

KEEPING COOL AT WORK

MANAGING WORK-RELATED STRESS AND SUBSEQUENTLY, YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



By TARA THIAGARAJAN
tara.thiagarajan@leaderonomics.com

EARLIER this morning, I was told that I had about a day to write this article. I began to worry about the short time given to me and this was of course very stressful. Indeed, I was stressing out over writing an article about work-related stress. Oh, the irony!

Meeting deadlines is commonplace where I work and yet my reaction is always the same – STRESS.

My mind races, my heart pumps hard, and my breathing is shallow as I sense the deadline drawing nearer and nearer with each passing second.

Stress, like work, is an inevitable part of our lives. We experience it from the moment we wake up every morning till we go back to sleep at night.

From a biological perspective, stress is our body's natural response to potentially dangerous things in our environment. Hormones such as adrenaline are released throughout our body to increase our heart and breathing rates along with other symptoms such as sweating.

This is known as the fight or flight response—our body's way of responding to stressors in the environment. Obviously, humans have evolved from being fearful of life-threatening dangers such as facing saber-toothed tigers, to dealing with deadlines and responsibilities at our jobs.

According to the Malaysian Psychiatric Association (MPA), working adults typically spend an average of 10 hours at work, making it evident that work is one of the most influential aspects of our lives.

Work is sure to affect the way we live especially since many individuals tend to organise their lives around their jobs, making them neglect other equally, if not more important matters, such as their

mental health.

Stress is without a doubt an effect that even the best job in the world can bring, if we do not know how to manage it.

However, a small amount of stress is needed for us to perform well at work since it can be a driving factor that pushes us to meet deadlines and showcase our abilities better. Too little stress can be demotivating.

If we experience too much stress, it can make us feel overwhelmed and even helpless, rendering us unable to perform to the best of our abilities.

Clearly, the trick to managing stress is to strike a good balance between the two extremes. But experts say the first step to managing work-related stress is to detect stress when it occurs.

WHERE'S THE TRIGGER?

According to the National Health Service in the UK, identifying the factors that trigger your stress is the first step in stress management.

A great way to do this is to keep a journal and jot down brief descriptions of your stressful episodes for two to four weeks.

As we look back on what we have written over the past few weeks, we may be able to notice a pattern, perhaps a common theme that ties each stressful episode to one another, which can be incredibly useful in identifying what exactly triggers our stress response.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), below are the common triggers of work stress:

- Low salaries.
- Excessive workloads.
- Few opportunities for growth or achievement.
- Work that isn't engaging or challenging
- Lack of social support.
- Not having enough control over job-related decisions.
- Conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

It is important for us to recognise how much we can have on our plate at one time and still deliver good quality work on time.

If we keep agreeing to optional work that we aren't sure we can complete while at the same time having other commitments, we may end up being too overwhelmed as work eats into our free

time, causing stress and exhaustion.

This is why the National Institution for Mental Health emphasises the importance of setting priorities.

Decide the most important work that should be dealt with first before checking if there is still enough time for other tasks.

Time management is an essential skill to possess for this to work.

LET OTHERS KNOW

Yes, it is imperative that we know our limits when it comes to handling our workload, but it is even more important that we also inform our superiors at work about those limits.

According to the MPA, effective communication at the workplace is one good way to buffer against stressors at work.

Effectively communicating not only to our bosses, but also to our coworkers, that we can only handle so much work at one time, does not mean that we are telling them not to give us work or ask us for help in the future.

Instead, it sends the message that we need room to breathe to avoid burning out from being overloaded with work.

RESPOND HEALTHILY

Stress is something we are faced with everyday. It is up to us to develop the appropriate reactions to help us cope with it in efforts to preserve our mental and physical health.

Experts from the APA suggest any form of exercise that can be done after work is the best way to buffer against the mentally exhausting effects of stress. Allotting time for your hobbies or even time with family or friends can do wonders against stress as well.

These experts also highlight the importance of developing healthy sleeping patterns in combatting the negative effects of stress.

Cutting down on coffee and perhaps switching to soothing herbal teas could make a world of a difference to your energy levels during the day.

It would do us good to apply these strategies to our everyday lives in an effort to manage the way we counter life's daily stressors. I know I certainly will!

■ Tara is an intern who is trying her best to soak up all the information she can, which is why she refers to herself as a sponge. *Spongebob Squarepants* is also her favourite TV show of all-time. Coincidence? She thinks not. To connect with her, email editor@leaderonomics.com

