Fight or flight: learning how to handle workplace stress

Maybe you just survived a round of layoffs, but now have to do the work of two people. Perhaps your new boss wants to completely change the way the department is run. If you are feeling overwhelmed during work hours, you are not alone: nearly one quarter of Canadians admitted in a recent health survey that their days were extremely stressful. Also close to 30 per cent of Canadians feel more work-related stress today than in previous years. Although stress has become 'the new normal' for most people, excessive amounts of it can negatively impact your physical and mental health if it is not properly managed.

When you are stressed, your body releases adrenaline, causing your heart to beat faster, and your breathing to speed up. Then, your body starts to feel pressured, tired or anxious, causing you to drink more coffee, smoke or eat too much. Because stress drains your body's energy reserves, you may eventually become unable to sleep or think clearly. Stress is also a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes and mental illness.

Here are some stress-busting strategies to try the next time you feel inundated with workday challenges:

- **Recognize the symptoms of stress.** Feeling irritable or restless? Noticing changes in sleep patterns or appetite? Having trouble making decisions? Suffering from frequent headaches or rapid heartbeat? These are all signs of increased stress levels.

- **Prioritize your health.** The stronger you feel, the more equipped and resilient you will be to prevent, manage and conquer stress. Make time to exercise; avoid too much caffeine and processed food; drink water throughout the day and get plenty of sleep.

- **Stop multi-tasking.** Doing one thing at a time forces you to slow down and be more thorough. Create *realistic* 'to do' lists based on what you can actually accomplish, and assign each task a priority level. Learn to delegate work when you need help.

- **Find time for you.** Wake up a half-hour earlier so you are not rushing to get to the office on time. Schedule breaks for relaxation in your day, even if it is just a walk around the block to clear your head. Avoid eating lunch at your desk whenever possible.

- **Make a clean sweep.** Organize your files, supplies and materials so you do not waste time searching for what you need. Take five minutes to clear off your desk at the end of the day to avoid being greeted by a mountain of papers the next morning.

- **Talk it out.** Find a sympathetic ear – your manager, a co-worker, your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) representative – and share your problems. Often, identifying the challenging issues causing your stress produces an effective solution.

- **Tap into your mind, as well as your body.** Physical activity – especially outdoors, whether it is walking, gardening or yoga – greatly reduces stress. Try relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, stretching and mindful meditation – many free apps available today feature easy-to-learn techniques.

- **Be kind to yourself.** Stress often brings on negative thinking, and you may find yourself asking, "why can't I handle this?" Instead of worrying about things are beyond your control, reward yourself for positive work accomplishments or milestones: get a manicure, dinner out with friends or a fun getaway.

For additional assistance with change, stress and tips for building your resiliency, get in touch with your EFAP at workhealthlife.com or 1.866.833.7690.

If your child could use help with anxiety, adjusting to new routines, or self-confidence, our Children's Support Solutions can help. Learn more at childrensupportsolutions.com or 1.866.653.2397.