

Managing Stress at Work

Practice Guide



It is highly likely that you will experience some stress at work during your career. Alarmingly, Lifeline Australia states that 93% of adult Australians feel stressed and one in two Australians are experiencing a level of stress that could be making them sick. That means stress is very common and while low levels of stress may not feel too bad, and may even motivate or challenge you, persistent and frequent high levels of stress can lead to some serious long-term health implications.

What is stress?

Stress is a person's response to pressure. It can mean different things to different people because our bodies and minds have different ways of coping with the physical, mental and emotional strains or tensions that work and life puts on us.

Stress is a part of everyday life that is usually apparent when we see the signs and symptoms associated with stress. These signs can be physical, mental or emotional and include increased heart rate and blood pressure, and feeling sick and sweaty, anxious, nervous, angry or depressed. These signs and cues are very important as they are our body's way of letting us know that the situation is having a negative effect on us.

Many of the physical symptoms are the more obvious signs of stress, but the mental and emotional signs are often much harder to detect and recognise. Crying, being unmotivated, avoiding social situations, increased arguments and conflict, drinking or smoking excessively and being violent are all signs that there are underlying mental and emotional stressors in your life that need to be dealt with.

What causes stress at work?

There are many things that may cause you to feel stress at work. They include:

- Your physical environment – such as noise, uncomfortable working environment, poor safety or dangerous work conditions or a lack of breaks.
- Your job – such as tight deadlines, difficult or complex tasks, too much or too little to do, long or anti-social hours, isolation, lack of individual autonomy, strict performance expectations or regular critical incidents. It could be a lack of role clarity or not feeling confident in your role, especially if you lack training or leadership and peer support.
- Your workplace culture – such as strict or inconsistent rules, practices that differ from your own values and

beliefs, office politics, lack of good decision making, poor workplace communication or regular changes to your job and responsibilities.

- People – such as colleagues who are in conflict with you, bullying or harassment, poor and/or unsupportive management or unclear roles and responsibilities.
- Yourself – such as you put too many demands on yourself, are a worrier or a pessimist.

There are so many causes of workplace stress that it is impossible to name them all. Everyone is unique, but normally if you have just one or two of these stressors or triggers going on at the same time, you will very soon notice some physical and emotional symptoms of stress. Often, it's not a large or major event that causes stress; most people's stress is caused by a build-up of many things that little by little makes the workplace a stressful place.

Managing stress is not easy, but it is essential that you

- recognise stress
- take immediate action to reduce stressful situations
- develop strategies that help to maintain a healthy mind, body and spirit long term.

Below are ten tips to get you started. If all ten seem too many to implement at once, just start small and prioritise something that is going to make the biggest difference to your overall health and wellbeing.

Ten tips for managing stress

1 Manage your thoughts

Think about your personal responses to people and tasks at work. Choose to think more positively and confidently. Challenge your negative thoughts and perspectives if you are feeling discouraged, overwhelmed or anxious. Taking control of your thoughts can make an enormous difference and help you to slow down and even change your negative reactions to a situation or stressor.

2 Name your feelings

Don't judge yourself for the emotions you feel, but learn to recognise these emotions and understand them. Your emotions are very powerful and they can lead to you saying and doing some negative and unexpected things. If you are feeling upset, sad or angry, for instance, name what that feeling is and then ask yourself why you might be feeling that way. Is it a valid feeling and it is a helpful feeling? If it's not, then tell yourself what would be more reasonable, valid or helpful.

Managing Stress at Work

Practice Guide

3 Implement stress management strategies

Taking regular breaks, having boundaries and saying 'no', anger management, taking regular exercise and eating nutritious food are all examples of the strategies that can reduce your stress. But don't change everything about your habits and lifestyle all at once. Write out an action plan of all the things you need to do and change, then begin to implement them over a sensible period.

4 Develop your coping skills

Problem-solving skills, assertiveness, time management and interpersonal skills are extremely important as they help you cope with the demands of your work. They help you get on better with people, find social support and manage the challenges of your role and responsibilities.

5 Self-care, don't self-medicate

Some people find that when under stress, they use comfort food, medication, alcohol or drugs to gain temporary relief. The problem with this is that these solutions only mask the problem and people can often end up addicted to these unhealthy ways of coping. As an alternative, 'self-care' is when you choose activities that promote your health and wellbeing. Activities can include exercise, meditating, dancing, having a massage, reading a book, walking, volunteering or visiting a friend.

6 Organise your work better

If you feel that you have too much work, or you are feeling stretched or overwhelmed, then you may need to organise your work better. Think about some ways that will make you feel more organised, in control and efficient. Make lists, prioritise your tasks, delegate wherever possible, keep your desk clean, schedule once or twice a day to check your email, keep meetings short and focussed, skim read. These are all tips that can help you plan to have better control of your work and stressors.

7 Enjoy your job

Even though you may not have the authority to change your work role, think about what you do have the ability to do to ensure that your job gives you meaningful, stimulating, and interesting work that utilises your strengths and skills. Speak with a supervisor to get their input and approval if required.

If necessary, find ways of getting new experience and skills so you can change your job.

8 Make support a priority

Too often, people don't want to share how they are feeling with their colleagues or manager. This means they are often coping alone with the pressures of work, which makes it harder to address the situations or stressors. The problem is that if stress is left unacknowledged for too long, it can feel like the situation is unsolvable and this leads to sickness and burn-out. So don't wait till the signs and symptoms are too severe. Look for ways and opportunities for social interaction with your supportive colleagues (avoid the negative ones), ask your manager for either internal or external support, and never ever be embarrassed about seeking help.

9 Make time to relax and enjoy life

Work-life balance has become a bit of buzz word, but there are a lot of merits in learning how to positively juggle the demands of your work and your private life. Making time to be with your family, friends or social events can help you relax and recharge. Aim to minimise the time spent on rushing around or doing unproductive tasks and schedule more time for hobbies and pastimes that have nothing to do with work. If possible, negotiate some flexible hours with your manager, work from home one day a week or take a Friday afternoon off once a month to go for a swim, massage or game of golf. It's very important to not feel guilty about making time for yourself because research shows that good work-life balance increases your ability to be productive at work, and reduces your stress and likelihood of being absent from work due to sickness.

10 Be open to change

The fears we have that are associated with 'change' are a common source of stress. If change makes you anxious, frustrated or worried about the future, then you are not alone! You have the option of letting those fears oppress you, or making a decision to be more willing to learn, change and adapt. Start by asking more questions and thinking about how changes at work are going to benefit you. Become more open-minded, embrace the unknown and see change as an opportunity.

Ruth Knight is a researcher, change facilitator and trainer. Ruth helps organisations to improve their organisational and workforce performance.

Read more practice guides at www.zarkconsultancy.com

