

Strategies to Manage Stress

Unit

2

Unit 2

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Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Change the situations and actions that can be changed
- ✓ Deal better with situations and actions that can't be changed

Mental Strategies

Changing Ourselves

Now that we know what stress is, let's talk about some general strategies that we can use to manage it. This afternoon, we'll look at some more specific factors.

These three factors impact our ability to manage stress:

- Personality
- Nature of organization
- Quality of support

Which of these three can we influence?

Personality

It's true that we can't change our personality, although we certainly have influence over ourselves and we can make some small changes by making different choices. For example, if we are very impatient with other people, we can learn to be a little more patient with them. Impatient people can alienate others, and they run the risk of having very small social circles. Learning some tactics to curb our impatience could improve our lives tremendously.

Nature of Organization

We can't change the organization we work for, either, unless we own it, but we can influence the mood and atmosphere there. If the stress is unbearable and we cannot exert the influence we'd like, we can also change jobs. That is a drastic measure to be sure. However, assess what makes your workplace such a toxic environment. Is it the work or is it the people? Can the stress be partly attributed to your reaction to what is happening? If your workplace is truly too demanding, then save yourself and find another place to work.

However, if you are stressed out because nobody has ever told you what is expected of you, then talk to your supervisor about what they expect of you. If you feel like you need more training to do your job, ask for training. Perhaps you can find a mentor, or a buddy, or perhaps your company will send you to external training. You won't know if you do not ask.

Quality of Support

One thing we can always change is the nature of the supportive relationships we have. This can be done in very strategic ways, even though they may require that you function outside your comfort zone.

- We can develop relationships at work, socially, and at home.
- We can reach out more often to both friends and family.
- We can strengthen relationships. To do this, we can ask for and offer help.
- Keep in mind that relationships are reciprocal so be a better friend or supporter yourself, and develop a wider circle of support.

The Triple A Approach

Choosing an approach that works for you means that you are accepting the role you play in managing your own stress. When we have situations that cause our stress levels to rise, there is a choice-based approach that we can apply to almost everything. We can alter or change the situation, figure out how to avoid the situation, or accept the situation and alter our response to it.

Alter

Sometimes this is the most promising strategy. Let's say you are always stressed when you are going to be late for a meeting. Change the situation by setting an alarm so you will leave five or ten minutes earlier than you usually do. Write the appointment down with a 15-minute cushion. For example, if you have a meeting that starts at 2:30 p.m., and it is in the building next door which is a 10-minute walk, make sure that you write the walking time into your appointment calendar. And make sure that you don't accept a meeting invitation that will take you right up to 2:30 p.m.

Here's another example: Every time your mother-in-law comes for a visit your hackles rise and you are in a bad mood the whole time she is there. How might you alter that situation? You could speak with your partner and make reservations for her to stay at a nearby hotel, buy a bouquet of flowers for her room so you start off on the right foot, or try to get to know her better. If this is a longstanding tough relationship and you've never talked to her about it, perhaps now is the time to do so.

Avoid

On the other hand, that mouthy neighbor may be somebody you can avoid altogether. Don't get drawn into a conversation with them, and if they try to talk with you, let them know you have somewhere else to be. If cheese gives you a migraine, avoid it. If your car needs maintenance before it falls apart, avoid calamity by getting it looked after. Forcing ourselves into situations that contribute to our stress, when we really don't have to be in

those situations at all, is masochistic. (By the way, don't decide to avoid your mother-in-law altogether. That just transfers the stress you feel onto your spouse and that isn't fair.)

Accept

There are some things in life, like taxes, that are unavoidable so we may as well accept these situations with good grace. Being grateful that you make enough money to pay taxes puts the annoyance of taxes into another light. There are plenty of things that annoy people that others simply accept. Let's say going to the dentist makes you stressed. Accept that and deal with it accordingly. Play music before you go or do some meditation. Let your dentist know how you are feeling, and let them reassure you that they treat all their patients as if they don't want to be there and have set up their practice to make you as comfortable as possible. If that's still not helping, remind yourself that dental health is linked to heart health, and accept the benefits of what you are doing.

