

Understanding Stress at Work



What is Stress?

Stress. It's a word we hear almost everywhere we go these days. But what does it really mean? Stress is a set of reactions that take place in your body in response to an event.

What Causes Stress?

Any event that triggers a stress reaction in your body is called a stressor. It can be a physical demand, such as having to run for a bus, or an emotional demand, such as having to cope with the illness or death of a loved one. Even good things, like getting married or going on a vacation, can be stressful.

There are many situations at work that can also cause stress. One of these may apply to you:

- ▶ your company is downsizing and your job is about to change
- ▶ you fear that you could get injured
- ▶ your job is demanding with too many deadlines
- ▶ you're expected to do a new job, but haven't been given enough training
- ▶ you're discriminated against at work

Research shows that the two factors that contribute most to stress on the job are high pressure (having too much to do and not enough time to do it) and lack of control or influence.

How Can Stress Affect Your Health?

Your body first reacts to stress as if it were in a "fight or flight" situation. Your heart speeds up, you breathe faster, and a hormone called adrenaline is pumped into your bloodstream to give you the energy you need to fight or run. All of these changes help you deal with a stressor that lasts for only a short time. But if the stressor lasts a long time, these changes can harm your health.

For example, prolonged stress can lead to:

- ▶ irritability
- ▶ fatigue
- ▶ headaches
- ▶ increased number of infections (colds, 'flu, etc.)
- ▶ diarrhea or constipation
- ▶ changes in appetite, leading to weight gain or loss
- ▶ ulcers
- ▶ high blood pressure
- ▶ depression
- ▶ heart disease

Prolonged exposure to high levels of stress may also be linked to some forms of cancer and other chronic diseases.

How Can Stress Affect Your Work?

When you're under too much stress at work, you may:

- ▶ feel rushed and helpless
- ▶ get angry or upset easily
- ▶ find it hard to concentrate
- ▶ make more mistakes
- ▶ find it hard to make decisions
- ▶ waste more time
- ▶ be less creative
- ▶ find it hard to get along with co-workers and your boss
- ▶ be less courteous with customers
- ▶ miss work more often

Companies often notice that absenteeism levels rise and productivity and quality drop during times of change and high stress. There also may be more accidents and illnesses.

How Much Stress is Too Much?

The important thing to understand is that we all need some level of stress in our lives. Like food, stress is an important source of energy. However, too much stress (or too little) can be harmful. In general, the more stress you're under, and the longer you're under it, the more likely your health and work will suffer.

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