

## *An Overview of Stress*

We all experience stress at one time or another. Stress is a normal reaction to positive and negative changes. It affects our bodies, emotions, thoughts and behaviors. The effects of stress can be positive, negative or a combination of the two. For example, stress can motivate you and improve your concentration, or it can paralyze your ability to accomplish anything at all.

### **What Are The Signs and Symptoms of Stress?**

The following are feelings, thoughts and behaviors many of us experience at some time. If you have several of these symptoms and they linger or keep recurring, it is probably a sign of stress. Get to know your own pattern of reacting to stress so you can notice it early and work to reduce it before it gets worse.

#### **Physical Signs**

- Tiredness or fatigue
- Headache, aches and pains
- Feeling tense
- Muscle spasms
- Rapid heart beat
- Heavy perspiration or cold sweat
- Stomach and digestive problems
- Nausea or dizziness
- Heightened alertness or energy

#### **Emotional Signs**

- Anxiety or fearfulness
- Loneliness or helplessness
- Feeling on edge or apprehensive
- Easily frustrated or upset
- Feeling pressured or pressed for time
- Restlessness or listlessness
- Feeling incompetent or inadequate
- Feeling trapped or stuck
- Angers easily
- Dreading going to work
- Feeling unappreciated
- Sadness and depression
- Alienation and isolation
- Feeling guilty
- Losing interest in people and things
- Mood swings

### **Cognitive Signs**

- Trouble concentrating
- Daydreaming
- Thinking the same thing over and over
- Increased focus and concentration
- Confusion and forgetfulness
- Trouble remembering things
- Dulled thinking

### **Behavioral Signs**

- Missing deadlines
- Following rules rigidly
- Being extra-productive
- Making more mistakes than usual
- Increased aggression
- Using alcohol, drugs and cigarettes
- Change in eating or sleeping habits

## **What Causes Stress in the Workplace?**

- Unrealistic expectations
- Too much to do or too little time to complete assignments
- Change in supervisor
- Change in job responsibilities or classification
- Job burn-out or lack of challenge
- Lack of appreciation or acknowledgement
- Performance appraisal, raise, promotion or demotion
- Interpersonal conflict
- Pressures and deadlines
- Financial cutbacks, hiring freezes, layoffs and job insecurity
- Lack of information needed for your job
- Miscommunications among staff
- Illness or death of a co-worker
- Changes or problems at home

## **What Can I Do to Prevent or Reduce Stress?**

### **Watch for negative thinking**

Notice how you talk to yourself about yourself, others and the world around you. Try not to repeat negative thoughts to yourself; instead, try to substitute neutral or positive thoughts.

### **Communicate clearly**

Speak your mind without making accusations. Let others know when they make you uncomfortable. Take responsibility for your own feelings.

### **Don't overlook your own needs**

Especially when you are focusing on the needs of someone else, who may appear needier than you. It is stressful to care for someone who is sick or dependent. Don't try to make too many changes or accomplish too much at once.

Make a list of priorities. Break things down into manageable pieces. Set limits.

Exercise moderately at least two to three times a week. Find a physical activity you really enjoy. A brisk walk at lunchtime can be a big help.

### **Take care of yourself**

Maintain a healthy diet. Caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and drugs all contribute to stress. Get plenty of sleep. Don't forget to laugh, play and have fun.

### **Mindfulness and Relaxation**

Practice deep breathing, visualization, meditation, yoga, stretching or some other technique that helps you relax. Try to let go of what's bothering you.

Go to a movie, read a good book, solve a puzzle, take a break from whatever is causing you stress. When you are feeling more relaxed you will have an easier time finding concrete solutions to your problems.

### **Get support**

Identify co-workers, friends and family you trust and can talk to. Make social plans with them. Use the phone to reach out when you are feeling overwhelmed. Talk about your feelings, positive and negative.

**Employee Assistance staff are available to meet with employees or family members who are experiencing difficulties. Call for a free, confidential appointment at 510-643-7754**



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