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# HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS AT WORK

## IDENTIFY SIGNS OF STRESS IN EMPLOYEES

Individuals suffering from stress often display a range of signs that may be noticed by colleagues and other managers.

### THESE SIGNS INCLUDE:

- Tiredness and irritability
- Reduced quality of work
- Indecisiveness and poor judgment
- Loss of sense of humor
- Physical illness such as headaches, nausea, aches and pains
- Seeming jumpy or ill-at-ease, or admitting to sleeping badly
- Increased sick leave
- Poor timekeeping
- Changes in working day patterns - perhaps by staying late or taking work home

## SIGNS OF STRESS IN GROUPS

You should also look for signs of more widespread problems among groups of employees, for example:

- Arguments and disputes between staff
- General absenteeism
- An increase in grievances and complaints
- Greater staff turnover

## DEAL WITH YOUR OWN STRESS

Owner-managers and self-employed people need to learn to identify the signs of their own stress and take steps to tackle it.

Signs that you might be experiencing stress yourself could include:

- Poor judgement and indecisiveness
- Difficulty in concentrating
- A lack of assertiveness
- Irritability, aggressiveness, depression or loss of sense of humor
- Physical symptoms such as breathlessness, headaches, chest pains, nausea, sleeplessness, high blood pressure and constant tiredness

Stress can be magnified if you **work alone**. If you have no one to confide in, it can be easy for things to get out of proportion. This can be a particular problem for owner-managers who don't have the support of a management team and who may feel under pressure to work through periods of stress to ensure the continuity of the business. Although employees expect the managing director to know what to do in a given situation, you may in fact need help yourself. In addition, business owners often have significant capital invested in the business, putting added pressure on key decisions. One way of dealing with this is to network with people running businesses of a similar size to talk through each other's problems. You might even bring in a **mentor** to help you cope with the pressures of running your business.

## **HOW TO COPE WITH STRESS**

If you are suffering from stress, you try to:

- Identify and tackle the underlying causes
- Practice relaxation techniques
- Improve your diet and cut back where appropriate on smoking, alcohol and caffeine consumption
- Do regular exercise
- Avoid regularly working long hours if at all possible
- Make sure you take vacations

## **SEVEN KEY WAYS TO MANAGE STRESS AT WORK**

Work-related stress can cause major problems in a business. It could reduce productivity, lead to sickness absence and increase staff turnover. You have an obligation to ensure that your employees aren't made ill by their work, including stress-related illness.

Dealing with stress helps to ensure the wellbeing of your employees and yourself. Follow these tips to effectively manage stress.

1. Carry out a stress audit to find out if stress is a problem for your business. This can involve a questionnaire or talking informally to employees.
2. Look out for the signs of stress in employees. This can include irritability, increased sick leave and reduced quality of work.
3. Help staff priorities their workloads, and set realistic targets. Make sure that no employee feels they have too much or too little responsibility.
4. Make sure that staff take their vacation time.
5. Where possible give employees more control - allow them to plan their work schedule and decide how to tackle problems.
6. Be sympathetic when employees are suffering from personal-life stress such as an illness in the family or a bereavement. Offering flexible working arrangements can help.
7. As an owner-manager or self-employed person, it is important to deal with your own stress. You can try practicing relaxation techniques, living a healthy lifestyle and avoid regularly working long hours.

## IS STRESS A PROBLEM IN YOUR BUSINESS?

Carrying out a stress audit is one of the best ways to find out whether stress is a problem in your workplace.

A **stress audit** involves talking informally to staff to find out if they have any concerns. This can be either individually or in groups. Let employees know why you are carrying out the exercise and what you're trying to achieve - ie that you hope to prevent future problems or cure any existing ones.

If you have safety representatives, involve them in your plans and decision-making. Always respect the **confidentiality** of staff.

A useful exercise is to ask staff to list the three best and worst things about their job and whether any of these put them under excessive pressure.

You can also use questionnaires to gather the same information. Although there's a range of commercially available questionnaires, you may be better off developing your own **checklist** to fit the particular needs and working conditions of your business.

### THERE ARE A NUMBER OF KEY AREAS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER:

- Work scheduling and the type of work
- Working relationships with colleagues
- The level of communication and reporting
- The physical working environment
- Employees' expectations of their work

## 5 FUN STRESS MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Stress is something we all live with. For some it's miniature spurts of stress throughout the day, and for some stress is more chronic and long-lasting. Either way, there are plenty of fun ways to relieve stress.

It should go without saying, but stress is a huge problem in our everyday lives, and fun is a great way to relieve stress!

Fun provides a sense of eustress, which is the good kind of stress that keeps you feeling alive and well. Fun also provides an opportunity to cultivate a positive attitude that can help combat small instances of stress you experience daily.

It is also so easy to cultivate fun. While strategies for stress relief like going to the gym or booking a massage can be difficult and expensive to fit in, fun is something that can be achieved through any number of ways.

Here are **five fun stress management activities** to try the next time you're feeling stressed out!

## **1. ADULT COLORING BOOKS**

Have you heard of the new adult coloring book craze?

