

## Six Steps to Reducing Work Stress

### Healthy Lifestyles Report

One in three Canadians say work stress is getting them down.<sup>1</sup> Can you relate? If so, there are ways to deal with the causes of stress and develop proactive strategies to help you reduce your stress and anxiety levels. Of course, not all stress is bad stress.

### What is stress?

Stress is a natural reaction to any change where an adjustment or response is required. The body reacts through physical, mental or emotional responses. Stress may result when life or work related demands exceed the perceived internal and external resources required to satisfy the need. Stress may also occur when events or demands in our lives stretch us to new levels of functioning.

As school begins, the unique circumstances, the changes to protocols and procedures and the changes to your preparation for lessons, activities and interactions with both staff and students, you may experience varying levels of stress throughout the school year.

We understand managing work place stress is difficult, regardless of your role and how you contribute and interact in professionally. The key is to determine the right amount of stress, so you have the energy, enthusiasm and drive to move forward, while not taxing your physical and mental well-being.

### Why is reducing stress important to your overall health?

Stress can have negative effects on your overall health. When stress becomes unmanageable, it can cause physical, behavioural, and psychological challenges, which inevitably

impact your ability to perform organizational duties. These stresses have a variety of symptoms that can lead to more severe problems, if left unchecked.

**Physical.** When you are stressed, it can impact your physical well-being. Stress reactions can range in symptoms such as loss of sleep, upper respiratory or digestive problems, to more life threatening conditions such as elevated blood pressure, hypertension, or coronary heart disease.

**Behavioural.** Stress reactions can take a variety of forms, including nervous habits and tics (e.g. nail-biting), increased smoking or alcohol consumption, and negative health-related behaviours (e.g. reduced activity levels).

**Psychological.** Reactions to stress may have negative effects on your mood (e.g. depression, anxiety or aggression), lower your tolerance and patience levels as well as disrupt your cognition (e.g. inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, lack of attention to detail).

**Organizational.** Some of the most common individual outcomes of stress include increased absenteeism, decreased performance, and reduced employee engagement, which may lead to increased accident rates, increased interpersonal conflict, impaired communication, and flawed decision-making within the organization.

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Ultimately, any of these reactions can be devastating to both employee and employer. Remember, if you are beginning to feel symptoms of stress, use the strategies below to help alleviate your stress at work.

## Step 1: Change your thinking

How you think has a profound effect on your emotional and physical well-being. Each time you think a negative thought about yourself, your body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation.

### Use the tools below to change your thinking:

- **Re-framing your perspective** can reduce your stress by looking at challenging or difficult situations as opportunities to overcome. People who practice re-framing tend to look at “problems” as opportunities, pausing, assessing the scenario and regrouping in the moment to formulate a solution.
- **Focus on the positive** when stress begins to influence your mood and productivity. Take a moment to reflect upon the positive aspects of your life and profession and celebrate your milestones.

## Step 2: Manage your feelings

It is important to realize that managing your feelings not only impacts your stress level, but also those around you. Stepping back from stressful situations and thinking about the solution can help you move away from the emotional reaction, and allow you to deal with the task at hand.

### Here are some exercises to manage your feelings:

- **Learning to express your feelings** in a controlled manner is a skill that takes time to master. If you are encountering difficulty with something or someone, communicating your concerns in an open and respectful way is an important step in reducing stress. Being proactive in your approach when dealing with difficult situations reduces the risk of building resentment and sustained stress.

**Take a deep breath.** Breathing exercises are a simple and very effective way to reduce stress and manage your feelings. This can be done anywhere, and it only takes a few seconds out of your day. Taking deep breaths during stressful situations can help your brain switch from a stressed state to a relaxed and calm demeanor, re-energizing body and mind.

## Step 3: Learning to relax

Relaxing during challenging or uncomfortable moments can be difficult, but it is possible by taking small steps to keep you grounded during your work day. From the moment you wake up,

to commuting to work, to managing your workday, there are little things you can be doing to help your body relax and focus.

