

3.5: Avoiding and Managing Stress

Learning Objectives

1. Understand what individuals can do to manage their own stress.
2. Understand what organizations can do to help their employees avoid and manage stress.

Individual Approaches to Managing Stress

The Corporate Athlete

Luckily, there are several ways to manage stress. One way is to harness stress's ability to improve our performance. Jack Groppe was working as a professor of kinesiology and bioengineering at the University of Illinois when he became interested in applying the principles of athletic performance to workplace performance. Could eating better, exercising more, and developing a positive attitude turn distress into eustress? Groppe's answer was yes. If professionals trained their minds and bodies to perform at peak levels through better nutrition, focused training, and positive action, Groppe said, they could become "corporate athletes" working at optimal physical, emotional, and mental levels.

The "corporate athlete" approach to stress is a proactive (action first) rather than a reactive (response-driven) approach. While an overdose of stress can cause some individuals to stop exercising, eat less nutritional foods, and develop a sense of hopelessness, corporate athletes ward off the potentially overwhelming feelings of stress by developing strong bodies and minds that embrace challenges, as opposed to being overwhelmed by them.

Flow

Turning stress into fuel for corporate athleticism is one way of transforming a potential enemy into a workplace ally. Another way to transform stress is by breaking challenges into smaller parts, and embracing the ones that give us joy. In doing so, we can enter a state much like that of a child at play, fully focused on the task at hand, losing track of everything except our genuine connection to the challenge before us. This concept of total engagement in one's work, or in other activities, is called *flow*. The term *flow* was coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and is defined as a state of consciousness in which a person is totally absorbed in an activity. We've all experienced flow: It's the state of mind in which you feel strong, alert, and in effortless control.

Figure 7.5

High Focus	20% of managers are disengaged at work	10% of managers engage in purposeful work
Low Focus	30% of managers are procrastinators	40% of managers are distracted at work
	Low Energy	High Energy

A key to flow is engaging at work, yet research shows that most managers do not feel they are engaged in purposeful work.

Sources: Adapted from information in Bruch, H., & Ghoshal, S. (2002, February). Beware the busy manager. *Harvard Business Review*, 80, 62–69; Schiuma, G., Mason, S., & Kennerley, M. (2007). Assessing energy within organizations. *Measuring Business Excellence*, 11, 69–78.

According to this way of thinking, the most pleasurable way for a person to work is in harmony with his or her true interests. Work is seen as more similar to playing games than most activities adults do. This is because work consists of tasks, puzzles, surprises, and potentially rewarding challenges. By breaking down a busy workday into smaller pieces, individuals can shift from the "stress" of work to a more engaged state of flow.

Designing Work That Flows

Keep in mind that work that flows includes the following:

- *Challenge*: the task is reachable but requires a stretch
- *Meaningfulness*: the task is worthwhile or important
- *Competence*: the task uses skills that you have

- *Choice*: you have some say in the task and how it's carried out (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)

Corporate athleticism and flow are two concepts that can help you cope with stress. Next, let us focus more on exactly how individual lifestyle choices affect our stress levels. Eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, and employing time management techniques are all things we can affect that can decrease our feelings of stress.

Diet

Figure 7.6



Eating healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables is a key to stress management.

Yukiko Matsuoka – [Vegetable](#) – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Greasy foods often make a person feel tired. Why? Because it takes the body longer to digest fats, which means the body is diverting blood from the brain and making you feel sluggish. Eating big, heavy meals in the middle of the day may actually slow us down, because the body will be pumping blood to the stomach, away from the brain. A better choice for lunch might be fish, such as wild salmon. Fish keeps you alert because of its effect on two important brain chemicals—dopamine and norepinephrine—which produce a feeling of alertness, increased concentration, and faster reaction times (Wurtman, 1988).

Exercise

Exercise is another strategy for managing stress. The best kind of break to take may be a physically active one. Research has shown that physically active breaks lead to enhanced mental concentration and decreased mental fatigue. One study, conducted by Belgian researchers, examined the effect of breaks on workers in a large manufacturing company. One-half of the workers were told to rest during their breaks. The other half did mild calisthenics. Afterward, each group was given a battery of tests. The group who had done the mild calisthenics scored far better on all measures of memory, decision-making ability, eye-hand coordination, and fine motor control (Miller, 1986).

Strange as it may seem, exercise gives us more energy. How energetic we feel depends on our maximum oxygen capacity (the total amount of oxygen we utilize from the air we breathe). The more oxygen we absorb in each breath, the more energy and stamina we will have. Yoga and meditation are other physical activities that are helpful in managing stress. Regular exercise increases our body's ability to draw more oxygen out of the air we breathe. Therefore, taking physically active breaks may be helpful in combating stress.

