



## STRESS IS A RESPONSE

Most experts define stress as a response to life situations like the following:

1. Having too many responsibilities
2. Vague or confusing expectations
3. Doing unpleasant tasks
4. Facing too many distractions
5. Doing tasks for which one is unprepared
6. Working with difficult people
7. Being bored
8. Being sick
9. Experiencing too many changes
10. Being in physical danger
11. Living or working in a crowded space
12. Not getting enough exercise
13. Poor nutrition
14. Not getting enough sleep
15. Not getting enough time to relax
16. Being dissatisfied with one's physical appearance
17. Abusing drugs or alcohol, or being close to someone who abuses them

## WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Stress has become a factor in our culture in the last 20 years because of things that were originally designed to make life less stressful. Conveniences such as ATM machines, microwave ovens, and fax machines have made life easier in many ways, but they also have woven an expectation of instant gratification into our culture. And this causes stress.

## STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Almost everyone complains of stress at work these days. It often results from one of the following:

1. Having too much or too little work to do
2. Having to do work that is very complicated and demanding
3. Having to do work that is boring and repetitive
4. Having unclear goals and expectations
5. Having to follow changing or confusing procedures
6. Being at a career dead end
7. Working in a company with an impersonal management philosophy

## HOW WORK STRESS AFFECTS PEOPLE

**People at the top** of organizations suffer from stress because of excessive workloads, unrealistic expectations, and isolation. The phrase "it's lonely at the top" has some truth to it.

**Middle managers** often experience stress because they have responsibility for the people who report to them, but lack the control to execute what is expected. With the recent epidemic of corporate downsizing, middle managers have also been given greater and greater workloads. Managers who manage to keep their jobs often fear job loss.

**Professionals** suffer from their own brand of stress caused by monotony. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals often perform the same kind of work for many years, resulting in boredom and desperation.

**Workers at the lower levels** of today's organizations often feel stress caused by boredom and the frustration of dealing with the public. They also may feel less successful than their coworkers and may feel stressed by their lack of status.

## WHY WORKPLACE STRESS HAS INCREASED

1. The nature of work has changed. The fight-or-flight responses to stress are ineffective in response to the stresses of today's life.
2. The workplace has become decentralized. In many places, people no longer work together in one place, but may be scattered around the world or work from home, connected by technology.
3. People change with each generation. Baby Boomers differ from Generation Xers in terms of their values, work ethic, and their definitions of success. These generational differences contribute to stress at work.

## WORK STRESS UNIQUE TO WOMEN

1. Overall, women are still paid less than men for the same work.
2. Women still face a glass ceiling as they climb the corporate ladder. A recent report stated that only 2% of the members of top management of North



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American corporations are women.

3. Women who choose to have children are usually responsible for the logistics of child care.
4. Women with children often do more housework when they get home than their husbands do.
5. Compared with men, women with children also tend to experience more guilt feelings about leaving their children to go to work.

## HOW CAN STRESS BE MANAGED

The most important part of any stress-reducing strategy is to learn to manage relationships.

**Identify the sources of stress in your relationships.** Write about them in a journal. Make a list of people who cause you stress and explore what the issues are.

**Resolve the underlying issues.** For each of the situations identified in step 1, assess what needs to happen to resolve it. Make a list and design a plan to improve the situation.

**Learn skills to improve relationships.** Relationship skills are learned. We are not born knowing how to get along well with others, and most of us learned only limited skills from our parents. Identify the skills you need to develop, and make a plan for yourself. You can learn these skills by reading books, taking classes, or working with a therapist.

**Avoid toxic people and situations.** Some people have a toxic effect on you. If you can, limit the amount of time you spend with them. Look for opportunities to decline their invitations. When these people are family members, remind yourself that you don't have to feel guilty about avoiding anyone who makes you feel bad about yourself. In work situations, look for ways to rearrange your schedule or your workspace to avoid interacting with such people.

**Seek out positive people and situations.** This step is the reverse of the previous step. Look for opportunities to spend more time with people and in situations that make you feel good. Think about people who make you feel good about yourself and look for ways to increase time with them.

## MORE STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS

Besides learning to deal with people in a more positive manner, you can do many other things, such as the

following, to manage the stress in your life.

**Watch what you eat.** Some substances amplify the stress response. These include:

- **Caffeine** stimulates the release of stress hormones. This increases heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen to the heart. Ongoing exposure to caffeine can harm the tissue of the heart.
- **Refined sugar and processed flour** are depleted of needed vitamins. In times of stress, certain vitamins help the body maintain the nervous and endocrine systems.
- **Too much salt** can lead to excessive fluid retention. This can lead to nervous tension and higher blood pressure. Stress often adds to the problem by causing increased blood pressure.
- **Alcohol** robs the body of nutrition that it might otherwise use for cell growth and repair. It also harms the liver and adds empty calories to the body.

During times of high stress, eat more complex carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables, whole breads, cereals, and beans).

**Stop smoking.** Smoking not only causes disease and shortens life, it leads to increased heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration.

**Get moving.** The human body was designed to be physically active. However, in most jobs today, people are sitting down most of the time. They hardly move at all except when it is time for coffee break or lunch. When faced with stressors, we respond with our minds, not our bodies. It is no wonder that many of us have a difficult time responding to stressful events.

Exercise is one of the simplest and most effective ways to respond to stress. Activity provides a natural release for the body during its fight-or-flight state of arousal. After exercising, the body returns to its normal state of equilibrium, and one feels relaxed and refreshed.

**Look for ways to let go of tension and anxiety.** Meditation and progressive relaxation are two valuable ways to regenerate and refresh yourself. You can purchase meditation and relaxation audiotapes or record your own. This is especially important because your health and long life depend on minimizing stress and achieving a sense of balance and well-being.



**Dr. Jonathan Isaacson** is a licensed clinical psychologist, specializing in pre-marital and marriage counseling. He also specializes in helping singles choose healthy partners and loving relationships. With proven and timeless principles and strategies, you can create a loving marriage that will last a lifetime. Dr. Isaacson guides his clients to resolve couples distress and overcome challenges. He offers programs on marriage/relationship enhancement that includes a couple's personality and relationship profiles. Dr. Isaacson helps individuals overcome psychological and emotional problems which only become exacerbated in a relationship. He is the Director of **The Marriage Clinic** in Beachwood, Ohio and can be reached at **216-292-4500**.