

How to Manage Workplace Stress

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Workplace [stress](#) is a serious subject. According to a survey from the American Psychological Association, more than one third of American workers [experience chronic work stress](#)—and this is costing American businesses [billions of dollars](#) a year in lost work hours and medical bills. More importantly, all this worrying at work can have serious consequences for our quality of life—not only at the office, but everywhere else as well. So how do we regain our sanity and take back our lives?

After 17 years in the working world and another two as a business owner, I've learned a thing or two about workplace stress and burnout—and about the importance of managing stress so it doesn't take over our lives. In honor of Stress Awareness Month, which runs throughout April this year, I want to share with you the formulas I've discovered for managing workplace stress.

Letting Go of the “Invincibility” Myth

As we begin to address workplace stress, I believe we need to start by reminding ourselves that we are not invincible.

Remember when we were teenagers and thought we were invincible? We did stupid things like drive too fast, drink too much, and play with fire (either literally or figuratively). Many of us were lucky to make it out of our teens alive, what with our cavalier attitude toward mortality.

At some point (usually in our late 20s or early 30s), many of us start to realize we aren't actually invincible. People we know die. We stop doing the blatantly stupid stuff and start doing more of the “adult” stuff, such as working long hours, stressing over how great the front yard looks, or lying awake worrying about missing a deadline at work.

But it turns out the “adult” stuff can be just as dangerous as driving too fast. We work 60-plus hours a week as if there are no consequences. We run around creating the perfect household, trying to be the perfect partner, the perfect parent, or the perfect community pillar. We get stretched thin with obligations, deadlines, and trying to prove our worth. In other words, we are still acting as if we're invincible.

The truth of the matter is that we are not invincible. We burn out. We get sick. We are vulnerable. In fact, stress is responsible for [75-90 percent of all doctor's office visits](#). Stress contributes to [heart disease](#), [diabetes](#), obesity, and autoimmune diseases .

In other words, stress shouldn't be ignored. The good news is, coping with stress is actually pretty simple.

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Three-Step Plan for Managing Workplace Stress

To effectively manage stress, we need to address it in at least three areas of our lives: our physical health, our mental health, and our sense of purpose. Below, I've detailed stress-relieving tips for each of these areas.

One: Start By De-Stressing Your Body

In modern life, we spend far more time engaging our bodies' stress responses than we do engaging our relaxation responses. This has serious consequences for our physical health, as too much stress can accelerate the [aging process](#), [suppress our immune systems](#), and leave us feeling fatigued and depressed.

Since stress is a physical and hormonal chain reaction, the first place to start is using your body to interrupt the response. Indeed, the foundation for living a stress-free, physically energized life lies in what we eat, how (and how often) we move, and how much we sleep. The following are some of my favorite tips for eradicating stress on a physical level.

Stress-Relieving Tips for the Body

- 1. Eat whole foods.** Processed food can cause us to [feel anxious](#) and can even [contribute to ADD](#). We can prevent these symptoms by eating whole foods, eating more fruits and vegetables (especially green ones), and getting a healthy dose of omega-3 fatty acids from salmon or seeds such as hemp, chia and flax. Nourishing your body will make you better prepared to take on whatever challenges you'll face at work.
- 2. Exercise regularly.** Physical activity releases feel-good, [stress-relieving chemicals](#). Every time you find your stress level on the rise, get up and move. You can stretch, run in place, dance, or walk around the office or building. Doing so gets your blood and endorphins flowing, makes you happy, and turns off your flight or fight stress response. Boost the physical benefits of moving by taking several deep, cleansing breathes that trigger your relaxation stressor.
- 3. Get enough sleep.** Work stressors are magnified when we're sleep-deprived and foggy-brained. Aim for eight hours of sleep each night. Sleeping well can help you [solve problems](#) with a clearer mind and even [boost your intelligence](#).