### Here are some steps that may help you relax:

- **Cutting back on caffeine.** This may seem like an impossible task for those who feel they need a caffeinated beverage in order to function. However, it is important to know that caffeine increases the production of the stress hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is often associated with the reaction called “fight-or-flight”, where your body has a physiological reaction due to perceived harm or threat. By substituting caffeine with herbal teas, juices or water, you can lower your cortisol levels, allowing you to relax more easily.
- **Meditation at work.** Using scheduled breaks for meditation is a simple but effective method to relax your mind and body. Find a comfortable place, close your eyes, clear your mind and begin to take deep breathes. If your workplace is noisy, try sitting in your car or closing the office door to minimize external stimulation. Repeating a mantra or creating a rhythm or pattern can help you stay focused. Think of a mantra - a positive, inspiring word or phrase. For example, “Life is Beautiful.” Practicing meditation regularly can lead to deeper levels of relaxation, which can enhance your energy and increase your level of concentration and your overall feeling of well-being.
- **Listen to music.** Where permitted and not being disruptive to others, use headphones and listen to music you enjoy. This can be a great way to let go of stress and put you in a positive mood. Using music to reduce the surrounding noise of your workplace can help you focus on the task at hand and minimize the distractions of your environment.

## Step 4: Staying connected to purpose and meaning in life

When stress begins to take over your life, it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture. It often feels like everything around you is going wrong and there is no end in sight. Although this is often not true, the feeling of being stuck in your predicament can be overwhelming.

### Here are some tactics to use to alleviate stress in those situations:

- **Keep the big picture in perspective.** Remind yourself of what is important; will it matter in a month, or a year? Some people use the “five by five rule”; if it’s not going to matter in five years, don’t spend more than five minutes being upset by it.

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- **Clarify expectations that others have of you.** If your job expectations are not clear, or if the requirements of your work constantly change, stress and anxiety may build up. Consider speaking with your supervisor to clarify expectations and establish strategies to meet your job requirements.
- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control, particularly the behaviour of others. Rather than stressing over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to perceived problems.

## Step 5: Time management

Everyone has moments when they feel like there just isn't enough time in the day. Using time management skills and tactics can greatly reduce stress at work.

### Here are some common practices in time management:

- **Take time to plan ahead.** When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. Planning ahead and making a list allows one to visualize what needs to get done and what is of priority. Having an agenda or online calendar can help with planning and time allocation.
- **Re-evaluate your goals and prioritize them.** Make a list of tasks you need to complete. Review your list and tackle each item in order of priority. Try to leave a portion of your day free for unexpected tasks or emergencies. Identifying goals and priorities in groups of "complete today", "nice to have", and "ongoing" can help with organization and makes your list more manageable.
- **Do one thing at a time.** Multi-tasking (e.g. working on a report while speaking on the phone) may seem like a good strategy but it doesn't usually improve productivity, efficiency, or accuracy. Focus on doing one thing at a time and doing it well. This will minimize errors, reducing the need for corrections and updates.

- **Waking up early.** Give yourself an extra 15 minutes each morning. By getting up earlier, you won't feel as rushed and your state of mind will be calmer. You can use this time to create your to do list, or spend time with your family.

## Step 6: Getting active

Being active is important to reducing stress and living a healthy life. When participating in physical activity your body creates endorphins, chemicals in the brain that act as natural stress reducers.

### Here are some simple strategies to get active:

- **Morning exercises.** Doing exercises in the morning can have a positive effect on one's stress levels throughout the day. Findings suggest that getting 20 to 40 minutes of aerobic activity can result in a reduction of stress levels for several hours.<sup>2</sup>
- **Walk at lunch.** A brisk walk at lunchtime can help you blow off steam, lift your spirits, and get you into better shape. Take short breaks during the day to stretch and increase your blood circulation. If you are unable to walk at lunch, try parking further away from the entrance, or take the stairs rather than an elevator.
- **Sleep.** It may be obvious, but getting a restful night's sleep helps you cope better with the stresses of the day and prepares you for tomorrow. If you have difficulty sleeping, adjust your evenings and try an earlier bedtime.

Remember, you aren't alone. Many people face work related stress. Taking small steps each day to reduce your work related stress will benefit your overall health in the long run.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> What's stressing the stressed? Main sources of stress among workers. (2015, November 27). Retrieved February 17, 2017, from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2011002/article/11562-eng.htm#a2>

<sup>2</sup> Edenfield, T. M., Dr, & Blumenthal, J. A., Dr. (2011). The Handbook of Stress Science. Retrieved February 17, 2017, from <https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=EXVlk&pnEIKIC&oi=fnd&pg>