Sleep

It is a vicious cycle. Stress can make it hard to sleep. Not sleeping makes it harder to focus on work in general, as well as on specific tasks. Tired folks are more likely to lose their temper, upping the stress level of others. American insomnia is a stress-related epidemic—one-third of adults claim to have trouble sleeping and 37% admit to actually having fallen asleep while driving in the past year (Tumminello, 2007).

The work–life crunch experienced by many Americans makes a good night’s sleep seem out of reach. According to the journal *Sleep*, workers who suffer from insomnia are more likely to miss work due to exhaustion. These missed days ultimately cost employers thousands of dollars per person in missed productivity each year, which can total over \$100 billion across all industries. ^[1] As you might imagine, a person who misses work due to exhaustion will return to work to find an even more stressful workload. This cycle can easily increase the stress level of a work team as well as the overtired individual.

Create a Social Support Network

A consistent finding is that those individuals who have a strong social support network are less stressed than those who do not (Halbesleben, 2006). Research finds that social support can buffer the effects of stress (Yperfen & Hagedoorn, 2003). Individuals can help build up social support by encouraging a team atmosphere in which coworkers support one another. Just being able to talk with and listen to others, either with coworkers at work or with friends and family at home, can help decrease stress levels.

Time Management

Time management is defined as the development of tools or techniques that help to make us more productive when we work. Effective time management is a major factor in reducing stress, because it decreases much of the pressure we feel. With information and role overload it is easy to fall into bad habits of simply reacting to unexpected situations. Time management techniques include prioritizing, manageable organization, and keeping a schedule such as a paper or electronic organizing tool. Just like any new skill, developing time management takes conscious effort, but the gains might be worthwhile if your stress level is reduced.

Listen Up and Learn More

Check out this interview with *Fast Company* and Tony Wright, CEO of RescueTime, who has created a tool to evaluate your productivity using data from your computer.

www.fastcompany.tv/video/see-...ith-RescueTime

This software is available at <http://www.RescueTime.com/> and is currently free to use.

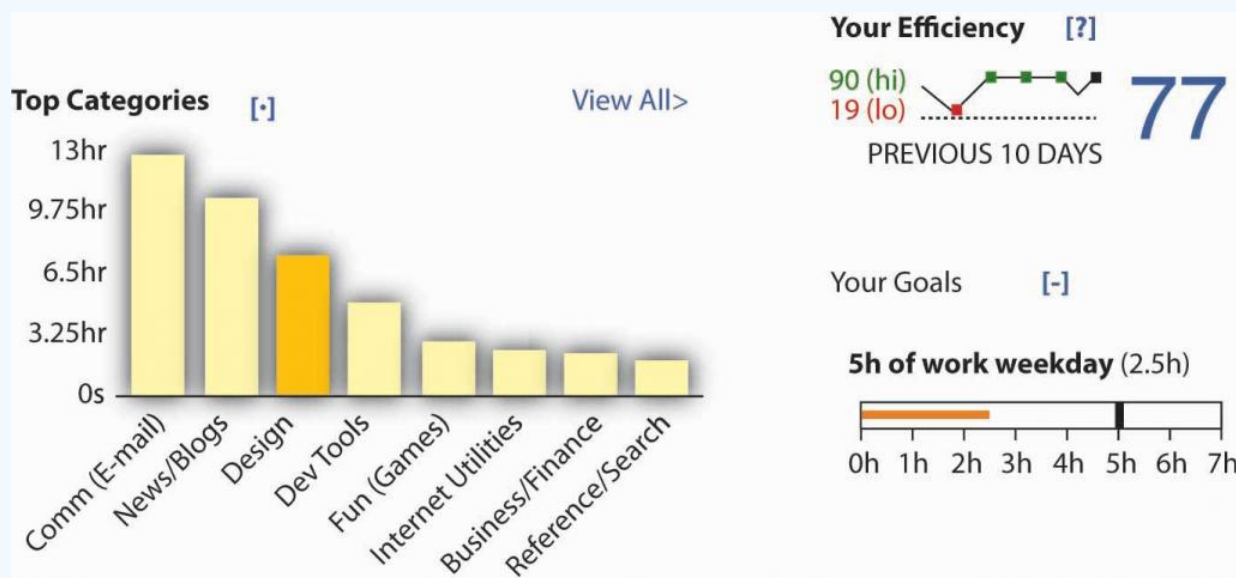


Figure 3.5.7: This is an example of output from a RescueTime user. Source: Used by permission from RescueTime.

