

The Negative Effect of Stress on Our Bodies

Tutor's Handbook



Stress and Our Bodies

Understanding our Stress

Places of work can be stressful environments for employees and employers alike. While some work-related stress is normal, for example when there is a deadline to work towards or a conflict to be resolved, it is not healthy for stress to be a constant factor in your workplace. In addition, excessive or long-lasting stress can negatively impact on your physical, emotional and mental well-being.

Chronic stress can also affect your performance and productivity in work, which in turn can perpetuate the stress in your working life.

As such, a first step to protect yourself against the effects of stress is to understand the common causes of stress. By understanding the causes of stress, you can start to take steps to reduce your levels of stress which will improve your well-being overall. Workplace stress can be caused by a range of factors – from difficult managers to heavy workloads, or poor working conditions or an unhealthy company culture. To help you and your group to identify the causes of stress in your place of work, we have compiled a list of the most common causes of stress which occur in professional environments. Take a minute to run through this list, and

see if any of these factors might be contributing to your levels of stress:

- **Role ambiguity:** Workplace stress can occur for employees who do not fully understand their role or where they are not given sufficient support or training to perform in their role.
- **Work-life balance:** Working unsocial hours, long-hours, shift work, etc. can have a negative impact on family and personal life, increasing personal stress.
- **Technology overload:** Employers placing unrealistic demands on employees, such as answering emails, phone calls or other work activities outside of working hours can cause additional stress.
- **Poor physical work environment:** Lack of protective clothing, comfortable seating, adequate lighting or appropriate equipment. Workplaces that are too hot, too cold, too noisy.
- **Being under-qualified for work tasks:** Employers asking employees to perform tasks that they are not qualified or experienced enough to do.
- **Concerns over job security and salary:** Managers and employers not keeping employees informed of company decisions that could affect their job can cause stress.

- Poor or inadequate management: Weak or ineffective leadership and management can leave employees feeling like they lack direction or support.
- Over-management: Being micro-managed can affect employee's self-esteem and confidence in their abilities to perform.
- Company with a blame culture: If there is an unhealthy culture in the company, employees may be afraid to admit to mistakes or to get things wrong.
- Change in relationships with colleagues: Promotions or demotions in work can bring about a change in relationships with colleagues, which can give rise to conflict with colleagues.
- Bullying and harassment: Instances of bullying, harassment and intimidation of employees by managers and /or peers can cause stress.
- Conflict with colleagues: Conflict with colleagues, especially if it is reported and not dealt with by managers, can cause prolonged, chronic anxiety.
- Cognitive symptoms:
 - Memory loss
 - Over-thinking and obsessive thinking
 - Worrying
 - Difficulty making decisions
- Emotional symptoms:
 - Feeling anxious, nervous, agitated
 - Emotional responses to everyday events
 - Depression and sadness
- Physical symptoms:
 - Aches and pains in the shoulder, neck and back from stress
 - Headaches and migraines
 - Feeling tight in the chest
- Behavioural symptoms:
 - Change in regular habits – eating more or less, drinking too much alcohol, smoking for the first time or more than usual, etc.
 - Withdrawing from social situations and meetings due to worry and anxiety caused by stress.

Symptoms of Stress

The following lists provide examples of the symptoms that you may experience under each category.

Recognising when you are Stressed!

So how do you know if you or a member of your local network are experiencing stress? If you think you, or someone you know, is experiencing **cognitive symptoms** of stress, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have trouble concentrating?
- Do you often have racing thoughts that you cannot control?
- Do you over-think things?
- Do you re-play events from the day in your head over and over?
- Do you have unusual dreams?
- When you think of past, present or future events or situations, do you always focus on the negative aspects?

To uncover if you have **emotional symptoms**, ask yourself or your group the following:

- Do you notice you feel more emotional than usual?
- Are you prone to outbursts of anger, rage, sadness?
- Are you likely to start crying if something does not go your way in work?
- Are you easily irritated?
- Do you experience feelings of panic, or that you are not in control of your work, or certain aspects of it?
- Do you feel depressed or helpless when you think of certain work situations or your workload?
- Are you experiencing anxiety as a result of your work?

To identify the **physical symptoms** of stress, ask the following questions:

- Do you have a constant lack of energy?
- Do you feel lethargic and lack motivation?
- Do you suffer from regular headaches or migraines?
- Do you suffer regularly with back, shoulder or neck ache?
- Are you experiencing from hair loss?
- Have you noticed any change in your skin – are you suffering with itchy skin, or breakouts?
- Do you have a sore jaw?

For suspected **behavioural symptoms** of stress, ask the following:

- Do you eat to calm down or to make yourself feel better?
- Do you smoke more cigarettes than you previously have in other jobs?
- Do you drink more alcohol now than you have in previous employments?
- Do find that you are over-extending yourself?
- Have you noticed that you are withdrawing from social groups or cutting yourself off from others?
- Do you find yourself procrastinating over tasks?
- Are you getting enough sleep?
- Do you find it difficult to get up in the morning?

- Have you started biting your nails, or have you taken up other nervous habits?

How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents some information on about stress and the negative impact it can have on our health. Specifically it aims to highlight some of the symptoms you may be experiencing that can identify if you are experiencing stress and it includes questions that will allow you and your local network members to understand if they are experiencing stress and what effect it is having on their health. To use this resource with your local group, we recommend that you first play the short video lecture and then lead a group discussion about the instance of stress in their lives.

To accompany this handbook, you will also find a short PowerPoint presentation that can be used with your local health network. This presentation contains a copy of all of the questions for identifying symptoms of stress. We would suggest that as part of your group activity, you should use this PowerPoint and as a group address these questions to identify if people are experiencing stress, and what symptoms they have.

Group Activity

Once you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your group members, you can start a group

discussion about stress and the impact it has on our bodies. For this, please use the slides 3-6 in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation. Read through all questions slowly, allowing time for group members to share if they are experiencing this symptom of stress, and also explaining how this impacts their overall health and what they think is the cause of it. Then as a group, you can brainstorm mechanisms that the individual can use to limit the impact that stress has on their bodies.



ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors



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