Art has a proven healing power, and is used across the world as an alternative therapy for patients facing tough diagnoses like cancer. While adult coloring books may not be considered a full art therapy, yet, they still provide great benefits for those looking to relieve stress in a fun way.

If you haven't tried adult coloring books yet, they are full of incredibly detailed pictures with a plethora of small spaces making up the larger images. When you color, it helps build focus as you concentrate on staying within the lines of each of the smaller spaces that make up the picture.

Inability to focus is often a symptom of stress, so this form of stress relief creates a fun way to attempt to alleviate the negative effects of stress. Coloring books provide an opportunity to focus only on the picture you are coloring, which in itself is a form of meditation.

In essence, those who color are occupying their mind with thoughts of creating a beautiful pictures, which replaces negative and stressful thoughts they may be having.

## **2. EAT DARK CHOCOLATE**

Eating dark chocolate is a fun way to relieve stress because it allows you to feel like you're getting away with one of your favorite foods, while also reaping some of dark chocolate's health benefits.

The flavanols found in dark chocolate have heart healthy properties that lower blood pressure and cholesterol, while also stabilizing coronary artery health.

During times of stress in our lives, our blood pressure instinctively rises in order to meet our brain's perceived need of assistance in addressing our stressor. In addition to promoting heart health ahead of our stress response mechanisms, dark chocolate works to lower the stress hormones found in our blood.

In a study of mock stressors, an interview and calculating a math problem in front of an audience, it was found that men who had consumed dark chocolate had lower levels of cortisol and epinephrine in their systems.

While dark chocolate holds powerful health properties, as always, it is important to consume in moderation.

## **3. PLAY**

Play is a little ambiguous, and can mean many things to many different people, but is such an important way to relieve stress in a fun way. As children, we most certainly knew the importance of play. Games and make believe scenarios (like pretend the carpet is lava!) help children flex their imaginations in positive ways for intellectual development and growth.

However, as we age we lose our passion for play. Time then gets devoted to homework, college applications, college homework, job applications, and then emails and work-related homework. Play loses its place in our everyday lives, we stop making time for creativity and we make more time for pressure.

Play is a state of mind, and can vary between taking improv classes to taking your dog to the park and engaging in a rousing game of fetch. Play, however, is not something that creates negative feelings of competition and additional stress in your life.

Play reduces stress hormones and helps clear your arteries. Adults need, deserve, and probably want play in their lives for stress relief, so you should make a concentrated effort to incorporate more of it into your everyday life - maybe even at work!

#### **4. FIND A FURRY FRIEND**

Play with a pet, or if allergies are a thing for you, follow some pet instagram accounts full of fluffy friends. Think of this as an informal pet prescription. How can you NOT be happy looking at this?

College campuses across the world, and several workplaces, hospitals, and nursing homes are integrating dog therapy as stress relief initiatives. **Petting your animals can release feel-good hormones for both of you**, while also reducing your personal heart rate.

When you talk to your pets, you probably typically use happy-talk, *“who’s a good boy?!”* and this positivity in your daily life leads to improved blood pressure rates.

Companionship is also such an important aspect of pets and animals as a fun way to relieve stress. Animals become important parts of our lives, and the importance of their relationships with us should not be discounted. The sense of being loved, and coming home to someone so happy to see you, is a great feeling that can help you displace negative feelings and emotions in your life.

Even if pet ownership isn’t in the stars for you, studies have shown that even brief encounters with animals can have tremendous stress relief benefits.

#### **5. JOT IT DOWN**

Transferring stressful thoughts from your head onto paper can help you take stock of the things that bother you the most. Consider spending a few minutes each day writing in a stress journal. Record key information about stressful events, including time of day, your reaction, and how you coped. After a couple of weeks, examine your journal to determine patterns that can help you identify triggers and solutions that may help you feel better.

#### **6. MOVE YOUR BODY**

The benefits of exercise extend far beyond physical fitness. In addition to boosting your heart rate, regular aerobic activities, such as swimming, walking, dancing, and cycling, also help your body release endorphins that can make you feel less stressed and more positive.

#### **7. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness experts suggest that **focusing completely on what you’re doing** can help reduce stress and worry. You can even turn everyday activities, like eating and drinking, into a mindfulness practice by thinking about the taste, texture, and aroma of each food or beverage as you consume them. Simple moments of mindfulness throughout your day can make you feel calmer and happier.

## **8. TAKE A FOREST BATH**

Forest bathing, or spending time outdoors in the woods, is a Japanese trend that's catching on in the U.S. Studies have shown that those who immerse themselves in nature tend to relax more, have lower blood pressure and stress-causing cortisol levels, and get sick less often. Research suggests that interacting with nature can relieve your stress by giving you a new perspective on any challenges you may be facing in your life.

## **9. REACH OUT TO A LOVED ONE**

If worrisome thoughts are racing through your head, call a friend or family member to talk about your concerns. Leaning on those you trust for advice, comfort, and reassurance can do wonders to reduce your stress levels.

While stress is a natural part of life, everyone deserves a calm and relaxing reprieve from their worries. Try these stress-relieving activities for adults to invite more peaceful vibes into your days.