

Reducing Workplace Stress

Relaxing at work may sound like an oxymoron, but research shows you'll be healthier in the long run if you avoid letting your job stress you out.

Moreover, "practicing relaxation techniques can improve your ability to think clearly," says Warren L. Huberman, Ph.D., a New York psychologist. "When you're relaxed, the quality of your work will improve."

You can use the following techniques throughout your workday to manage your stress, feel better and get more done.



Breathe deeply

Taking a few deep breaths is one of the most powerful techniques you can use to quickly lower your blood pressure and slow your pulse.

"Pick a number, say 25, and count backward on each breath until you get to one," suggests Dr. Huberman. Or teach yourself to relax on cue by picking a word such as "calm." Slow your breathing slightly while repeating the word.

"If you practice relaxation while repeating a word such as 'calm,' the word itself eventually becomes a cue to relax," says Dr. Huberman.

Another technique: While concentrating on your breathing, close your eyes and picture yourself bathed in a blue light," says David Edelberg, M.D., co-founder of American WholeHealth, a medical practice in Chicago that combines conventional and alternative medicine. "And to get even better at meditating when there's a lot of activity going on around you, listen to a guided meditation in your spare time."

Personalize your workspace

Posting photos of loved ones, relaxing places, a vacation you've been on or destinations you want to go to also can provide a much-needed respite from stressful situations.

"It's easy to get lost in whatever is going on when you're at your desk. Looking at a pleasant picture temporarily takes you someplace else," says Dr. Huberman.

Fragrant fresh-cut flowers also can help you reduce stress, as can a memento from your childhood.

Go for a walk

To physically break the stress cycle, "walk around the block or to a different part of the building," says Dr. Huberman. "People often make jokes about feeling like they're chained to their desks -- but very often, they're not."

If you can't leave your desk for long, you can at least visit the bathroom. "The bathroom is one of the few places where nobody will follow you, where you can actually get a few minutes to yourself," says Dr. Huberman.

Keep a stress journal

Write in your journal for two weeks. Include what is causing your stress, the day of the week and time of the day it occurred and how you handled it. At the end of the two weeks, read your journal to determine if there's a pattern. Is your stress related to the type of work you're doing? Is the job too complicated? Do you need more training? Is your workload too much? Is the work boring with not enough challenge? Or does your stress come from people: managers, co-workers or complaining customers?

Listen

Sometimes people are so anxious to tell their side of a problem that they forget to listen. Ask your co-workers their perspective of the situation, then listen.

Take a vacation day

You don't function well at work when you're overly stressed, so take a day off to have some fun. This will recharge your batteries and keep things in perspective.

Take time to reflect

Besides these short-term stress-reducing techniques, investigating the causes of your stress also can help. "It's vital to explore your life and the sources of your stress," says Dr. Edelberg.

Ask yourself: Am I doing with my life what I like? Are the decisions I've made in my life genuine, or am I living somebody else's expectations? What steps could I take to improve my life?

"You can be having the time of your life in a stressful job if it's genuinely what you want to do," says Dr. Edelberg. "The job doesn't affect your health adversely because you've made the decision and you have control. You start running into problems with stress-related issues when you relinquish control."

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