

# Understanding Stress and Workplace Stress

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Stress is normal. Everyone feels stress related to work, family, decisions, your future, and more. Stress is both physical and mental. It is caused by major life events such as illness, the death of a loved one, a change in responsibilities or expectations at work, and job promotions, loss, or changes.

Smaller, daily events also cause stress. This stress is not as apparent to us, but the constant and cumulative impact of the small stressors adds up to big impact.

In response to these daily stresses, your body automatically increases blood pressure; heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This stress response is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to any high-pressure situation.

However, when you are constantly reacting to small or large stressful situations, without making physical, mental, and emotional adjustments to counter their effect, you can experience stress that can hurt your health and well-being. It is essential that you understand both your external and internal stress-causing events, no matter how you perceive those events.

Stress can also be positive. You need a certain amount of stress to perform your best at work. The key to stress management is to determine the right amount of stress that will give you energy, ambition, and enthusiasm versus the wrong amount, which can harm your health and well-being.

## **Important Stress Causing Issues, Characteristics and Traits**

While each person is different and has different events and issues that cause stress, there are some issues that almost universally affect people. These are the stressors you most want to understand and take measures to prevent.

- Feeling out of control,
- Feeling direction-less,
- Guilt over procrastination or failing to keep commitments,
- More commitments than time,
- Change, especially changes you didn't initiate or institute,
- Uncertainty, and
- High expectations of self.

## What Affects Your Coping With Stress Skills?

During times of stress and uncertainty, you can anticipate some predictable issues, problems, and opportunities. For instance, during any change, members of an organization have:

- Different ways of regarding change. Some people have difficulty accepting and adjusting to change and uncertainty; others will relish the changes and view them as great opportunities. Some people initiate change; others prefer the status quo.
- Different amounts of experience and practice in stress management and change management. (What is devastating to one individual may excite another or only mildly irritate a third person.) Theoretically, people become better at managing stress and change with experience.
- Some people need to "talk it out." Others suffer silently. Some find relief in complaining. Some talk and talk and talk, but are really supportive of the change. Others find ways to sabotage changes and undermine efforts to move forward.
- Different levels of stress and change occurring in other areas of their lives.
- During change, people will experience different amounts of impact from the current changes and stress producing situations. They will also experience different amounts and types of support from their spouse, significant other, friends, supervisor, and coworkers.

Here are additional thoughts about what affects your ability to cope with stress at work.

All of these and other issues impact your ability to manage workplace stress and change, to continue to function productively. It is important to recognize that people who are experiencing serious stress and change may not be capable of performing exactly as they have in the past.

Stress can cause physical, emotional, and behavioral problems that can affect your health, energy, well-being, mental alertness, and personal and professional relationships. It can also cause defensiveness, lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, accidents, reduced productivity, and interpersonal conflict.

Too much stress can cause minor problems such as sleep-loss, irritability, backaches, or headaches, and can also contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases such as high blood pressure and heart disease.

During stressful times or situations, people often blame themselves for being weak or for their inability "to handle it." Often managers in organizations do not understand the normal progression of change or stress-producing situations and they expect employees

to immediately return to total productivity after a stressful event. It doesn't happen.

### **Stress Results From Change**

People have deep attachments to their work groups, organizational structures, personal responsibilities, and ways of accomplishing work. When any of these are disturbed, whether by personal choice or through an organizational process from which they may feel quite removed and uninvolved, a transition period occurs. During this transition, people can expect to experience a period of letting go of the old ways as they begin moving toward and integrating the new.

When you consider stress in the workplace, understanding these components about stress, situations that induce stress, and employee responses to stress, can help you help both yourself and your staff effectively manage stress and change.