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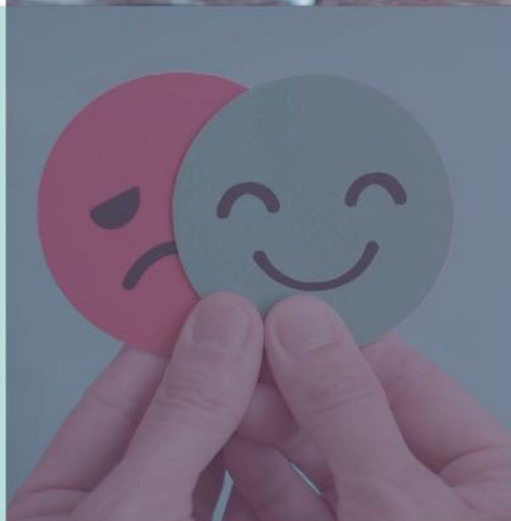


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DEALING WITH WORK STRESS



It's normal—even helpful—to experience some stress at work. The right level of stress can sharpen your thinking and motivate you to do good work. However, too much stress, endured for too long, can be draining. It can be bad for your health, your relationships, and the quality of your work. Also, your reactions to excess stress can have a negative effect on the people around you.

How can you deal with unhealthy and unproductive work stress? Here are some tips.

Recognize the warning signs of excess stress.

The first step in dealing with stress is learning to recognize its warning signs. Excess stress affects your body and mind. Without knowing its signs, stress can build gradually to the point where you're paralyzed with anxiety, lash out in anger at coworkers, or feel like you can't succeed.

So, pay attention to the signs of work stress. These may include physical signs, such as:

- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Trouble sleeping
- Low energy or fatigue
- Rapid heart rate

They can also include mental and emotional signs, such as

- Apathy and loss of interest in work
- Trouble concentrating
- Anxiety, irritability, or feelings of depression
- Misuse of alcohol or drugs

Identify your stress triggers.

As you become more attuned to the signs of stress, make an effort to identify what causes your stress level to rise. This might be obvious: a long stretch with extra work, worry about the possibility of layoffs, or tense relationships with coworkers or your manager. There may also be triggers to your stress that you haven't recognized, things that might bother you more than other people—perhaps because of your past experience or simply your particular personality.

As an exercise, keep notes for a week or two on when you feel an extra level of stress and what might be triggering those reactions:

- Where were you and what were you doing just before your stress level started to rise?
- Who were you interacting with?
- What were you thinking and feeling?

These notes, and your reflections on them, can help you identify your unique stress triggers.

DEALING WITH WORK STRESS

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Once you've identified your most important stressors at work, think about how you might deal with them. For each stressor you identify, write down steps you might take to address it in a positive way. That might mean getting a better handle on your workload to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Or it might mean learning to recognize and control negative thinking or irrational fears.

Reduce work stress by taking care of yourself.

If stress from work is having a negative effect on your work output, your health, your relationships, or your life outside of work, it's time to step back and pay attention to your basic needs:

- Get moving. Physical activity is important to your health and is one of the most effective stress reducers. Take a walk during a break in the workday—even if it's just for five minutes—to interrupt a feeling of rising tension. Build more physical activity into your daily and weekly schedule.
- Sleep well. Adopt healthy sleep habits to get more rest. That means a regular bedtime and no work or electronic devices as you wind down for sleep.
- Build healthy eating habits. Avoid stress-driven eating, which can lead to weight gain and swings in blood sugar and energy. A regular schedule of healthy meals and snacks can help keep your emotions on an even keel.
- Make time for fun and social connections. Your emotional health is tied to your physical health, and it is important for sustained work performance. Include your own emotional needs in your priorities.

Learn to relax.

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned. When you feel tense from work stress, practice relaxation techniques that work for you. These might include

- Deep breathing to restore a feeling of calm
- Progressive muscle relaxation to intentionally relax your body and mind
- Mindfulness or meditation to pull your thinking out of a cycle of worry and restore an ability to focus
- Listening to calming music

Take quick relaxation breaks at work or use a relaxation transition as you begin and end the workday.

Sharpen your focus at work.

If your stress is coming from feelings of overwork or a lack of control over your work, think about ways you might regain control, confidence, and calm:

- Work with your manager to set realistic goals and expectations. If particular aspects of your work are causing more stress than others, it might be a sign that you need more training on those tasks. Or perhaps work on the team might be shifted so that you and other team members focus more on what you enjoy and are good at.
- Prioritize to focus on the most important work—the work that will have the biggest impact on your team's and organization's success and that will meet the most important needs of your customers. Work that seems urgent but is less important may need to wait.
- Break big tasks into small steps, and map out a schedule to get them done.
- Use to-do lists to stay on top of your tasks.
- Protect your time to minimize interruptions and enable concentrated focus. Schedule time for planning and work on bigger projects.



