

Reference document

# Stress management



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## Introduction

Ah stress! We know it, experience it and, sometimes, put up with it. The pace of our modern lives never stops quickening, and the universe in which we live is becoming more complex. Stress, particularly work related stress, is a growing phenomenon in our society and undoubtedly affects all fields and all occupational classes.

Learning to manage stress effectively at work or at home is essential for health, balance and happiness!

The negative consequences of stress on health and individual ability also affect corporate performance. It has been called the modern “new evil.” With all the responsibilities that fall to us and all of the goals we are asked to achieve, is it really possible not to give in to the stress of our time? Not entirely. But we can manage it! How do we get there? There are various solutions that involve employers and employees alike. If we want to maintain a minimum of well-being in the workplace, we must learn to manage our stress. If we don’t, tensions will build and perhaps eventually have an impact on our physical and mental health.

## Definition of stress

Stress is the body’s response to environmental constraints. It can also be defined as a syndrome for coping with a number of emotional, physiological, psychological or social disturbances. Today, work stress presents itself in many ways: performance expectations, conflicts, workload, lack of time, lack of autonomy, work environment (noise), perfectionism, emergencies, work-life balance issues, etc. Several factors are responsible, including sustained pressure, which has its own consequences.

## Causes of stress at work

Tighter deadlines, shorter adjustment periods during times when changes are made to take on the competition, unforeseen circumstances, emergencies and other unusual situations can have harmful consequences on employees’ ability to adapt, which inevitably hinders their efficiency.

In addition, with technology developing at lightning speed, companies must constantly upgrade their products and services. Frequent changes require employees to demonstrate

adaptability and flexibility. This “new knowledge” quickly becomes outdated and updating employees’ skills has become essential. In this context, the feeling of needing to stay ahead, and even of being threatened, makes employees increasingly more susceptible to stress.

## Categories of stress: positive and negative stress

The category of stress depends on the nature of a particular situation and the perception we have of it. For example, team work can bring positive stress when the chemistry is good and when the team is successful. On the contrary, bad energy and personality conflicts among colleagues can create negative stress.

## Forms of stress: physiological and psychological

Back in the Stone Age, physiological stress was expressed instinctively in the presence of a threat that compromised physical integrity or survival. Today, due to the evolution of the human race, the complexity of our reactions when we are threatened extends well beyond instinct. Emotions and interactions with others become the main cause of stress. Physiologic stress is like a combustible: it is a source of energy. It makes people more alert, stronger and faster. It is important to note that, sometimes, this stress is not related to any precise cause, but is, rather, the result of a subconscious block.

Moreover, psychological stress tends to express itself mainly when a person is vulnerable, provoking excessive emotions such as doubt, worry and tension. Psychological stress is like an extinguisher: it is a source of apathy and makes people more lethargic, weaker and slower.

## Phases of stress: alarm, resistance, exhaustion

The alarm phase of stress is short term: this is the essential phase from which the first physiological reactions arise (increased heart rate, sweaty hands, faster breathing, etc.). For example, think of the way you feel before giving a presentation, announcing a lay off or terminating an employee.

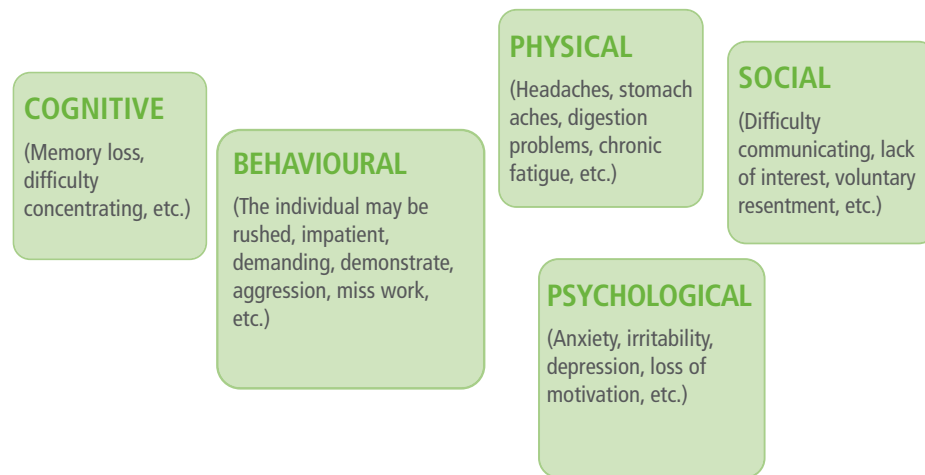
At the resistance phase, stress persists, the body adapts and remains in a state of alert; it naturally produces other hormones that are added to our defence arsenal. We instinctively become more creative and better at problem solving. For example, this is the time to think

