



How to Survive Workplace Stress

The economy may be taking a battering right now, but how are employees and entrepreneurs holding up? Not too well, according to Neil Shah from The Stress Management Society (www.stress.org.uk).

“Workplace stress is on the increase during the credit crunch as people are decidedly nervous about their jobs in the foreseeable future. At the Stress Management Society the last six months have been our busiest ever in terms of the number of enquiries we’ve had, both from individuals needing help and companies wanting to find support for their stressed staff.

A major survey released in late 2008 also highlights this rise in stress at work with almost two thirds of 2,700 workers polled saying they felt more run down, stressed and prone to illness than they did three years ago.

At the same time, the current financial climate means that ‘luxuries’ like holidays or meals out are being cut from people’s budgets. Ironically these are often the very things that help us unwind and alleviate stress, thus compounding the problem.

But is this a real cause for concern? Isn’t pressure just part of the job? Within reasonable boundaries pressure is actually a positive driving force that ensures we keep pushing to be the best we can be. However too much, and pressure turns to stress which leads to poor decision making in the short term, and poor health in the longer term.

Stress effects

Under stress, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to ‘fight or flight’ mode and in response it releases a complex mix of hormones and chemicals to prepare the body for physical action. This causes a number of reactions, from blood being diverted to muscles to shutting down unnecessary bodily functions like digestion.

However workplace stresses are solved using sophisticated mental and social skills. Having a body pumped full of adrenaline won’t help you if you’re worried about profits, office politics or a frozen PC. It will only make it more complicated to form a measured and appropriate response.

Workplace stress is a major problem for business. Not only does it affect productivity and morale, it’s the second biggest occupational health problem in the UK after back problems. It’s also something Businesses should be tackling this problem with some urgency because not only does it reduce productivity, but it can also leave companies that don’t try to deal with the problem liable to legal action.

Workplace triggers

In current market conditions, a big stressor is the threat of redundancy. In turn this creates more pressure as people try to perform at top levels all the time. Yet at the very time they feel insecure about the future, they can’t discuss it easily because they don’t want to appear weak. Other factors



are unrealistic deadlines, heavy workloads, poor working conditions, unsupportive management or colleagues, and where people feel powerless over their working lives.

This can lead to a whole host of symptoms, from feelings of anxiety or depression, loss of interest in work, tense muscles, disturbed sleep, tiredness or poor concentration to loss of sex drive.

At work some might become more aggressive and confrontational and lack patience with colleagues or detailed tasks. Others might become withdrawn and non-communicative. However work habits almost certainly change, with people skipping breaks, working later or taking work home.

The good news

It may seem like a huge problem if you or people you work with are stressed. However in reality there is a lot you can do to help reduce the problem.

Individuals should:

- **Prioritize.** Write lists of your things to do and prioritize them into 'must dos' and 'nice to dos'. Put anything that's not essential to the bottom of your list, or see if someone else can take it on. Perhaps you could even drop it altogether?
- **Start saying 'no'.** You only have 24 hours in a day, so use them wisely. Turn down things that you don't have the time for or can't justify doing.
- **Go step by step.** Break large projects into small stages and take it one simple step at a time. This is a great way to start those huge projects that you keep putting off.
- **Communicate.** If you start to feel stressed on an existing job, tackle it early in a very matter of fact way. Say to the relevant person, "Given the work that's needed, I need another week" rather than rush in with a frantic "I can't cope!!!".
- **Create a good work/life balance.** All work and no play is a recipe for stress. So make sure you have a mixture of work and home activities in every week.

Employers should:

- **Take it seriously.** Tackling stress is part of your Health & Safety responsibilities and you are legally obliged to take action if you have such a problem at work.
- **Communicate well.** Keep employees in the picture about changes and finances. Be extra clear about job roles and targets, and be sensitive in the way you communicate.
- **Give feedback.** When you see someone doing something right, jump in with generous praise.
- **Remember the team.** Stressed people zone out others. So focus on creating good team spirit and get everyone involved. Organise company events out, even if it's a trip to the pub once a week at lunchtime. Being valued and involved like this is a major factor in happiness at work.



- **Ask for opinions.** People often feel stress when they are powerless over their job content. So if change is required, consult those involved so they can have a say in work-related decisions.

Three ways to stay stress free

1. **Exercise.** Endorphins released during physical exercise help burn off the hormones released when you are stressed like adrenaline or cortisol. Even a brisk walk round the block at lunch time will help, but try to get a total of 30 minutes of aerobic exercise (where you are working hard enough to increase your heart beat or raise a sweat) every day even if you split that into two or three chunks of activity.
2. **Take care of your body.** Eat quality meals at regular intervals to ensure a steady blood sugar supply. Keep well hydrated with water. Avoid stimulants like nicotine or caffeine (in coffee and chocolate). Get enough sleep to give your body time to repair and regenerate.
3. **Find a way to relax.** Don't just watch TV or play on the computer. Find an active way to relax. Try yoga, massage, aromatherapy or just sitting in a quiet room and listening to meditation music. Go to www.stress.org.uk for a free guide to stress management which includes yoga and massage techniques that you can do unobtrusively at your desk.

Neil Shah, Director, The Stress Management society,

The Stress Management society is one of the UK's leading authorities on stress management for individuals and companies. A not-for-profit organization, the Society advises people and employers across the UK on how to reduce stress, and is a member of the NHS's Mental Health Promotion sub-committee. See www.stress.org.uk or call 08701 999 235 for info.