

# Stress-Management in the Workplace

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## What is stress?

The term was coined in the 1930's by endocrinologist Hans Selye and defined "Stress is a biological term for the consequences of the failure of a human or animal to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats to the organism, whether actual or imagined." While the initial stress response can be functional (many feel they thrive on a certain amount of stress); it is long term stress, or the inability to effectively cope with that stress both physically and emotionally, which can have long term damaging effects on our body's and minds. The initial stress response includes an increase in the hormone adrenaline. Adrenaline increases the heart rate and respiratory rate, diverts blood flow from the organs and towards the muscles and essentially prepares your body for the "fight or flight" response. While this response can be helpful on the short term, if the stressor does not resolve, the stress can lead to issues in productivity and focus, irritability, fatigue and trouble concentrating. Further long term stress can cause significant harm causing a variety of health issues including: tension headaches, ulcers, diabetes, digestion issues, cardiovascular problems, depression and other mental illnesses.

## Stress in the Workplace – what can we do?

It is the responsibility of both the individual and the organization to deal with stress in the workplace. Just like so many other health and wellness initiatives, "top-down" support of a stress-management philosophy is essential when assisting employees with managing stress more effectively. As a manager work with your team to effectively minimize stressors where possible; and where it is not, look at effective strategies to support your team in managing stress – and then support them in taking action.

## Minimizing Stress – ACTION Steps:

1. Create a Culture that encourages employees to engage in healthy behaviours and take steps to effectively manage stress. This includes engaging the executive and managers in taking positive steps as role models. If employees see their role models walking the walk, they are going to feel much more comfortable taking their own steps.
2. Communicate with employees – determine the consistent issues causing stress in the workplace. You may need to utilize an external consultant to gain feedback to ensure employees feel safe and secure sharing their honest feedback.
3. Engage Employees to be part of the solution – work with them to develop and implement strategies to tackle the issues that arise. Ask for feedback using forms or develop a focus group of employees to act as a Stress-Management or Wellness Steering Committee.
4. Educate Everyone – find out the greatest challenges employees and managers are facing and work with an external consultant with expertise in the area to educate staff and managers on solutions. Based on the feedback you may want to consider topics such as Task Management, Creating Healthy Workplace Relationships, or a general Stress Management Workshop that covers the topics covered in the Action Steps below.
5. Recognize Healthy Choices your employees are making. Consider your business needs and employee requests and look at the following ways you may promote a healthy workplace: flex hours, onsite fitness and wellness programs, subsidized fitness memberships, health spending accounts, healthy food at meetings, etc. Additionally, you could look at a rewards and recognition program that includes recognition for healthy choices – recognizing a new employee each month, or a points system enabling employees to earn 'wellness points' they can use towards prizes.

## Managing Stress – ACTION Steps:

Encourage employees to take the following steps in their lives, then be a role model and take the same steps yourself!

1. Move More  
Physical activity releases hormones called endorphins that help your body deal with stress. To gain this and other benefits of physical activity you want to work towards obtaining 60 minutes of accumulated physical activity every day. It doesn't have to be all at once – studies show that just 6-10 minute intervals of physical activity (anything from stretching to walking, cleaning, gardening all count towards your physical activity).
2. Fuel Your Body  
Providing your body with healthy nutrition and adequate hydration is like giving your car the fuel it needs to drive. Fuel your body as if it is a high performance vehicle – with the high calibre fuel. High calibre nutrition and hydration will keep your engine running cleaner and your vehicle running longer; and in times of stress, it will perform just as you need it to.
3. Find a Balance  
Striking a balance when you are feeling pulled in a variety of different directions can be a challenge, but prioritizing and setting goals can help you ensure you don't drop any of the important balls you're juggling.
4. Sleep Well  
Getting good sleep may not reduce the amount of stress you have in your life, but it will certainly help you cope with it better! Being well rested will leave you full of the energy and vitality you need to cope with stressful situations in a way that leaves you feeling empowered and in control.
5. Say NO  
The bottom line is this – we can't be everything to everyone and do it all well. Sometimes the best answer is to say no. Whenever you are approached to do something ask yourself the following questions:
  - Do I have time to take this on? (yes or no)
  - Is this a task best suited to my unique capabilities? (or could I delegate it?)
  - Is something else going to be sacrificed if I take this on? (and if so, what is it and how can I juggle this?).Be honest about what is reasonable to do – and then stand proudly in your NO.

## Helpful resources:

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>

Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Living

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/>

Help Guide: Stress and Stress Management

[http://helpguide.org/mental/stress\\_signs.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm)

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