

## **Managing Workplace Stress**

Because we spend more waking hours at our jobs than anywhere else, it is no wonder that workplace stress can have such an impact on our overall health. Occupational stress has been called a global epidemic by the UN's International Labor Organization. Studies have found that 75 – 90% of chronic health conditions can be traced back to stress. Stress can impact every area of our life- our physical health, our mental health, and our relationships.

When we are under stress, our bodies release stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol). In the short-term, this can be beneficial. Stress hormones kick our bodies into overdrive- this is the "fight or flight response" which allows us to focus in, move faster, and tune out all other distractions. But when our bodies remain in an amped up stressed state, these same hormones begin to cause harm. Rather than a short term response to an immediate stressor, ongoing stress causes adrenaline and cortisol to continue to pump into our bodies- prohibiting a return to a calm state.

Unfortunately, many people find themselves in a state of ongoing stress at work. Factors that generate increased stress at work are demands to do more faster, uncertainty over job stability, or conflict with a supervisor or peer. Feeling constantly stressed at work has been linked to higher absenteeism, increased doctor's visits, and greater staff turnover.

We all know stress when we feel it. Stress can make us sick- quite literally. Physically, stress manifests through stomach issues, headaches, and muscle aches. Over time, chronic stress shows up in heart disease, high blood pressure, and adrenal fatigue. Stress also affects our mental health and can cause anxiety, depression, or extreme mental exhaustion. It is easy to remain distracted about work when at home and not have any leftover energy to invest in our relationships. When we remain in a constant state of stress our families and friendships suffer.

When in a stressed work environment, we may feel helpless to change anything. No wonder people who report high stress miss work at a greater rate than those under moderate to low stress.

Here are five suggestions for managing stress at work in a healthy way. First, focus on what you can change, not on what you can't. Rather than focus on the areas outside your control, identify something you can control and do something about it. Even small changes can have a big impact- choosing when to take your lunch, how to present a report, the way your desk is arranged. By identifying something you can change, you gain a sense of power in what otherwise can feel like a powerless situation.

Second, focus on yourself and not on everyone else. When we get caught up in everyone else's unhappiness, it can magnify our own. Instead, start taking care of yourself. Stop worrying about the daily gossip or the complaints of others. Also, don't allow a co-worker's performance – or lack thereof – to impact your attitude. Recognize that you are the only one you can control. Letting go of the frustration of what other people are doing or saying can be very freeing.

Third, if your stress comes from a difficult boss, try to put yourself in their shoes. Rather than becoming stressed over unreasonable expectations, consider the pressures they might also be under. Realizing your supervisor is also answering to someone can give you a new perspective on their demands of you. Consider whether there is a constructive way to address your concerns. If not, focus your attention on aspects of your job you enjoy rather than the boss that makes things difficult.

Fourth- don't take it personal. We can reduce our stress when we quit taking conflicts personally and instead develop a positive outlook. Being criticized for our way of handling a situation or job performance is never pleasant, but being able to see it as a part of the work environment and not a personal critique can free us from feeling personally attacked.

Finally, build a full life outside work. Rather than allowing work stress to deplete your time outside work, refocus on enjoying activities and relationships you can develop when away from work. Minimize the impact work is allowed to have on the rest of your life. By finding joy in life away from work, you are stronger emotionally to handle whatever work throws at you.

Let's face it – no matter where we work we are going to have workplace stress. Using these techniques may not make the stress go away, but it can help us to manage its impact. And feeling less stressed is good for us – mind, body and soul.

Emily Frazier, LCSW has a private practice in Murfreesboro, TN. She is a member of the Rutherford County Psychotherapy Association. Emily can be reached at [Emily@emilyfrazierlcsw.com](mailto:Emily@emilyfrazierlcsw.com) or 615-260-3883