

Industrial Psychology

Protect yourself from job stress

Most often people say that they can handle the work; the stress comes from management, subordinates or fellow workers. Whatever the source, if you are distressed you have two choices: change the situation or increase your ability to handle stress.

First, you need to recognize if you are suffering from job stress. Do you feel "burnt out"? Do you feel trapped? Do you feel as though things are out of control? Do you feel angry, resentful or irritable? Does it feel hopeless that things will get better?

If the answer to most of the above questions is "yes", then you could be suffering from job related stress, and it is time to do something about it. You may wish to consult with a counsellor skilled in dealing with stress to help.

You will want to analyze the situation to determine what external factors are increasing your stress. Sometimes job stress comes from many sources. I have worked with clients who were suffering from the effects of an arbitrary and insensitive management. I have witnessed some workers, with their own personal agenda and using the protection of a union, poison a work atmosphere so that good worker-management relations were impossible. I have also witnessed situations where workers have forged documents, deleted records from computers and started rumours to undermine co-workers.

The problem with most Employee Assistance Plans is that they focus only on the individual who may be the victim. If your job stress is caused by factors external to both yourself and to the work itself, then you need a plan that will take into account those external forces. You can fight, you can attempt to find a compromise, you can collaborate, you can avoid, or you can acquiesce. Which of these five strategies you use in your personal plan will depend on your personality and your circumstances. It is advised that you discuss your plan with a trained professional because people suffering from stress often have difficulty seeing the whole picture. A professional counsellor will not tell you what to do, but will ask questions that will help you set realistic goals and to develop effective plans to reach those goals. You will find that once you have adopted a personal plan, your spirit will improve. You now have a way to change the situation to make things better.

Most counsellors will tell you that the only person you can change is yourself, and this is true as far as it goes. Most of us, for example, could improve our communication skills, and appropriate assertiveness will help us to deal with job stress. In addition, you may also benefit from steps to increase your ability to handle a given amount of stress. The rules of the game are simple. Most often, when you face other-generated job stress, if you give up and run away, you lose.

Regular exercise will help you to deal with the negative affects of existing stress and will increase your ability to handle larger stress loads without negative effect. The kind of exercise will depend on your level of fitness and on your likes. I discovered cross-country skiing after joining a poisoned work situation with the now defunct Northern Health Branch. Vigorous exercise, like skiing, burns unused adrenalin left over from stressful encounters. Skiing also gets me outdoors where I can appreciate nature. In addition, vigorous exercise, two to three times a week, will improve your ability to handle stress and will result in sounder sleep patterns.

It is important that you take the time to relax. Often our bodies forget how to relax when subjected to long-term stress. I teach a form of progressive relaxation that has worked well for many people. Massage and yoga are also excellent for this purpose. Forms of meditation that use the principles of progressive relaxation have been shown to have positive health benefits in controlled experiments.

Exercise and relaxation are the core to most plans for handling job stress, but don't forget to treat yourself well in other ways. Eat well balanced meals. Take breaks. Have positive daydreams. Communicate with friends that you can trust. Have a healthy sex life.

Successfully dealing with stress is often a matter of lifestyle. Decide on the lifestyle for you that meets your needs.