

Managing Pressure at Work

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For many people, being part of the business world comes at a substantial personal cost: stress. "It's a high stress job," people often say, as if this testifies to the position's prestige. For people whose ability to cope is at crisis point, however, stress is no longer a matter of bravado. For them, stress is a serious problem that can have far-reaching consequences. To avoid reaching this point, stress must be managed.

What You Need to Know

My supervisor gets a real buzz from being under pressure and so assumes I do too.

However, I much prefer working in a calmer environment. Is there a way we can work well together?

This happens frequently, but the good news is that your differing styles can actually complement each other. Raise the subject with your boss and suggest that you discuss and create a plan of action. You may still find it easiest to limit your contact with your boss while working on joint projects, however.

I enjoy working under pressure, but it is starting to affect my relationships with others. What should I do?

It can be true that a hovering deadline gives us the adrenaline boost we need to get a job done well and promptly, but if working in this way becomes a habit, it's easy for it to become the norm. While people can become very focused in such an environment, other areas of their lives, such as time spent with friends and family, may be neglected. Their health may also suffer as a result. In the long term, pressure should not have a permanent place in anyone's working life, but if you feel it is becoming part of your organization's preferred way of working, flag it up.

How do I exploit the benefits of pressure while diminishing the downside?

Pressure can raise our performance, but sometimes at the detriment of other factors, such as relationships. Under pressure, some people become highly task-oriented, focusing on immediate areas. Others become very short-term oriented. Explore what happens to you, seek feedback, and evaluate whether you believe there is an issue or not. The earlier you recognize it, the easier it is to ensure that the negative impact of pressure is alleviated.

What to Do

Know the Symptoms of Stress

It is important to be able to distinguish between pressure and stress. Pressure is motivating, stimulating, and energizing. But when pressure exceeds our ability to cope, stress is produced. Sustained high levels of stress can, at worst, result in illness, depression, or even nervous breakdown. However, there are a number of warning signs that can help you determine when your level of stress is bordering on dangerous.

Take a good look at your well-being. If you experience some of the following behavioral and physical symptoms on a frequent or near-constant basis, it can indicate that you have crossed the line between healthy pressure and harmful stress.

Behavioral symptoms

- Constant irritability with people
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Loss of sense of humor
- Suppressed anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Inability to finish one task before rushing into another
- Feeling the target of other people's animosity
- Feeling unable to cope
- Wanting to cry at the smallest problem
- Lack of interest in doing things after returning home from work
- Waking up in the morning and feeling tired after an early night
- Constant tiredness

Physical symptoms

- Lack of appetite
- Craving for food when under pressure
- Frequent indigestion or heartburn
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Insomnia
- Tendency to sweat for no good reason
- Nervous twitches or nail biting

- Headaches
- Cramps and muscle spasms
- Nausea
- Breathlessness without exertion
- Constant tiredness
- Fainting spells
- Impotency or frigidity
- Eczema

Identify Sources of Stress in the Workplace

If you feel that you are not coping well with the everyday pressures at work, creating an action plan to cut down (or cut out altogether) excess pressure is the next sensible step. To do that, identify the sources of workplace stress you face. For example, it could be that you're struggling with some of the following:

- Trouble with client/customer
- Too much travel
- Having to work late
- Constant people interruptions
- Conflict with organizational goals
- Trouble with boss
- Job interfering with home/family life
- Deadlines and time pressures
- Overflowing in-box
- Telephone interruptions
- Difficult decision-making
- Dealing with the bureaucracy at work
- Not enough stimulating things to do
- Too many meetings
- Trouble with co-workers
- Uncertainty about career direction
- Worried about job security
- Too much responsibility

- Unsupportive spouse/partner
- Too many jobs to do at once
- Long commute

In addition to these potential daily hassles, there are, of course, more significant problem areas. These may include coping with lay-offs, dealing with a bullying boss, or trying to cope with a dysfunctional corporate culture that demands excessive working hours or employs an autocratic management style.

Strive for Work-Life Balance

Managing pressure is often about achieving some balance between work and the rest of your life. It is usually in the workplace that we are most susceptible to pressure, but it can also stem from a home or social environment. Avoid allowing work to become the central focus of your life. For example, take advantage of your vacation time, exercise regularly, and maintain relationships with friends and family. Practicing hobbies and interests that help you to “turn off” is also very useful. If necessary, raise concerns with your manager.

Understand the Causes of Pressure

There are numerous conditions in the workplace, many of which are linked, that can contribute to high levels of pressure. Some of the most obvious are:

- insufficient resources—not enough time, funds, or staff to get the job done properly;
- insufficient *appropriate* resources—skills gaps in certain critical areas;
- unreasonable demands—management expectations to maintain an unreasonable pace;
- improper staffing or staff direction—failure to understand or capitalize on employees’ individual strengths;
- insufficient training;
- poor planning;
- promising to do too much in too little time;
- lack of job security.

