

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 10 Tips to Help Reduce Workplace Stress Levels

How to Reduce Workplace Stress

A 40-year-old marketing executive, highly stressed from deadlines and problems at work, developed ulcers and saw his hair turn prematurely gray. One morning, he said, "I'm sick, not happy, getting old and not doing this anymore." He quit his job and sold his mini-mansion, BMW, plane and boat. He and his wife bought a Volkswagen camper and traveled across the U.S. looking for their next home. They eventually settled in York Beach, Maine, where he writes books and enjoys life. His hair has turned brown again.

A sales manager who enthusiastically accepted a position at a major corporation on his first day was greeted by hostile staff members. They were angry because he got the job they each wanted. The rejection felt like a personal defeat. He became depressed and anxious, lost weight and started arguing with his wife. "All of a sudden, I was unsuccessful at my work, and it played a number on my head," says the executive, who's now the president of a high-tech recruitment firm in Pleasanton, California.

What these two executives had in common was stress that affected their health and personal lives. Stress can be as debilitating as heart disease, cause as much time off from work as the common cold and is more far-reaching than cancer. The leading source of stress for adults is their jobs.

The workplace holds a plethora of anxiety-producers. Many are from unpredictable sources such as sudden job losses, relocations, losing co-workers to downsizings or having multiple bosses in quick succession.

To reduce stress brought by such changes, employees need to assess their skills periodically, learn new ones, participate in professional or trade associations and stay current on industry trends. "By maintaining employability and support systems, you can

be better prepared the next time your company downsizes, merges or changes focus," says Sue Aiken, chair of the graduate program in career development in the School of Management of John F. Kennedy University in Walnut Creek, California.

We can't eliminate stress, but there are ways to manage it. The following 10 tips can help you reduce your overall stress and ease specific sources of anxiety.

1. Maintain a sense of personal power. A study of high-pressure work environments by Essi, a San Francisco research firm, shows one factor that predicts which employees would become ill and which stayed healthy: people's perception of their personal power or lack of it. Personal power is defined as how much control you feel you have over your life, your ability to function and express yourself.

Ideally, your work environment will be an organization where colleagues and superiors listen to your problems and solutions and you're consulted when your role is redesigned, given the resources and information needed to perform the job and can contribute your ideas.

2. Practice effective communication. Communication is essential for preventing and easing tensions. Whether you head a team or are a team of one, how effective you are at communication depends on how well you understand others' verbal and nonverbal messages. Pay attention to co-workers' gestures, tone of voice and posture.

- 3.** Develop good working relationships. Trust, respect, understanding and compassion are necessary in any relationship. Co-workers have to function as a team and reach a common goal. But they often focus all their attention on their tasks and very little on how they treat each other.

Good work relationships will relieve stress and can buffer you from other stresses. Spend five minutes of each hour considering how to get along with your co-workers.

- 4.** Choose the right job. During interviews, ask the questions that help you make sure the job's right for you. Get a realistic picture of the company or department's culture, working relationships, problems and hidden agendas.

- 5.** Be flexible. Recognize and accept that things change. If you need to hold on tightly to the status quo, you need to loosen up. Think of your organization as a space ship. It's constantly correcting its course "to go where no man has gone before" in the marketplace. You have to change with it. Be proactive. You're in a better position to maneuver if you are primed and ready.

- 6.** Manage your anger. When you feel a surge of anger rising, back off and leave the scene as soon as you can. Repeat in your mind: "let go" or "relax." Breathe deeply until you feel your tension leave.

Ask what's the real reason for my anger? Gain perspective and plan your next step. Practice what you'll say and how you'll say it. Make sure you're calm and in control of your emotions. Approach the person with a win-win attitude and desire to resolve the problem and have a good working relationship.

- 7.** Have realistic expectations. Don't set yourself up for disappointment or put yourself on an emotional roller coaster. Try to be optimistic and realistic at the same time. This outlook doesn't mean you shouldn't have desires or expectations. Just make sure you're not always longing for the impossible.

- 8.** Adjust your attitude. Your attitude—how you make others feel about you and how you make them feel about themselves—can make or break your future.

How's your attitude? Do you complain the moment something doesn't suit you, or do you take things in stride? Try to see yourself through the eyes of others. Do you make others happy or miserable? If you need to, make an attitude adjustment.

- 9.** Tie up loose ends. Not being able to finish a task can be unsettling to those who like to shut doors and end sentences with a period. Most people need some kind of closure on projects, even the little ones.

If you're on a treadmill where you're always beginning new tasks before finishing old ones, make a list of what's left hanging. This exercise can make projects seem more manageable. How can you structure your time to tie up those loose ends?

- 10.** Take time to revive. People aren't built like machines. They can't run with their engines revved up continuously. Eventually they wear out. That's why there are coffee and lunch breaks. It's long been recognized that people need to take a little time off every few hours to revive. They return to their tasks with renewed enthusiasm.

If you can, try not to take work home. Every now and then a project may take some extra time, but work shouldn't be devouring your life.

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Gloria Dunn, president of *Wiser Ways to Work®*, is an organizational behavior specialist, consultant, trainer, speaker, and author of *From Making a Living to Having a Life*. Check out her free tipsheet: "5 Ways to Attract and Retain Top Talent," and sign up for her "10 Management Tips" series on www.wiserwaystowork.com.

Gloria can be reached by email at: gloria@wiserwaystowork.com.