Handling the stress of success

We all long for a job that doesn't "feel" like work; one that motivates you to spring out of bed, even on Monday mornings. If you finally got that much-anticipated promotion or reached the career you've been working towards, congratulations! But sometimes the reality of that dream job is…well…not quite as "dreamy" as you imagined.



If your climb to success isn't what you expected, you're not alone. Even dream jobs can have a downside—whether that's stressful deadlines, unrealistic expectations or workplace politics. Each step up the ladder typically comes with added responsibilities, heavier workloads and less time for you and your family. But by understanding your response to this change, giving yourself time to adapt and being pragmatic about what your job is and isn't, you'll be well on your way to turning those great career expectations into an even greater reality.

The stress response

Stress is often a positive force that can push you to get the job done, improve your performance and stay motivated. In fact, it may have even helped you get to where you are today. But if you feel like you're being pulled in every direction, are constantly afraid of under-delivering at work and worry that your extra hours on the job are taking time away from your family, your mental health may start to pay the price.

Your body is designed to react to short-term stress with the "fight or flight" response. So when you're stressed day in and day out your body's stress response never gets a chance to shut off, releasing steroid hormones and cortisol into your system. Over time this can not only damage your heart's function, but can also affect your mental well-being—from poor concentration and fatigue, to mood swings, depression and anxiety. Needless to say, your pursuit for professional success shouldn't have to cost you your physical and mental health.

How to deal?

If you're suddenly overwhelmed by your new role, try these tactics to help keep stress levels down while your career soars:

Perfect the art of imperfection. Setting impossible standards for yourself will only set you up for additional stress and failure. Instead, aim for reasonable goals. Perfectionism can often have the reverse effect of what's intended—paralyzing your work and stopping you from getting the job done. Ask for help when it's clear you need it and recognize that sometimes "good enough" is just fine.

Get scheduled. Use lists to help you prioritize your "to-dos" in all parts of life. Focus on tackling big projects one step at a time and cross them off your list when each task it met instead of feeling overwhelmed by trying to deal with everything all at once.

Leave earlier. A mere 10 to 15 minutes extra in the morning can make the difference between rushing frantically to work and having the time to ease into your day. Giving yourself a little extra time can go a long way in decreasing your stress levels.

Don't be afraid to delegate. You can't do it all yourself; at home or on the job. If other people can take care of something, let them. Although there's a reason you've reached your goals, let go of the desire to control everything and feel unnecessary stress dissolve in the process.

Give it time. Any life change, even positive ones, can cause anxiety and stress as you get used to new people, new tasks and new routines. While you may initially feel like a fish out of water, remind yourself that it may take weeks, maybe even months to feel completely comfortable in your new role.

Open up. If you feel like you can't handle your stress levels on your own, reach out to a supervisor,

colleague, friend or family member. If stress is affecting your day-to-day life, consider seeking professional help through your doctor or professional. A professional will work with you to identify stress sources and help you find better ways to deal with daily challenges more effectively.

Take care of you

If you're noticing that stress at work is affecting your ability to do your job, care for yourself or manage your personal life, you need to take action. Even a few small changes will lift your mood, increase your energy and make you feel like you're back in the driver's seat. The better you feel, the better equipped you'll be to manage challenges, deal with the tasks at hand and enjoy where you are in your career.

Get healthy. One of the best ways to release tension is to exercise regularly. Make 30 minutes of aerobic activity a part of each day. This should be coupled with a healthy and balanced diet full of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and protein. Processed foods and excess salt, sugar, alcohol and caffeine will do nothing to help you combat stress.

Relax. Fit some "me" time into your new, hectic schedule. Take a walk at lunch, read a book, have a hot bath or get a massage. Set aside time and don't let your other responsibilities creep in. This is a chance to forget your stress, recharge and refocus your energy. Remember to try to continue doing things you enjoy like gardening, sports or hanging out with friends.

Catch up on sleep. Although stress and anxiety can cause insomnia, too little sleep affects your ability to handle stress. If your to-do list is keeping you up at night then be sure to avoid alcohol or caffeinated beverages in the evening and exercising close to bedtime. Instead take a warm bath before bed, turn off all electronic devices, cuddle up with a book and aim to get to sleep at the same time each night.

Job promotions and new career paths are certainly something to celebrate, even if they get off to a less-than-perfect start. Sure, sometimes these challenges can be downright scary and cause you to second-guess your abilities or leave you feeling like a bit of an "imposter" posing as a composed worker. But don't forget you got where you are today because of your competence, perseverance and hard work. By taking a balanced approach, giving yourself some time to adjust and making time to decompress, you'll turn the stress that comes with your new territory into positive energy that helps put the "dream" back into your dream job.