related articles



(/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm)

[Preventing Burnout: \(/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm\)](/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm) Techniques for Dealing with Overwhelming Stress



(/articles/stress/stress-management.htm)

[Stress Management: \(/articles/stress/stress-management.htm\)](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) Using Self-Help Techniques for Dealing with Stress



[\(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm)

[Quick Stress Relief: \(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) Using Your Senses to Relieve Stress On the Spot

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