

STRESS MANAGEMENT

How to Manage Stress at Work

Most of us can agree that modern work environments are stressful. Consider a person in this country with a spouse, two children, a threatening debt load, and a job with changing demands. This person is exposed to more information in a single edition of the Sunday paper than most people were exposed to in their entire lives only a couple of centuries ago.

While this seems inherently stressful, there are people who live this life, and others who live even more demanding lives, for whom life is an enjoyable, challenging endeavor. How do they do it, and is their approach something that the rest of us can benefit from?

The answer to the last question is a definite yes, qualified by the fact that managing stress does not mean a quick fix, take-a-pill-and-you'll-feel-better-in-the-morning, solution. The very notion that we can manage stress means that we embark on a process of being in harmony with ourselves, and understanding how we function as human beings. We have to reclaim our freedom every day.

Bad Stress

To understand what people do to manage stress effectively, one must first understand what stress is, and the principles that make work an enjoyable endeavor rather than drudgery. Researchers tell us that there are two types of stress – distress, and U-stress.

Distress can be labeled “bad stress”. A bad-stress situation is one that a person would like to change, but feels he can't, either in the present or in the future. Bad-stress also comes from patterns of thought that make a person feel hopeless and helpless. Put into the work context, a “bad-stress” situation is one in which there is a focus on an excessive number of things, a lack of closure, no clear rules for participation, no reasonably attainable challenging goals, no control over meaningful goal attainment, no feedback to tell a person how he is doing, and/or inadequate or inappropriate use of a person's talents. The result of chronic bad-stress is depleted energy reserves and depression of the immune system. In effect, a person in a bad-stress work environment gets sick and tired of being sick and tired, but can't or won't do anything about it.

Imagine working for a company in which you could never learn the rules. One in which you didn't know what you were supposed to be doing, weren't certain how to do it, and got feedback only when you made a mistake. Would this be a fun place to work? For most people this would constitute a stressful job. Contrast this with work situations in which employees are happy (i.e., – not stressed-out). The odds are that if you poked around the cubicles and production floor of these workplaces, you would find clear attainable goals, clear rules for desired and appropriate conduct, reward and feedback mechanisms that let employees know how well they are doing, and an effort to utilize employee talents. You

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would find ownership of outcomes along with access to the means of accomplishment. If you put yourself in this situation — or manage yourself in a manner that creates this kind of environment — and you'll soon find your stress level dropping.

Let's explore this further by looking at the "life is good" side of stress, U-Stress, and then looking at some strategies for reducing stress at work.

Good Stress

U-Stress, or "good stress" is the consequence of doing something enjoyable, which means doing something in which one loses oneself in the effort. Work experiences in which a person becomes so involved that he simply loses track of time are examples of U-Stress situations. Non-work activities, like jogging, gardening, and fishing are all examples of activities that can result in U-stress. These activities actually strengthen the immune system. It is worth noting that in these non-work activities, the goals are understood and attainable, there is an internal ownership of the goal, and there is feedback to let a person know whether or not he is making progress. These criteria also hold true for games, team sports, and work that is enjoyed.

Imagine watching or playing a football game in which the rules for play and rules for scoring kept changing haphazardly. Not only would there be no clear goals, but they would be unattainable, and the abilities of the players would be called into question. The game would quickly become a frustrating, confusing endeavor. When viewed in this way, it can be easier to see that U-stress is in many ways the opposite of distress.

It can be easier to see that the criteria that make play fun and enjoyable, can also make work enjoyable and lower stress.

Managing Stress

How can this background be used to manage the stress on the job? This question can be answered by taking a second look at the characteristics of stressful work:

- 1) Focus on an **excessive number** of things
- 2) Lack of **closure**
- 3) No reasonably attainable challenging **goals**
- 4) No **control** over meaningful goal attainment
- 5) Inadequate **feedback** to let us know how well we're doing
- 6) Inadequate or inappropriate use of **talents**

The concepts of focus on an excessive number of things and lack of closure are closely related. To understand how they impact us, it may be useful to borrow from psychological theory.

Psychologists tell us that when the human mind focuses on fewer than five things at once, boredom ensues. When the typical human mind focuses on more than nine things at once,

the mind experiences overwhelm. Somewhere in between boredom and overwhelm, is a comfortable range of focus, that of placing one's attention on five to nine separate issues. Herein lies the seed of successful time management and stress management. Let's explore how this information can be applied to manage time, reduce distress, and increase good stress in the work-day.

- 1) Take your mile-long to-do list and pull out the **top five items**. Ask yourself what would be the consequences if these things never got done. Perhaps an item doesn't matter at all. If getting these things done does matter, keep this smaller to-do list in front of you, and put the other forty-seven items in an "I'm going to get to these someday" file and forget about it until you complete the top five items. Next, clear your workspace of any clutter that distracts your attention.
- 2) The next step is to **plan your day**. Start by taking two blocks of time, ½ hour each, and scheduling them into your morning and your afternoon. These blocks represent dead space, or strategic reserve time and you need to schedule them into your day. Strategic reserve time allows you to recover when unexpected issues crop up and threaten to ruin your schedule. It allows you to gain a greater sense of control. Look at what is left of your schedule: If you don't have the luxury of focusing on just one item until it is completed, allot enough time for each task so that you can reasonably expect to make progress on each one. During the allotted time, work as consistently on that one item as your workplace allows.

In approaching work in this way, one can begin to make progress. One can begin to gain closure on some issues and experience greater U-stress. One can create a more comfortable mental environment.

Ideally management handles the remaining characteristics of a stressful work environment. When management does this, the work environment becomes a hospitable one, where workers are happier and want to belong. When this is not the case, you can reduce your stress by setting goals that matter to both you and your company, and that you in control of reaching.

It is also wise to ask the question "How will I know when I am in the process of attaining this goal?" and set up milestones that act as indicators of progress. If you can't tell if you are making progress, set smaller goals.

The difference in stress level difference between having the world on your shoulders and taking care of a smaller plot of land is immense.

Finally, let yourself know how well you are doing. When you do make progress, take time to reward yourself in a way that is meaningful to you.