DEALING WITH WORK STRESS

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Delegate and collaborate. Where possible, share responsibilities and enlist the help and ideas of others.

Take time to recharge.

No one can run a marathon at a sprinter's pace. To avoid burnout and succeed over the long term, you need to take breaks to recharge:

- Take quick breaks. A five-minute break for a walk or deep breathing can relax your body and restore your mind so that you can focus more efficiently and creatively on the problem at hand. The distraction of watching a funny video or having a quick conversation with a friend can have the same effect. The point is to get your mind off work so that you can come back to it with renewed energy.
- Schedule time for your own needs—for family, friends, exercise, and breaks to relax and restore your energy.
- Use your vacation time to refresh and recharge yourself. "Working vacations" tend not to be vacations at all and don't have the same restorative effect.

Talk it over.

When you endure your work worries alone, stress can build up. A conversation with a trusted coworker or friend can release that tension. It may also give you a fresh perspective and new ideas on ways you might respond. You might even get an offer of help—if not with the core work issue you're facing, then with something else that can free you to focus on work with less distraction.

Be sure to return the favor when the opportunity arises. Helping, listening, and collaborating are keys to effective teamwork and a balanced, satisfying life.

If you need help prioritizing in a work crunch, talk it over with your manager. Knowing what's critical and what can wait can reduce the pressure you're feeling and help you regain a sense of control over your work.

Flip negative thinking.

Some work stress is caused by negative thinking and unnecessary worry:

- Practice positive reframing. When you find yourself looking too quickly and too often at the downside of work events and interactions, push yourself to imagine alternative and more positive outcomes. Then think about the steps you might take to make those positive outcomes happen.
- Focus on achievements. When you feel daunted by the work ahead, take a minute to consider the progress you've made. Think back to past achievements and other challenges you've overcome.
- Challenge negative thoughts. Is what you are worrying about really true? What might be a more positive and equally reasonable explanation?

Avoid unproductive conflict and draining work interactions.

Some conflict with coworkers is healthy and productive. Talking through different opinions on the best solution to a work problem can get your team to a better solution than any one of you might come to on your own. However, some work conflicts and interactions are emotionally draining and should be avoided:

- Steer clear of gossip. It can lead to negative talk and undermine team morale.

DEALING WITH WORK STRESS

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- Avoid people with consistently negative outlooks. Complainers and doomsayers create stress for the people around them. If you're forced to work closely with a coworker who spreads negativity, talk to your manager about ways to handle these interactions.
- Be cautious in sharing political and religious views at work. If your views are not relevant to your work or the work of your team, they're probably best kept to yourself. If political or religious discussions are fueling conflict at work, talk with your manager or human resources (HR) representative for help in setting boundaries.
- Strive to resolve conflict in positive ways. Focus on the present and what you can agree on to move forward. Don't dwell on past hurts or resentments. If a conflict can't be resolved and isn't critical to work progress, agree to disagree and walk away from it.
- Focus on what you can control, and let go of what you can't. In working with other people, you may be able to influence the way they behave, but you can't control it. You can control your own behavior and how you react to what others do and say. Put your focus there.

Know when to seek help.

If you've tried the steps above and you're still feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or discouraged, you might benefit from talking with a mental health professional. Your employee assistance program is one source for this help. An expert at the program can listen and offer practical suggestions.

A counselor can help you understand the source of your stress and help you take steps to address it. That might be by changing ingrained habits of thought and behavior, by forming a strategy for better communication with your manager and coworkers, or by treating a clinical problem such as depression or anxiety disorder that could be contributing to your feelings of stress.

Morgan, H. (Reviewed 2024). *Dealing with work stress* (B. Schuette & Z. Meeker, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



HOW TO RELAX: THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

The concept of the mind and body as separate spheres is breaking down in the face of research, showing the powerful connections between them. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the realms of stress and relaxation. When you are stressed, where is the tension: in your body or your mind? When you relax, where do you feel relief: in your body or your mind? Clearly, it's both. You feel stress in your muscles and your stomach, as well as in your moods and thinking. The calming relief of relaxation can flow both from your body to your mind and from your mind to your body. Understanding the mind-body connection can help you relax, and learning to relax is good for your body and mind.

What is the mind-body connection?

The *mind-body connection* is the intimate and inseparable intertwining of your emotions and thoughts with your physical sensations and health. Your mind and your emotions influence the functioning and health of your body, just as your body influences your mind and emotions. The interconnection is often easiest to understand with examples:

- When you become anxious or afraid, your body reacts with faster, shallower breaths. Your heart

rate goes up and your blood vessels constrict, raising your blood pressure. You may feel tension in your muscles and stomach. This cascade of reactions is triggered by your parasympathetic nervous system and is often referred to as the *fight-or-flight response*.