Develop Coping Strategies

There are also many *types* of pressure. The most common is time pressure—too much to do and too little time to do it in. However, there are plenty of coping strategies to help manage time pressure and to smooth out organizational problems which contribute to it. For example:

- Anticipate where the pressure may come from.
- Separate overwhelming tasks into multiple, smaller jobs. Create “to do” lists of all the tasks that must be completed in the short term (perhaps within the next week), and in the long term.
- Reserve your prime working time—when energy levels are high—for complex tasks, and save trivial, routine tasks for non-prime time.
- When planning your work schedule, attempt to balance routine tasks with more enjoyable responsibilities.
- Accept that risks are inevitable and that few decisions are ever made on the basis of complete information.
- Communicate progress to other stakeholders in the task and manage expectations. For example, if a task will take longer to complete than originally thought, be honest. The sooner people are alerted to potential problems, the sooner you can collaborate on contingencies.
- Learn to say “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand” when necessary.
- Manage technology rather than allowing technology to manage you. For example, with telephone conversations, plan what you’re going to say and/or ask in advance; prioritize e-mail messages according to their importance to your objectives; turn off your cell phone when it could interrupt an important meeting or activity.

While these time-pressure coping strategies do not necessarily extend your deadline, they can increase your sense of control. If time pressure continues to be an issue, you may need to re-evaluate your role and its demands and resources. Are you delegating enough? Have you prioritized your actions? Are you promising to do too much?

Fix On a Solution

Once the cause and type of pressure has been identified, begin the task of determining a solution. The solution may lie in organizational changes at work, or in changes on a more personal level. Some options in both categories are described below.

Organizational Changes

Pressure can be a result of the nature of the job, or of how the role fits in with the rest of the business. To alleviate this kind of pressure, your role or job may need to be renegotiated, with different boundaries instituted. Clearer lines of responsibility, as well as better delegation and prioritization, can help reduce pressure on individuals, teams, and departments.

Better organizational planning and anticipation of pressure points can help ensure that resources are in the right place, at the right time. Sometimes pressure is unavoidable, but it is certainly more bearable when the duration is minimized.

Personal Changes

People also put themselves under pressure when they lose confidence in their abilities. A good self-awareness and a solid understanding of your real skills are important for avoiding this type of pressure. Building and supporting confidence is also invaluable.

When assessing potential changes on a personal level, be aware of how you respond to pressure. Some symptoms you exhibit may be positive and motivating, others may not. Know your balance and how others respond. At the same time, be aware of pressure in others. No two people respond to pressure in the same way.

There are physical strategies to help manage pressure. Exercise is good from a health standpoint, and often relieves pent-up frustration. In the office, simple things like stretching in your chair, going for a quick walk, or talking to a friend can be good remedies for relieving pressure. Take occasional breaks from work using holidays or vacation time. In more serious cases, consider moving further away from the situation through a sabbatical, job rotation, or study leave.

In addition, a sense of humor can help manage pressure, as can remembering to step back from a situation. It is important to tackle the underlying causes of pressure whenever possible, rather than just dealing with the symptoms. Above all, remember that you are not alone in feeling pressure or attempting to better manage it. Do not hesitate to confide in a friend or colleague, or to seek counseling when help is needed. Some causes of pressure are much more overwhelming than others—for example, being ill, caring for a sick family member, or experiencing a change in marital status. In these circumstances, talking to someone may help you to see things from a broader perspective and to take the first step toward a solution.

What to Avoid

You Try to do Too Much

People sometimes take on too much at work, thinking that they can cope without additional support. Perhaps they think they are saving their organization money by covering a number of responsibilities—but in reality they may be wasting money in missed opportunities or inefficiency. Often the one thing employees fail to do well under pressure is to delegate work appropriately. Thus, a focus on improved communication is critical and a better prioritization of objectives is essential. Also important in dealing with pressure are effective resource management, building in time/slack, anticipating pressure points, and monitoring progress.

You Forget How to Say “No”

Perhaps you are capable of sustaining high levels of activity over a long period of time, and it has become expected that you will always perform at that pace. Your colleagues may not be aware of your sacrifice, and there may be no reward—in fact, additional work may be dumped on you because of your intensity. The solution is to be assertive and to say no or push back when the pressure keeps building. Just as it isn't practical or productive to keep a car in fifth gear at all times, you too must vary your speed and occasionally make a “pit stop.”

You Succumb to a Long Hours Culture

In some organizations, the tendency to work long hours has become part of the corporate culture. In this context, pressure creates status; putting yourself under pressure is interpreted as accomplishment. Many people put in long hours, hoping that their hard work will be noticed and rewarded, but secretly resent that they have to do this. Resist succumbing to this influence. Focus on outputs rather than inputs to define your success. Working hard and working long hours are not the same thing.

You Take it out on Others

Pressure respects no boundaries. Pressure from one aspect of your life will eventually affect the other parts of your life as well. Be aware of how pressures in your personal life may affect your work performance. It is not fair to transfer this pressure to coworkers, or anyone who is not actually part of the problem. Work on the causes and not the symptoms of pressure because compartmentalization will only work in the short term.

Where to Learn More

Web Site:

Mind Tools: www.mindtools.com/smpage.html