

MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

Stress is a part of every job. Left unchecked, however, workplace stress can have a negative impact on an individual's personal and professional lives. Stress can begin as a minor annoyance, but can progress and result in serious impairment. This guide will provide tips for identifying and managing work-related stress, as well as information on where to find additional help.

1. Identifying Work-Related Stress

Stress can manifest itself in many ways. Some of the more common symptoms of stress include:

- Sleep disturbances (too much or too little sleep)
- Change in appetite (eating too much or too little)
- Short temper (irritability, anxiety, depressed mood)
- Disturbed relationships with family and friends (social withdrawal, marital discord)
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol ("self medicating" to cope)
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, teeth grinding, or stomach/digestive problems (difficulty concentrating, procrastinating)
- Job dissatisfaction (burnout)

Regarding job dissatisfaction, it is also important to understand whether your stress is being caused by your specific position and work atmosphere (e.g., you are dealing with job insecurity or conflict with coworkers), or whether you would react to workplace stressors in the same way no matter what your position. This will determine how you ultimately manage your stress. Namely, if your stress is caused by concerns over job insecurity or another position-specific reason, you may want to consider looking for a new job.

2. Dealing with Work-Related Stress

The following are some recommended methods for preventing and alleviating work-related stress:

- Understand What Triggers Your Stress. Being aware of what types of workplace situations cause you to feel stress will allow you to better manage your stress. Consider keeping a journal of the times at work when you feel most stressed and your reaction to those situations (e.g., anger, nervousness). You may recognize patterns that allow you to avoid, or at least mitigate the effects of, stressful scenarios. For example, if conflicting work deadlines are a major source of worry for you, you may want to work on time management.
- Take Care of Yourself. This may sound basic, but our bodies are the first thing we neglect when we are busy at work. Skipped meals (or consumption of junk food), inadequate sleep, and lack of exercise are all the unfortunate by-products of busy office jobs, and can aggravate stress symptoms. Even though it may not always be feasible, you should make it a priority to eat regular, balanced meals, get the sleep you need (which may include avoiding excessive caffeine intake), and maintain an exercise routine.

- Managing Stress While at Work.

1. *Time Management.* Although someone in the legal profession may not always be able to control the amount of work he or she has, good time management skills can help a person be more efficient and less likely to run up against deadlines, thus reducing that person's stress level. Simple steps such as setting realistic goals for yourself, prioritizing the tasks on your "to-do" list, and being honest with your superiors about your workload and your ability to take on new work can help you make the most of your time and prevent you from getting overloaded.
2. *Have Colleagues You Can Trust.* Having friends and mentors at work can be very helpful in working through stressful work situations. Trustworthy colleagues will understand what you are going through and can provide valuable perspective, particularly if your stress is caused by feelings of inadequacy at your job. Friends at work can also provide insights and suggestions for coping with coworker conflicts. Note that serious conflicts should always be discussed with someone in your human resources or legal personnel department.
3. *Take a Break.* Sometimes taking a short break is the best way to avoid feeling overwhelmed at work. Try getting up from your desk and doing some gentle stretches or, better yet, stepping outside for some fresh air (and maybe some sunshine). Basic breathing or meditation exercises can also provide relief during a particularly stressful workday. Examples of such exercises can be found at www.webmd.com and in the book "Mindfulness For Beginners" by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

3. How to Find a Better Balance

A key component in managing workplace stress is finding a balance between your life at work and your life outside of work.

- Don't Spend Unnecessary Time at the Office. Again, this may sound obvious, but one way to find a better balance in your life is to spend less time at your desk at work. Some attorneys, especially those just starting their careers, often feel the need to spend as many hours as possible at the office. However, this may increase your stress levels as well as your risk of burning out. The following are a few simple steps you can take to spend less time at the office:
 1. *Arrive early, before your colleagues.* You will be especially productive and efficient at the beginning of the day when there are no phone calls or meetings being held.
 2. *Leave the office once you have finished your tasks for the day.* Even if there are still items on your "to-do" list, you may cause yourself unnecessary stress if you frequently work late into the night on non-urgent projects.
- Develop Coping Skills
 1. Recognize – Watch for the warning signs of stress
 2. Restrain –yourself from negative thinking, blaming, feeling like there is nothing you can do

3. *Reverse* – Change what you can (yourself) and let go of what you can't change
 4. *Resilience* – Build your resilience to stress by focusing on self-care and what is within your control to change
- *Have Hobbies.* *Hobbies can be a wonderful way to decompress after a stressful workday.* While it is fine to relax in front of the television, it can also be beneficial to spend time doing something constructive that you enjoy and that also allows you to use skills you don't use at work. You may choose to cultivate a hobby that you have enjoyed in the past, but it always great to try something new. Your primary goal should be to get your mind off of work. For ideas and classes related to hobbies, visit the 92nd Street Y at www.92y.org. Also, LifeLabs New York and 3rd Ward offer one-time classes and workshops that can kick-start a hobby or at the very least provide you with a fun diversion (visit www.lifelabsny.com or www.3rdward.com).

4. Symptoms of Stress Not to Ignore

Occasionally those suffering from stress will exhibit serious symptoms that do not respond to self-treatment. If you experience any of the following, it is best to seek help from a medical professional:

- Weight loss and/or severe gastric problems
- No sleep or too much sleep
- Panic attacks (sometimes characterized by difficulty breathing, nausea, hot flashes or chills, rapid or irregular heartbeat, chest pain, and/or a feeling of extreme fear or detachment)
- Severe fatigue
- High blood pressure
- Inability to get out of bed/taking excessive time off from work
- Depression and/or suicidal thoughts

5. Where to Find Help

Whether your stress is mild or severe, there is no need to suffer alone. The following are some resources for those struggling with workplace stress:

- New York City Bar Lawyer Assistance Program. The New York City Bar Lawyer Assistance Program is a free and confidential service available to attorneys, judges and law students in New York City who are struggling with stress, depression or anxiety, substance abuse, and other issues. The Program offers referrals, counseling, peer support, as well as other valuable services. **For assistance or additional information call the help line at 212-302-5787.**
- Columbia Referral Line. The Columbia Department of Psychiatry offers a free, confidential referral service for those seeking mental health or other medical services. The line is open 24 hours a day. During business hours on weekdays, the line is staffed by a doctor in order to direct callers to the services within the New York-Presbyterian Hospital system best suited to their particular needs. **For assistance or additional information call 212-305-6001.**
- Reading Materials:

- ***“Stress Management for Lawyers: How to Increase Personal and Professional Satisfaction in the Law” by Dr. Amiram Elwork***
- ***“:60 Second Stress Management” by Dr. Andrew Goliszek***
- ***“The Book of Stress Survival” by Alix Kirsta***
- ***“The Relaxation Response” by Herbert Benson, M.D.***

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