Stress at Work

The Stress Tax

Do you work in a stressful environment? Is it what you would consider a “reasonable” amount of stress, or does it seem that there is more stress in your organization than others?

Costs of stress on the job can include:

- Errors
- Absenteeism
- Conflict
- Low morale
- High staff turnover
- Poor decisions/no decisions
- Accidents

What are the symptoms of stress overload, when our bodies have responded too many times to the "fight or flight" call?

- High blood pressure
- Risk of heart attack
- Risk of a stroke
- Risk of diabetes
- Headaches and migraines
- Always tired
- Always angry
- Not feeling much of anything (shutting things out)

Stress Inventory

Inventory

Rate each statement as it applies to you on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 meaning never, 2 rarely, 3 sometimes, 4 often, and 5 always.

Score	Statement
	My job description and responsibilities are not clear to me.
	My job description and responsibilities are not clear to others.
	I often disagree with others at work.
	I have trouble identifying what my priorities are.
	I feel like my workload is too heavy or too light.
	I do not get regular feedback from my supervisor.
	I do not have input in work-related decisions.
	I feel isolated from the people I work with.
	I do not have any friends at work.
	I do not feel secure in my job.
	I feel over or under qualified for my job.
	I do not get enough support at work.
	When I have questions or need help, I do not have any resources.
	I react to issues that come up, rather than planning my work proactively.
	I have too much or too little supervision.
	This position is not on my career path.
	I keep quiet about my discontent.
	I am over or under paid.
	My organization's leadership changes often.
	I spend a lot of time on meaningless tasks.

Score	Statement
	I am tired at work.
	I get upset at work.
	I snap at others.
	I have chronic health problems (such as insomnia, headaches, digestive issues, etc.).
	I can't stop thinking about work.
	I find it hard to concentrate at work.
	I dislike interacting with clients.
	I feel like I have a negative or pessimistic attitude.
	I don't know what to do to improve my situation.
	My family and/or friends have commented that I seem unhappy.
	TOTAL

Scoring

- **Below 30:** You have very little job stress. Most people can manage this level of stress and are not likely to burn out.
- **31-60:** You have a low amount of job stress. Most people manage this level of stress and will not burn out. However, this inventory might identify areas of concern. Make sure to address issues before they become chronic problems.
- **61-90:** You have a moderate amount of job stress and are at risk of burning out. Look at the items of concern in the inventory and take action.
- **91-120:** You have a high level of job stress. If you aren't burnt out already, you will be soon. Start working with your supervisor or human resources team to develop an action plan and reduce your stress.
- **Over 120:** You have an extreme level of job stress and are likely burnt out. Take action to reduce your stress and improve your working environment immediately.

Finding Some Solutions

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Stress Logging

If you find that you feel very stressed at work, and you're not sure why, it can be useful to keep a stress log for a week to see what's going on. Include the follow items:

- Write the date at the top of each day.
- Write the time and what happened.
- Rate the event on a scale of one to ten, where one is a minimum of stress, five is, "I feel like I need a break," and ten is, "I'm going to blow a gasket."
- Leave room for any comments or thoughts.

Here is an example.

Monday, June 15			
Time	Event	Rating	Comments
8:15 a.m.	Stuck in traffic	3	Why did I get so upset and let this ruin my morning?
10:30 a.m.	Bob messed up his report, so my report will be delayed	8	
12:05 p.m.	Pizza shop messed up my order	8	I really overreacted at the cook. ☹️
3:30 p.m.	My manager complained about my late report	6	
5:15 p.m.	Was late leaving the office and picking my son up	5	Luckily his babysitter is nice!

Once you have logged your stressful events, you can do something about them using the Triple A approach we discussed earlier. For example, if you got stuck in traffic four out of five days and that caused you stress, you may need to find a different route to work or leave at an earlier time to get ahead of the rush.