

Letting go of work stress

☐ *I'm so stressed.* These words are so familiar to us: we have said them and we have compassionately listened to our colleagues and loved ones utter them as well. Stress — both as an experience and a topic of discussion — has become so commonplace that it can almost seem inseparable from life itself. While not all stress is a bad thing, too much stress can be unhealthy. Let's learn more about what stress is and why it is so connected with work, why it can be harmful and some strategies for reducing stress.

What exactly is stress?

When we say we are stressed we usually mean we are feeling overwhelmed, burdened and run-down. What we commonly refer to as stress are our physical and mental reactions to **stressors**. A stressor is anything that poses a perceived challenge or threat to our well-being, and can be anything from the life threatening to the everyday. Stress triggers the fight-or-flight response in our bodies, which in turn causes other physiological symptoms to occur. These can include disturbed digestion, a rise in heart rate and disrupted sleep. These effects accumulate and cause the feeling of general anxiety and worry that we call stress.

How does stress affect our well-being?

Some amount of stress is normal and even necessary; as we rely on the increased attention and energy it gives in situations that are genuinely threatening. However, too much stress can lead to high blood pressure, insomnia and mental health problems like depression and anxiety disorders.

Why does work cause us stress?

For many people, work is a leading reported cause of stress. Why is it that our jobs are so stressful? The answer is that there are many potential stressors present in the average workplace. Some of these include tight deadlines that feel impossible to stay on top of, interpersonal relationships with coworkers and sometimes a lack of job security. Usually the factors that cause stress at work are interconnected and difficult to isolate. Although you cannot always control your environment or the stressful factors inside of it, you can manage your reactions to the environment. Below we will look at some things you can do to reduce work stress both in the workplace and outside.

What can you do at work to reduce stress?

- **Schedule breaks during the day.** Often when we are at work we attempt to push ourselves non-stop to accomplish tasks. This can exacerbate stress. Try to take breaks at least every 90 minutes and go for a walk or do something else that relaxes you. If you prefer a different rhythm, you can take shorter breaks every 25 minutes. Whatever you choose, you will have more focus and energy if you do not attempt to work without breaks.
- **Eliminate interruptions.** It can be hard to get everything done when you are constantly bombarded with emails, phone calls, and visits. Some of these interruptions are unavoidable such as your boss approaching you and asking you for something, however, other distractions such as texts and phone calls can be controlled. You can also control how you react to interruptions by choosing whether to accept the interruption, cut it off or make a plan to attend to it later.
- **Deal with conflict gracefully.** It is inevitable that you will run into differences of opinion and conflicting personalities in any workplace. Rather than letting these small conflicts accumulate, it can actually be less stressful to address them head on. Speak to your coworkers about problems as they arise before they snowball into something larger.

What can you do at home?

When you arrive at home at the end of the day, do the best you can to leave work at work. Instead of worrying about what awaits you tomorrow at the office or what you left behind, channel your energy into self-care. You can also reduce stress by having a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, doing activities you enjoy and spending time with others. If you fill your time at home with these activities, you will also reduce your stress levels at work.

If you are feeling like stress is becoming more and more of a problem for you, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) for more support in dealing with work stress.