- That hyper-alert, tense state is not a conscious response, but you can consciously control it. Using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation—pushing your body to behave as if it were relaxed—you can reverse the response and cause your body and mind to settle back into a calm mode. This is a great example of the mind-body connection that you can experience yourself the next time you're feeling stressed.
- When you experience prolonged or chronic stress, the unrelieved tension can have negative effects throughout your body. In the short term, these can include headaches, muscle pain, and stomach problems. In the long term, chronic stress can contribute to more serious health problems, including heart disease, high blood pressure, and an increased risk of strokes.



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HOW TO RELAX: THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION •

The mind-body connection works in positive ways, too:

- Relaxation and mindfulness practices can improve both mind and body health. Studies have found that many of these stress-reduction, body-awareness methods can lead to improvements in conditions, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, chronic insomnia, and some types of chronic pain. They can even help in controlling blood sugar levels. (Note that relaxation practices may be effective as complements to medical treatment for some conditions and diseases, but they should never be considered as a substitute for medical diagnosis and treatment.)
- Healthy lifestyle habits, such as balanced eating and regular physical activity, can also improve your mood, allowing you to handle challenges in calmer and more thoughtful ways.

How Relaxing Your Body Helps Your Mind

When you are feeling tense or anxious, physically relaxing your body can interrupt your stress response, calming both your body and mind. By focusing on your body and deliberately relaxing tense muscles or intentionally slowing your breathing, you can trigger a relaxation response in your mind. As your mind calms, your thinking becomes clearer and your mood improves. Your mind also stops sending signals to your body to be wary and alert, building a reinforcing relaxation cycle.

How Relaxing Your Mind Helps Your Body

When you relax your mind in response to signs of stress, you start a cascading series of positive effects in your body:

- Your breathing and heart rate slow.
- Your blood pressure goes down.

- Your muscles relax.
- You may experience relief from chronic pain.
- Your digestion improves.
- Your immune system becomes more effective in fighting infections.
- You sleep better.

All of these effects on your body, in turn, make it easier for you to maintain a relaxed mind.

How to Use the Mind-Body Connection to Relax and Reduce Stress

Now that you have a broad understanding of the mind-body connection, here are some ways to make it work for you in reducing stress and improving your ability to relax. Try one, two, or a few of them until you find the methods that work best for you. All of these techniques work better with practice and will have a greater effect on your health, mood, and sense of wellbeing if you make a habit of using them regularly.

Deep Breathing

This is a technique that's easy to learn and easy to use. It can be combined with other relaxation methods. When you feel signs of stress and tension, simply concentrate on taking slow, deep breaths. It can help to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth to bring your focus to your breathing. As you learn what deep breaths are, put your hand on your belly. When you breathe deeply, from your diaphragm, the hand on your belly will feel the rise and fall. You can practice deep breathing sitting up or lying down, in a five- or ten-minute break, or even to calm yourself in the middle of a meeting.



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Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Sit in a comfortable position or lie down. Starting at one end of your body—your toes or your head and neck—tense and then relax particular sets of muscles. Clench each set of muscles for five or ten seconds, then relax, practicing deep breathing, and feeling the muscles release their tension. Work all the way through your body—from your toes up or from your head down—until you have relaxed all your muscles. Savor the feeling of relaxation. An alternative is to skip the muscle-clenching step and just concentrate on relaxing your muscles progressively from your toes to your head and neck or in the other direction.

Meditation

Sit in a comfortable position or lie down. Focus your mind on just one thing. That might be your breathing, a calming word repeated to yourself as a mantra, a soothing sound, or an object directly in front of you. If other thoughts pop into your mind, don't worry. Just return your focus to the single object of your meditation. As you practice, you'll likely find that it becomes easier to maintain your focus and shut out distractions and that each session leaves you calm and refreshed.

Mindfulness

Like meditation, *mindfulness* is the practice of focusing. However, rather than focusing on one thing, your focus is on the present moment. Pay attention to what is happening right now—the sounds around you, your breathing, how your body feels—without trying to change it. The goal is to be in the moment in an open and accepting way—without distraction from thoughts about the past or future and without judgment.

Visualization

Make yourself comfortable. Imagine a peaceful, calming place or situation. Bring it to life in your mind with all its sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and warmth or coolness. Once you feel sufficiently relaxed and refreshed, gradually bring yourself back to the present. Guided imagery is when you use an app, a recording, or a coach to guide you through a visualization session.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback uses sensors attached to your body to measure key body functions while you engage in a relaxation exercise. Biofeedback can be done at a hospital or physical therapy setting, or personal devices can be used at home. The goal is to help you understand how your thoughts and actions affect your heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, muscle tension, and other body measures.

