

Stress in the Workplace

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According to a 2008 report by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the workplace is recognized as an important influence on mental health. Between **10% and 25%** of workplaces are characterized by conditions and environments considered mentally injurious. Occupational health specialists report that **50 – 60 %** of their caseloads are related directly or indirectly to mental health concerns.

So what causes mental health issues in the workplace? In a word: stress. Stress can manifest itself in numerous different ways, including: becoming **irritable**, being **unable to relax/concentrate**, having **difficulty thinking logically and making decisions**, **enjoy work less**, feeling **less committed to work**, feeling **tired/depressed/anxious**, and having **difficulty sleeping**. In some cases, more severe physical symptoms can occur as a result of stress, such as: **headaches, increased blood pressure, heart disease, and digestive distress**. But stress is not necessarily what people make it out to be, and it is the purpose of this newsletter to help you differentiate the types and sources of stress in the workplace, and give you tools to be able to deal with that stress more effectively.

Sources of Stress in the Workplace

As with any problem, the first step to dealing with stress or distress in the workplace is finding its source. There are a myriad of stressors in our daily lives, and these stressors affect different people in different ways.

An important point to make is that you typically will not be faced by just one of these stressors, and they tend to be cumulative. Think about it like this: your ability to cope with stress is like fuel in a car. You can use up all your fuel on one big drive, or you can use it up on many short trips. Coping with stressors is just like that; you either have the fuel to cope with one really big stressor or many small ones, but once your fuel tank is empty you can't cope any more.

The following is a brief list of some of the most common workplace stressors.

Job Performance Stressors: These sources of stress relate directly to the demands of your job. For example:

- **The amount of work you have to do:** Having a large workload or unrealistic deadlines can easily overwhelm even the most organized and efficient of employees.
- **The type of work you do:** Though this may seem like an unfair generalization, some jobs are just more stressful than others. A mismatch between your personality and the demands a particular job can be a large source of stress.
- **Work roles/Job expectations:** In some cases, you may feel that you are required to wear “more than one hat” at work, or feel unsure about what you are supposed to be doing at work. A mismatch between what your superiors expect from you and what your clients/patients need from you can also create tension, as you may be unable to satisfy both parties fully.
- **Lack of control:** Feeling that you are being “pushed” from one project to another, or feeling that you have no say in the type of work you are doing can lead to stress.

Organizational Climate Stressors: These sources of stress differ from Job Performance stressors, in that they are usually the result of poorly implemented policy and/or management communication issues. Examples of this type of stressor include:

- **Unclear company direction and policies (including fear of layoffs):** Not knowing what your company's long term plans are can create the feeling that your job's future is uncertain, which can lead to stress.
- **Inconsistent performance appraisals (and under-appreciation):** Getting a raise without a performance appraisal, getting multiple conflicting appraisals, or not being recognized for the work you do can lead to uncertainty about your performance on the job and the areas in which you need to improve.
- **Overwhelming administrative procedures:** Though the proper documentation of work is important (especially in the healthcare sector), too much paperwork can prevent you from attending to other duties, such as seeing patients/clients.
- **Lack of communication with management:** Poor communication channels both to and from managers and superiors can lead to many of the problems listed above.
- **Lack of work-life balance:** Feeling like you are constantly at work, or having managers and superiors that are insensitive to the demands of your home or family life can create conflict between those two environments and lead to stress.

Social Stressors: These sources of stress relate to interactions with coworkers (or the lack thereof). Examples of this type of stressor include:

- **Mistrust (or bad office politics):** Though some people thrive on competition, overly competitive workplaces can foster resentment and/or mistrust between coworkers, which can degrade the social atmosphere at work, reduce the amount of cooperation between colleagues, and increase individual workloads.

- **Bullying/Harassment from other employees:** This should go without saying, but being bullied or harassed by coworkers and/or superiors can be a very large source of stress for employees.
- **Social isolation/Lack of support:** At the other end of the spectrum, if you have no time or opportunity for contact with colleagues, you could begin to feel isolated. This isolation can make it more difficult to find help with problems (both work-related and personal).

Physiological Stressors: These stressors are directly tied to your physical/ergonomic work environment, and can include:

- **Environmental Concerns (poor lighting, high noise levels, air quality, crowding, poor ergonomics):** Your ability to cope with work-related mental stressors can be very quickly eroded if you work in an uncomfortable environment. Whether your workplace is too hot, too cold, too crowded, too loud, uncomfortable or has poor air quality, your need to deal with the physiological stressors reduces your ability to cope with job-related stressors or demands.
- **Dangerous working conditions:** Again, it should go without saying that if your work carries with it some inherent danger, you will likely be more stressed than usual in the workplace.

Coping with Stress

Now that you have identified the sources of stress in your workplace, the following are some steps you can take to prevent yourself from getting overwhelmed:

1. **Refill your “gas tank”:** To return to the car/fuel analogy above, you need to make sure that you refill your gas tank as often as possible. Here are a few easy ways to refill it:
 - a. *Eat Right:* make sure that you have something healthy in your body’s gas tank!
 - b. *Exercise:* Easy way to blow off some steam during a break, and relieves tension too!
 - c. *Sleep:* Make sure, when possible, to get a good nights sleep; it will help you deal with your day. NOTE: drinking 5 extra-large coffees is not a good substitute for sleep!
 - d. *Take care of your physical health:* Fighting off an illness uses fuel too, leaving you with less fuel to deal with your day. Make sure to take care of yourself physically.
 - e. *Avoid drugs/alcohol as a coping tool:* Alcohol and street drugs are very poor choices of coping tools. If you have resorted to these substances and they are controlling your life, seek professional help.
2. **Communicate:** This encompasses everything from communicating with your coworkers to talking to your managers. One of the single biggest contributors to many of the problems listed above is a lack of communication. If communication lines between superiors and employees remain open, many of the above problems can be remedied in short order; for example, work expectations, the future of a particular position, and bullying and harassment can usually be managed by a simple conversation with a manager or superior. And remember, one of the best ways to get rid of stress is to talk it over with someone, so don’t be afraid to speak up!
3. **Organize your time, tasks and workspace:** It is easy to feel overwhelmed when your workspace is a mess, you have 7 projects on the go, and you are 5 minutes late for a meeting.
 - a. Prioritize your daily, weekly and monthly tasks (make lists when possible); once everything you have to do is written down, you don’t have to stress about remembering it.
 - b. Take breaks, even short ones can give you a bit of pause before jumping into your next task.
 - c. Break big tasks down into more manageable steps. This will not only help you visualize your project, but also give you a sense of accomplishment when you complete each step.
 - d. Take time to appreciate the completion of a task; take a quick 10 sec breather and remind yourself that this task is done.
 - e. Organize your workspace; it is easier to see and do what needs to be done if your space is not a mess
4. **Try to balance your work and life:** Consider your schedule carefully and make sure to give yourself time at the end of the day to relax. Don’t over-commit yourself or try to schedule too much in one day; you will likely feel worse about not finishing the list than proud of what you have accomplished.
5. **Be aware and get help if needed:** Use the information above to monitor your stress level. If you feel that you are losing control of your stress level, if you are having difficulties at home or in your personal life that are affecting your work, or if you are just starting to feel overwhelmed, be sure to take the time to talk to someone about it.

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