Organizational Approaches to Managing Stress

Stress-related issues cost businesses billions of dollars per year in absenteeism, accidents, and lost productivity (Hobson, 2004). As a result, managing employee stress is an important concern for organizations as well as individuals. For example, Renault, the French automaker, invites consultants to train their 2,100 supervisors to avoid the outcomes of negative stress for themselves and their subordinates. IBM Corporation encourages its worldwide employees to take an online stress assessment that helps them create action plans based on their results. Even organizations such as General Electric Company (GE) that are known for a “winner takes all” mentality are seeing the need to reduce stress. Lately, GE has brought in comedians to lighten up the workplace atmosphere,

and those receiving low performance ratings are no longer called the “bottom 10s” but are now referred to as the “less effectives” (Dispatches from the war on stress, 2007). Organizations can take many steps to helping employees with stress, including having more clear expectations of them, creating jobs where employees have autonomy and control, and creating a fair work environment. Finally, larger organizations normally utilize outside resources to help employees get professional help when needed.

Make Expectations Clear

One way to reduce stress is to state your expectations clearly. Workers who have clear descriptions of their jobs experience less stress than those whose jobs are ill defined (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Sauter, Murphy, & Hurrell, 1990). The same thing goes for individual tasks. Can you imagine the benefits of working in a place where every assignment was clear and employees were content and focused on their work? It would be a great place to work as a manager, too. Stress can be contagious, but as we’ve seen above, this kind of happiness can be contagious, too. Creating clear expectations doesn’t have to be a top-down event. Managers may be unaware that their directives are increasing their subordinates’ stress by upping their confusion. In this case, a gentle conversation that steers a project in a clearer direction can be a simple but powerful way to reduce stress. In the interest of reducing stress on all sides, it’s important to frame situations as opportunities for solutions as opposed to sources of anger.

Give Employees Autonomy

Giving employees a sense of autonomy is another thing that organizations can do to help relieve stress (Kossek, Lautschb, & Eaton, 2006). It has long been known that one of the most stressful things that individuals deal with is a lack of control over their environment. Research shows that individuals who feel a greater sense of control at work deal with stress more effectively both in the United States and in Hong Kong (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Xie, 2000). Similarly, in a study of American and French employees, researchers found that the negative effects of emotional labor were much less for those employees with the autonomy to customize their work environment and customer service encounters (Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005). Employees’ stress levels are likely to be related to the degree that organizations can build autonomy and support into jobs.

Create Fair Work Environments

Work environments that are unfair and unpredictable have been labeled “toxic workplaces.” A toxic workplace is one in which a company does not value its employees or treat them fairly (Webber, 1998). Statistically, organizations that value employees are more profitable than those that do not (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Welbourne & Andrews, 1996). Research shows that working in an environment that is seen as fair helps to buffer the effects of stress (Judge & Colquitt, 2004). This reduced stress may be because employees feel a greater sense of status and self-esteem or due to a greater sense of trust within the organization. These findings hold for outcomes individuals receive as well as the process for distributing those outcomes (Greenberg, 2004). Whatever the case, it is clear that organizations have many reasons to create work environments characterized by fairness, including lower stress levels for employees. In fact, one study showed that training supervisors to be more interpersonally sensitive even helped nurses feel less stressed about a pay cut (Greenberg, 2006).

Supervisor Support: Work-Family Conflict Survey

Think of your current or most recent supervisor and rate each of the following items in terms of this person’s behavior toward you.

Answer the following questions using 1 = not at all, 2 = somewhat, 3 = fully agree

1.	_____	My supervisor is willing to listen to my problems in juggling work and nonwork life.
2.	_____	My supervisor takes the time to learn about my personal needs.
3.	_____	My supervisor makes me feel comfortable talking to him or her about my conflicts between work and nonwork.
4.	_____	My supervisor and I can talk effectively to solve conflicts between work and nonwork issues.

5.	_____	I can depend on my supervisor to help me with scheduling conflicts if I need it.
6.	_____	I can rely on my supervisor to make sure my work responsibilities are handled when I have unanticipated nonwork demands.
7.	_____	My supervisor works effectively with workers to creatively solve conflicts between work and nonwork.
8.	_____	My supervisor is a good role model for work and nonwork balance.
9.	_____	My supervisor demonstrates effective behaviors in how to juggle work and nonwork balance.
10.	_____	My supervisor demonstrates how a person can jointly be successful on and off the job.
11.	_____	My supervisor thinks about how the work in my department can be organized to jointly benefit employees and the company.
12.	_____	My supervisor asks for suggestions to make it easier for employees to balance work and nonwork demands.
13.	_____	My supervisor is creative in reallocating job duties to help my department work better as a team.
14.	_____	My supervisor is able to manage the department as a whole team to enable everyone's needs to be met.

