



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE
OFFICE OF HEALTH SERVICES

EMPLOYEE HEALTH UPDATE: STRESS AWARENESS MONTH

April is National Stress Awareness Month, and research has linked chronic stress with life-threatening illnesses such as heart attacks, stroke, depression, and chronic pain. It can also be a major contributor to bad habits and excessive drinking, smoking and drug abuse.

Most of us have felt “stressed out” at one time or another. When this feeling persists day after day, stress becomes chronic. Chronic stress can take a toll on our careers, on our quality of life and on our bodies, making us susceptible to a host of illnesses. In fact, what many of us do not realize—and what medical researchers are confirming in study after study—is that our stress levels are directly linked to our physical well being. Seventy-five percent of our visits to the doctor’s office concern stress-related ailments.

Stress has implications for many other ailments as well. Depression and anxiety, which afflict millions of Americans, can be caused or exacerbated by stress. It also triggers flare-ups of asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, and gastrointestinal problems. And illness is just the tip of the iceberg. Stress affects you emotionally as well, marring the joy you draw from life and loved ones.

In the course of a lifetime, odds are good that you’ll experience some very stressful events. You’ll also face a gamut of far smaller, day-to-day stressors. How you deal with these stressful events, big and small, will determine the impact on your physical health and emotional well-being.

We all know that stress affects us at work. In fact, one in four people say they have missed work due to work-related stress. When we are under chronic stress, we often have trouble meeting deadlines, concentrating and making decisions. Our productivity and performance decrease as our stress levels increase. We also may become easily irritated and overwhelmed, and have relationship problems with colleagues. Many people who are over-stressed at work are unable to leave their job-related issues behind at night or they feel immobilized on the job. Stress can also mean more headaches, backaches and colds—and more sick days.

Whether the stress originates at the office or at home—or a little of both—we take it with us wherever we go. The good news is that we now know that caring for our minds as well as our bodies can keep us healthier, happier, and more productive in all aspects of life. Here are some strategies you can use to better manage stress. These tips may seem like common sense, but few of us apply them to our daily lives. They will help if you use them.

Signs of Stress

If you experience some or all of these signs of stress, and they persist, it may be time to seek help.

- Constantly overwhelmed;
- Strained relationships;
- Poor work performance;
- Overly emotional;
- “Little things” set you off frequently;
- Insomnia;
- Fatigue;
- Headaches and backaches;
- Rise in blood pressure.

Stress Management Strategies

- Treat your body right.** Eating right and exercising can increase your tolerance to stress.
- Set realistic goals.** Do what is possible and carry on.
- Set and re-set your priorities.** Take care of important and difficult tasks first, and eliminate unessential tasks.
- Take one task at a time.** Divide large projects into smaller tasks, and make “to do” lists.
- Take five.** Taking a short break can help slow down your mind long enough to improve your ability to deal with stress later.



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- ☑ **Learn to relax or meditate.** Studies show that just 10 to 20 minutes of quiet reflection or meditation a day can bring relief from chronic stress and increase your tolerance to it.
- ☑ **Give yourself a break.** No one is perfect. Striving to be the best in everything will lead to worry, anxiety and failure.
- ☑ **Learn to say “no.”** Slow down and be honest about what you can comfortably do.
- ☑ **Be flexible.** Make allowances for other people’s opinions and be prepared to compromise.
- ☑ **Avoid excessive competition.** Excessive competition can be dangerous emotionally and physically—not to mention damaging to your job.
- ☑ **Go easy on criticism.** You may expect too much of yourself or others. Try not to feel let down or frustrated when your expectations are not met.
- ☑ **Manage your anger.** Retreat before you lose control. Allow time for you both to cool down. You will both be better equipped to handle the problem constructively later.
- ☑ **Be honest with colleagues.** Make it plain you feel you are in a bind. Chances are others feel the same. Do not just complain—make practical suggestions for improvement.
- ☑ **Talk it out with a loved one.** Talking it out can help you see things more clearly, release negative feelings, and get emotional support.

Mini Relaxation Techniques

Mini-relaxations can help allay fear and reduce pain while you sit in the dentist’s chair or lie on an examining table. They are equally helpful in thwarting stress before an important meeting, while stuck in traffic, or when faced with people or situations that annoy you. **Here are a few quick relaxation techniques to try.**

One Minute - When you have 1 minute:

Place your hand just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation. Alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself “I am” as you, breathe in and “at peace” as you breathe out. Repeat slowly two or three times. Then feel your entire body relax into the support of the chair.

Two Minutes - When you have 2 minutes:

Count down slowly from 10 to zero. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply saying “10” to yourself. Breathe out slowly. On your next breath, say “nine,” and so on. If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

Three Minutes - When you have 3 minutes:

While sitting down, take a break from whatever you are doing and check your body for tension. Relax your facial muscles and allow your jaw to fall open slightly. Let your shoulders drop. Let your arms fall to your sides. Allow your hands to loosen so that there are spaces between your fingers. Uncross your legs or ankles. Feel your thighs sink into your chair, letting your legs fall comfortably apart. Feel your shins and calves become heavier and your feet grow roots into the floor. Now breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly. Each time you breathe out, try to relax even more.

***Asking for help is not a sign of weakness—taking care of yourself is a sign of strength.
Do not be afraid to Seek Professional Assistance.***

Sources for this article and links to read more:

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Mental Health America (formerly known as the National Mental Health Association) - www.nmha.org/index.cfm?objectid=C7DF987A-1372-4D20-C88A8696DA98036F - *Supplemental Result*
Harvard Health Publications – <http://www.health.harvard.edu/health>
Stress Institute – <http://www.stressinstitute.com/>
Dr. Orman’s Wellness Center: Stress Cure – <http://www.stresscure.com/>

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