Two: Remember To De-Stress Your Mind

When I ask audiences the question, "What is stress?", I typically receive answers such as "deadlines," "traffic," "over-commitment," "not enough time," and even "having to deal with "stupid" people." These answers suggest that **many of us believe stress is something that happens to us. In reality, stress is merely our response to all those external factors.**

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The stress response is a function of our autonomic nervous system's flight-or-fight response. Specifically, stress is triggered by a [thought or belief](#) that we are in danger—and our body then goes into overdrive producing cortisol and adrenaline to help us get out of danger as fast as possible.

Let's repeat that for emphasis: **Stress begins in our minds via a thought or belief.** Thus, an important key to neutralizing stress is to fuel our minds with more positive, happy, gratitude-filled thoughts in order to trigger our stress responses less often.

Stress-Relieving Tips for the Mind

1. Cultivate gratitude. Things will go wrong throughout our workday, or at least not according to plan. This is inevitable. We can take the sting out of these negative events by focusing on what's great in our life. Each evening, write down three things you are grateful for. They can be as simple as seeing a gorgeous sunrise or being complimented on your new pair of shoes.

2. Meditate regularly. A consistent [meditation practice](#)—even if it's only five minutes a day—may [help lower blood pressure](#), and can help us control the thoughts that can trigger stress. The next time you get stressed because your boss just added another task to your already overflowing [to-do list](#), stop and take a breath. Shake out your body, sit back down and meditate for five minutes.

3. Learn to say “no”. Being overbooked, overworked, and overcommitted will lead to stress. We often feel obligated to say “yes” to everything for fear we won't be liked. But **the greatest act of stress relief is exercising your right to say no.** You can be polite but firm: Explain to others that you are overcommitted and that you must say no. And yes, you can even tell your boss “no”; just explain that one more project will mean the quality of your work will drop. Negotiate priorities.

Three: Don't Lose Sight of Your Purpose

Each of us is more than the work we do. We are creative, in relationships, spiritual, and passionate. Connecting with our *whole* selves by fueling our sense of purpose is the keystone for less stress and more happiness, both in the office and outside of it.

“What's that?”, you say? What is purpose and what does it have to do with stress? As [I've written before](#), purpose can be thought of as a person's calling in the world—but it's really broader than that. It encompasses everything from meaningful work, to relationships, to the hobbies that brings us joy and meaning. Purpose is the expression of our own unique spirit.

When we starve our purpose—by not engaging with our work, suppressing our creativity, or ignoring our relationships (including the one with ourselves)—we trigger our stress response. When our life is full of nothing but work and obligations, we begin to feel bitter, resentful,

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depressed, and even angry. The antidote to these feelings is to focus on fueling *all* facets of our life. Bonus: Doing so will give us even more for which we can be grateful.

Stress-Relieving Tips for Your Purpose

1. Schedule quality social time. When we're working crazy hours, we can find ourselves detached from our relationships. Each week, schedule some time with a loved to just be together, hang out, and laugh. No work talk allowed, and no checking the smartphone. Disengage from work and reengage with those that matter.

2. Get creative. Remember how much fun you had as a kid doing crafts. You might have stopped because your last creation wasn't perfect, or because you didn't have the time. But it's important to [carve out some time to be creative](#) and tap into your inner kid. [Creativity can include anything](#) from cooking dinner, handwriting a card to a friend, or creating a vision board. Get out the scissors and glue stick and just play.

3. Get spiritual. Regardless of what "spirituality" means to you, one thing is certain: When we are overworked and chronically stressed, we can forget about our place in the bigger picture. Connecting with your spiritual roots through prayer, meditation, chanting or other rituals is an excellent way to get perspective on what's stressing you and relieve that pressure. Another simple tip? Pull out a world map and reflect on how big the earth is, and where you fit in.

The Takeaway

We cannot eliminate or escape stress at the workplace. It is a fact of modern life. Yet we can neutralize stress in all areas of our lives by fueling our lives with meaningful actions, thoughts, and beliefs. We all deserve to live a happy, contented life. It's never too late to start making yours.

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