Coping with stress at work

By Mayo Clinic staff

Coping with stress is easier when you identify your stress triggers, manage your time well, and take steps to curb job burnout.

Nowhere is stress more likely than in the workplace. Twenty-five percent of people say that their job is the primary stressor in their lives. Job stress can affect your professional and personal relationships, your livelihood, and your health. The good news is that you're not powerless. You can learn better ways of coping with stress.

The effects of stress

In small doses, stress is a good thing. It can energize and motivate you to deal with challenges. But prolonged or excessive stress — the kind that overwhelms your ability to cope — can take a severe psychological and physical toll. High stress levels have been linked to depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal problems, impaired immune response and cancer.

Your genes, personality and life experiences all influence the way you respond to and cope with stress. Situations and events that are distressing for most people might not bother you in the least. Or, you may be particularly sensitive to even minor stressors. The first step in coping with stress is identifying your stress triggers.

Some causes of stress are obvious — the threat of losing your job, for instance. But small, daily hassles and demands such as a long commute or difficult co-workers also contribute to your stress level. Over time, small, persistent stressors can wreak more havoc than sudden, devastating events do.

Tackle your stress triggers

To identify the factors causing you stress, try keeping a stress inventory: For one week write down the situations, events and people who cause you to have a negative physical, mental or emotional response. Give a brief description of the situation. Where were you? Who was involved? Also, describe your reaction. Did you feel frustrated, angry or nervous?
After a week, sit down and look at your stress inventory. Choose one situation to work on using problem-solving techniques. That means identifying and exploring the problem, looking for ways to resolve it, and selecting and implementing a solution.

Suppose, for instance, that you're behind at work because you leave early to pick up your son from school. You might check with other parents to see if your son can ride with them. Or, you might come in early, work through your lunch hour or take work home to catch up. The best way of coping with stress is to try to find a way to change the circumstances that are causing it.

**Improve your time management skills**

Work overload — feeling you have too much to do — is a common cause of job stress. You may not be able to affect the amount of work you have, but you can use time management to help you be more efficient and feel less under the gun. Try these tips to improve your time management skills and lower your stress level.

- Set realistic goals. Create realistic expectations and deadlines for yourself, and set regular progress reviews.
- Make a priority list. Prepare a list of tasks and rank them in order of priority. Throughout the day, scan your master list and work on tasks in priority order.
- Protect your time. For an especially important or difficult project, block time on your schedule when you can work on it without interruptions.

**Keep perspective**

When your job is stressful, it can feel like it's taking over your life. Try to maintain perspective. Here are some tips that can help.

- Get other points of view. Talk with colleagues or friends you trust about the issues you're facing at work. They may be able to provide insights or offer suggestions for coping. Just having someone to talk to can be a relief.
- Take a break. Make the most of workday breaks. Even 10 minutes of personal time can be refreshing. Similarly, take time off, whether it's a two-week vacation or just a long weekend.
- Have an outlet. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Make sure to spend time on activities you enjoy, such as reading, socializing or pursuing a hobby.
- Take care of yourself. Be vigilant about taking care of your health. Get regular exercise and plenty of sleep, and eat a healthy diet.

**Seek help**

If none of these things relieves your feelings of stress or burnout, try talking with a health care professional. He or she can help you assess your feelings and consider all your options. In some cases, the best solution to intolerable job stress may be finding a new job.