Add up all your ratings to see how your supervisor stacks up.

Score total = _____

Scoring:

- A score of 14 to 23 indicates low levels of supervisor support.
- A score of 24 to 33 indicates average levels of supervisor support.
- A score of 34 to 42 indicates high levels of supervisor support.

Adapted from Hammer, L. B., Kossek, E. E., Yragui, N. L., Bodner, T. E., & Hanson, G. C. (in press). Development and validation of a multidimensional measure of family supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB). *Journal of Management*. DOI: 10.1177/0149206308328510. Used by permission of Sage Publications.

Telecommuting

Figure 7.8



Telecommuting helps employees avoid traffic jams like this one.

Jonbgem – [Traffic](#) – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Telecommuting refers to working remotely. For example, some employees work from home, a remote satellite office, or from a coffee shop for some portion of the workweek. Being able to work away from the office is one option that can decrease stress for some employees. Of course, while an estimated 45 million individuals telecommute each year, telecommuting is not for everyone (WorldatWork, 2006). At Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc., those who are interested in telecommuting are put through a rigorous training program that includes 2 weeks in one of their three home office simulation labs in Florida, New Jersey, or Manhattan to see if telecommuting is a good fit for the employee. Employees must also submit photos of their home office and a work plan. AT&T Inc. estimates that nearly 55% of its U.S.-based managers telecommute at some point in the week, and this method is also popular with managers around the world (AT&T, 2004). A recent survey found that 43% of government workers now telecommute at least part time. This trend has been growing in reaction to a law passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000 requiring federal agencies to offer working from home as an option (Gross, 2008). Merrill Lynch has seen higher productivity, less stress, lower turnover, and higher job satisfaction for those who telecommute (Chadderdon, 2008). A recent meta-analysis of all the studies of telecommuting (12,883 employees) confirmed researcher findings that the higher autonomy of working from home resulted in lower work–family conflict for these employees. Even more encouraging were the findings of higher job satisfaction, better performance, and lower stress as well (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Of course, telecommuting can also cause potential stress. The keys to successful telecommuting arrangements are to match the right employees with the right jobs to the right environments. If any variable is not within a reasonable range, such as having a dog that barks all day when the employee is at home, productivity will suffer.

Employee Sabbaticals

Sabbaticals (paid time off from the normal routine at work) have long been a sacred ritual practiced by universities to help faculty stay current, work on large research projects, and recharge every 5 to 8 years. However, many companies such as Genentech Inc., Container Store Inc., and eBay Inc. are now in the practice of granting paid sabbaticals to their employees. While 11% of large companies offer paid sabbaticals and 29% offer unpaid sabbaticals, 16% of small companies and 21% of medium-sized companies do the same (Schwartz, 1999). For example, at PricewaterhouseCoopers International Ltd., you can apply for a sabbatical after just 2 years on the job if you agree to stay with the company for at least 1 year following your break. Time off ranges from 3 to 6 months and entails either a personal growth plan or one for social services where you help others (Sahadi, 2006).

Employee Assistance Programs

There are times when life outside work causes stress in ways that will impact our lives at work and beyond. These situations may include the death of a loved one, serious illness, drug and alcohol dependencies, depression, or legal or financial problems that are impinging on our work lives. Although treating such stressors is beyond the scope of an organization or a manager, many companies offer their employees outside sources of emotional counseling. **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** are often offered to workers as an adjunct to a company-provided health care plan. Small companies in particular use outside employee assistance programs, because they don't have the needed expertise in-house. As their name implies, EAPs offer help in dealing with crises in the workplace and beyond. EAPs are often used to help workers who have substance abuse problems.

Key Takeaways

There are many individual and organizational approaches to decreasing stress and avoiding negative outcomes. Individuals can control their diet, exercise, and sleep routines; build a social support network; and practice better time management. Organizations can help make expectations clear, give employees autonomy, create fair work environments, consider telecommuting, give employee sabbaticals, and utilize employee assistance programs.

Exercises

1. Have you ever been in a state of “flow” as described in this section? If so, what was special about this time?
2. Whose responsibility do you think it is to deal with employee stress—the employee or the organization? Why?
3. Do you think most organizations are fair or unfair? Explain your answer.
4. Have you ever considered telecommuting? What do you think would be the pros and cons for you personally?

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1. For additional resources, go to the National Sleep Foundation Web site: www.nationalsleepfoundation.org. ↩

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