Other practices that can help you relax include

- Aromatherapy
- Massage
- Yoga
- Tai Chi

Simple comforts, such as a warm bath, calming music, or a hot (non-alcoholic) drink, can also break a stress cycle and help you relax your body and mind.

Morgan, H. (Revised 2024). *How to relax: The mind-body connection* (B. Schuette & Z. Meeker, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



HOBBIES CAN IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

With busy lives and demanding jobs, many people view hobbies as frivolous relics of the past—activities for children, retirees, or other people who have extra free time. That's a mistake. It's actually the busiest people who have the most to gain from engaging in a hobby.

Hobbies and leisure activities that engage your concentration are good for your health, mind, moods, and relationships. When they draw on or grow into a personal passion, they can add meaning and purpose to your life. By pulling your thoughts and your body out of work pressures and daily worries, they can provide a space to recharge your energy and renew your focus.

What is a hobby?

Part of the bad rap given to hobbies these days might be a problem with the name. Think "hobby," and you might have images of ham radio, string collecting, or other quaint activities of your parents' or grandparents' generation. Think instead of a leisure activity that engages your energy and enthusiasm, and you get closer to a hobby's real value. A hobby is a leisure activity that you do because you enjoy and are interested in it. It's something you do because you want to do. It's also different from pure leisure in that

it gets you off the couch, gets you thinking, and challenges you to gain new skills.

Your hobby might be gardening, woodworking, learning about your family history, reading, cycling, exploring nature, drawing, origami, glassblowing, cooking, rock climbing, knitting, playing music, restoring old cars, birding, or any other activity that pulls you out of your work mind and that brings you satisfaction and joy.

How Having a Hobby Can Be Good for You

Hobbies take you out of your everyday routine—with its pressures to meet the demands of other people—and allow you to spend time on activities you yourself enjoy and are passionate about.

Engaging in a hobby can do the following:

- **Give you permission to take a break and do something you enjoy.** It's like scheduling "me" time in your calendar. When you engage in a hobby regularly, you make it a habit. Instead of feeling guilty that you're not working, it becomes part of your routine, something you plan your work and other responsibilities around.



HOBBIES CAN IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

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- **Provide a pleasurable break from daily pressures.** A hobby can keep you from burning out in your job. It can help you carve out moments of personal time in a busy home life.
- **Reduce stress.** Engaging in an activity you enjoy can be far more effective in pushing worrisome thoughts out of your mind than a passive activity like watching TV. Immersing yourself in a hobby can help you break the rumination cycle of rethinking the events of your day.
- **Improve your physical and mental health.** Engaging in enjoyable leisure activities has been found to lower blood pressure, improve perception of overall physical function, and reduce stress and depression.^{1,2} Physical hobbies, like tennis, running, or cycling, can also help you build muscle, improve heart health, and maintain a healthy weight.
- **Help you develop new skills.** When you start a new hobby, you'll dive into a new body of knowledge and acquire new skills. Some of those new skills may serve you well at work and in other aspects of your life.
- **Boost your confidence.** A good new hobby is challenging at first and stretches your abilities. Over time, as you gain mastery, you'll also gain new confidence and a boost in self-esteem.
- **Enhance your creativity.** Some hobbies, like drawing, writing short stories, knitting or crocheting, jewelry-making, composing music, and designing in wood, require creativity. The more you engage in these activities, the more you'll build your creative abilities.
- **Forge new social connections.** Some hobbies, like playing games or music with other people, are naturally social. In engaging in these activities, you make and strengthen social connections. An interest in birding or hiking can lead to new friends with shared interests. Today, even solitary hobbies can lead to social connections by sharing your output, technique, or plans in online communities. A knitter in Canada can see the work of and communicate with other knitters in Scotland, Sweden, or Japan.

Keys to Choosing a Beneficial Hobby

- **Choose a hobby that engages your mind.** The benefits of hobbies come from their ability to engage you and remove you from the swirl of everyday concerns. When considering new hobbies, try out activities that challenge you, make you think, and require that you learn new skills. The ideal hobby is one that leads you to experience *flow*—a state of mind in which you are fully absorbed in what you are doing and can lose track of time.
- **Choose a hobby for the enjoyment of it.** Avoid the temptation to seek out a hobby to provide a second source of income. When a hobby becomes a second job, you may be engaging in it for money instead of for pleasure. Your hobby could become a source of stress rather than a relief from it. Be wary, too, of a hobby that appeals to you mostly because it will teach you skills that are useful in your work. Unless it's fun for you, that's more like job-skills training than an absorbing leisure activity.



The idea of taking up a hobby for pleasure, diversion, and stress relief can feel at odds with an always-on and always-productive culture. But give it a try. There's little risk and huge potential for improving your life.

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