about contacting the employee assistance program (EAP) or the management assistance program (MAP).

As for the exhaustion phase, when stress becomes chronic, it appears when the period of stress is uninterrupted and the overwhelmed body no longer offers any resistance. We no longer see a way to pull through.

## Signs of stress

Intense and prolonged, stress reduces performance and can have serious repercussions on one's health. Furthermore, reactions can vary, making it even more difficult to detect.



### PSSST!

Understanding the root cause of our stress allows us to know what we can act on and how to approach it. In some situations, changing the way we perceive things or how we react to them can make a difference.

## Adjusting our attitude

Often linked to our attitude, lack of time seems to affect all employees. We put things off for later and do everything at the last minute because we feel more stimulated and able to

perform better. This can even make us hesitant to apply various time management techniques. We accept all requests because we aim to please. This attitude often costs a lot of time! And yet, lack of time has become the main source of stress. Therefore, it is important to learn how to manage our time, because it's the only way we can adapt to the contemporary world!

## Knowing how to evaluate “emergencies”

Emergencies:

- Interfere with sound time management because they always take precedence over what is important
- Cause interruptions
- Often mobilize too many people without a precise plan of action
- Cause down periods, after the period of stress, which reduce productivity
- Bring about long-term fatigue and wear us down

## Taking the time to... plan our activities

*Did you know? It has been proven that taking an hour to plan makes it possible to reduce our weekly activities by five hours.*

Therefore, 15 minutes of planning a day = 75 more minutes of productivity each day! Accomplishing scheduled tasks on a daily basis gives us a feeling of satisfaction. This is even truer of more important or noteworthy tasks and the reason why a realistic and well-kept schedule brings a great feeling of relaxation at the end of the day!

## Developing a strategy for coping with stress

- Stop** —> Take a step back
- Evaluate** —> Identify what isn't working
- Decide** —> Choose to make changes

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For example, for the next month, I will try to think about the following exercise:

- What I'll remove from my personal life: \_\_\_\_\_
- What I'll add to my personal life: \_\_\_\_\_
- What I'll remove from my professional life: \_\_\_\_\_
- What I'll add to my professional life: \_\_\_\_\_

## Take care of yourself

Start by adopting healthy habits. Be active, move around, eat well (in terms of food choices, eat regular meals and snacks), adopt good sleep habits, develop pastimes, and, especially, have fun. Exercise is recognized as a good way to unwind and to maintain good physical and mental health.

## Prevention: the best way to manage stress

At work, it is best to modify the environment in order to alleviate monotony and reduce its effects on employees' health. For example, encourage, if possible, a better workplace layout, work team selection and the selection of work and production methods. At the same time, think of offering employees the opportunity to participate in implementing changes, especially when these have an influence on their jobs; by participating, they will feel less negatively affected. Finally, supporting your employees and highlighting their accomplishments encourages a feeling of competence and a positive attitude.

## Conclusion

Managing stress at work means learning to manage situations differently; but it also means learning how to manage oneself, knowing one's resources and making better use of one's personal abilities. Knowing how to manage stress at work or in any professional and personal context depends not only on external situations, but on our way of perceiving and understanding them.

One of the most important things to understand is that we do not fight stress, we manage it!

## References

<http://www.vaincre-stress.com>

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

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2010002/article/11266-eng.htm>

<http://www.gerersonstress.org/stress-au-travail.html>

The following resources can also be helpful for managing stress:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Tandem
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency