



The Place For Wellness

Stress Doesn't Get the Job Done

We have all heard it; perhaps we have even said it: "I thrive on stress," or "stress is part of the job, you just have to deal with it." For some people this may be true, but what they are really describing is challenge. We all respond to situations and pressures differently. The new project with a looming deadline may get the adrenaline flowing and create excitement for one person, while for another it brings a sense of being overwhelmed, fear, discouragement or depression.

We all need to learn to recognize the difference for ourselves and for others. Challenge is good. It brings forth the energy and drive that makes life exciting and becomes a source of innovation, progress and success. Conversely, stress weakens concentration, lowers morale, attacks our health and undermines our productivity. Labeling stress a challenge doesn't make it go away, or remove its destructive potential.

The difficulty lies in that there is no easy test to distinguish between challenge and stress. The best and most reliable guide is inside each one of us. How do we feel mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually? Only by assessing our response to circumstances and the people around us can we truly know the difference. There may be external signs – short temper, lack of enthusiasm, reduced productivity – but most indicators are known only to the person affected. All too often, people ignore these internal warning signs, like headaches or difficulty sleeping, until they are in crisis.

What then are we to do?

As a manager you can be proactive, and reduce the common sources of workplace stress before the symptoms become epidemic.

1. Examine the demands upon employees. Are they consistently feeling overloaded? If the answer is yes, look at redesigning jobs and redistributing responsibility.
2. Give employees a voice. Discussing concerns can be healing in and of itself, and studies show that involving the team in the search for answers will probably lead to increased productivity.
3. Assess your culture. Is it supportive? Do people listen to the voices of those under stress? Do employees feel that their needs are considered? The difference between "stress" and "challenge" is deeply dependent upon the environment in which people work.
4. Continually communicate, especially in times of uncertainty and insecurity. Interestingly, bad news does not cause nearly as much stress as the fear that bad news is coming.

While we can hope that managers will do their best to reduce unwanted stress in the workplace, each of us needs to take responsibility for addressing the stress in our own lives. We need to acknowledge the impact of stress on our health – the American Medical Association suggests that stress causes or contributes to 80% - 85% of all illness or disease. We should also admit the impact of stress on our relationships, which inevitably suffer when behavior deteriorates and poor choices are made.

The good news is there are many simple steps that can be taken to reduce the stress in your life. A long list could be provided, but consider adopting a few from this abbreviated prescription.

1. Get organized. Taking time to plan your day and schedule the important tasks can keep your world from getting out of control.
2. Follow your bio-clock. Schedule the tough tasks for when you are at your peak.
3. Maintain boundaries. Take responsibility for your work and say “no” to others who want to pull you into their assignments.
4. Take small steps. Break large tasks down so that parts that can be addressed one at a time.
5. Schedule interruptions. Don’t let e-mails and phone calls continually interrupt your day and prevent you from finishing tasks. Establish time when you will be available, and time when you will focus on the important tasks in your day.
6. Take breaks. A short walk, a stretch, lunch away from your desk can help you feel renewed.
7. Watch for signs. Stay alert to indicators of stress – insomnia, indigestion, irritability – and be ready to take action to reduce your stress.
8. Transition. For your sake, and your relationships, do something to shift gears between work and home.
9. Use relaxation techniques. Take ten slow, deep breaths, meditate, exercise, listen to music -- all ways to calm your nervous system and get back in balance.
10. Get help. Most of us need some help to overcome stress. Get a massage, talk with a counselor, visit a wellness center, or chat with a friend.

Stress is not something to be ignored or met with bravado that suggests “stress is for other people.” The chances are good that you have unnecessary stress in your life that can and should be discarded. It’s also a pretty safe bet that you can improve the way you cope with the stress that life inevitably brings -- benefiting your health, well-being and relationships. Don’t willingly accept the impact of stress on your life. You will be much healthier and happier without it!

Michael Campbell, MS, APR
President, St. Joseph Institute
Excellence in Addiction Treatment