



Managing Workplace Stress: Nine simple steps to relaxation

Stress ignores boundaries. It loves to act out at work and then continue carrying on at home. It reduces job productivity and satisfaction, and affects our health, happiness, and relationships at home and at work. Stress results in increased risk of heart disease, depression, exhaustion and absenteeism.

Most of us are now familiar with its problem causing nature, yet the number of people suffering from work-related stress is increasing. A recent Gallup survey found that seven out of ten employees feel “a great deal” or a “moderate amount” of stress. Sociologists identified a combination of three factors that increase work place stress, including 1) jobs with higher demands, 2) less control over your schedule and activities, and 3) minimal social support at work. Through downsizing and pressure for increased productivity, many positions have increased demands on employees while reducing flexibility. The pressure from these changes can also increase tension among the staff, thus reducing the social support. It is no wonder so many are feeling more stress and less job satisfaction.

Many companies have tried to help by improving the cooperative spirit of the workplace. Some find this quite effective, and others report it only increases their pressure to fit in. For example, when a company culture rewards those who work when sick, stay late, or skip vacations, it could alienate single parents or others who then have to struggle harder to avoid burnout. If you are further alienated by your workplace culture, it only increases your need to find the right solution for you. Many approaches to reduce stress are effective.

Stress Reduction Techniques

How do you find a technique that works for you? Here’s a sampling that appeals to a wide range of people. Start by picking one or two, and then see if it your stress level goes down.

1. **Catch it early:** Relaxing is always easier before you’re overwhelmed or in crisis. Watch for the following signs of stress and then take action:
 - a. Physical: Restlessness, tense muscles, sore stomach, and headaches
 - b. Insomnia: Difficulty in relaxing or letting go of the day
 - c. Emotional: Feelings of irritability, anger, fatigue, listlessness, lack of enthusiasm, depression or anxiety
 - d. Cognitive: Forgetfulness, poor concentration, negative self talk
 - e. Relational: Isolation, distrust, reduced sex drive
 - f. Existential: Emptiness, loss of meaning, lack of direction

2. **Mini-vacations:** Don’t wait for your life to change, the weekend to begin, or your boss to be fired. Use the in between times in your workday to relax. When you’re walking from your office to a meeting, don’t rehearse what you’re going to say or do next. Let go of all thoughts and notice the feel of your feet on the floor, the tree out the window, or paintings on the walls.

3. **Negative thoughts:** All of us distort reality by believing in our negative thoughts even though they're working against us or others. Watch how your thinking can distort what's actually happening. Perhaps you tend to see things in black and white, hold yourself to standards of perfection, like to control events or people, or think you know what others think. When you notice warped thinking, stop and find a more balanced perspective.
4. **Take care of your body:** When you're stressed, exercise is often first to go. Even during crunch times, make space in your day to workout, do yoga, or just walk. Taking care of your body also means getting enough sleep and eating well.
5. **Live:** If all you do is work, your mood and self-esteem will inevitably rise and fall with it. Set limits on how many times you can cancel plans with your family or friends. Laugh! Take a few minutes to play hallway putt-putt golf, or talk about last night's episode of Friends even if stress demands you finish a report.
6. **Let go:** You can't do and be everything, and it's OK. Drop one of the balls you're juggling and the world will go on. No need to nag yourself about those bills you haven't yet paid. Set aside time to wrestle with your bank account instead of gnawing about it all day and night. Be flexible.
7. **Forgive yourself; forgive others:** You don't need to be anyone other than who you are right now. You don't blame a half-gallon milk carton for not holding a gallon. Extend the same courtesy to yourself and others. Start by forgiving yourself when you find again that you're stressed. There's no instant cure for it; think of stress as a condition such as diabetes that needs regular and continuing attention.
8. **Remember your values.** Hold onto your soul by keeping your own counsel about what is important to you. Set your priorities by what you believe, even if it means you accomplish less in other areas. Burning out because of a lack of balance, or a loss of self, is a greater risk to what you can accomplish in the long run, than being late once in a while or a little less perfect.
9. **Get help.** Talk to a friend. Develop your support system. If you continue to feel the need, talk to a counselor or physician. Stress is a common problem for which many caring professionals offer solutions.

You can read more about stress at work on the American Psychological Association website:
<http://helping.apa.org/work/index.html>.