



COMMENTARY:

Ask Annie

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4 easy ways to beat stress at work

Feel like you're working in a pressure cooker? Here's how to manage when you're feeling overwhelmed. Plus, 10 wackiest coffee-break stunts. By [Anne Fisher](#), Fortune senior writer

(Fortune) -- Why did you quit your last job - assuming you left voluntarily? According to a recent study of 93 big companies by human-resources consultants Watson Wyatt (www.watsonwyatt.com), the No. 1 reason why people quit is excessive stress. Yet employers seem unaware of this, or in denial: When asked why they thought employees were leaving, most HR managers gave insufficient pay and lack of career development, including promotions, as the main reasons.

When it comes to dealing with stress on the job, you're on your own, says Tevis Gale, a career coach and head of a consulting firm called Balance Integration (www.balanceintegration.com).

"That study makes clear that you can't wait for your employer to 'get' just how big a problem your stress level is," notes Gale. "You have to take responsibility for managing it yourself, and do it now."

On top of the usual stressors - ever-higher productivity targets, only 24 hours in a day, and the struggle to carve out some kind of life outside of work - economic uncertainty adds "the fear of layoffs and feelings of powerlessness," says Gale.

If you're overwhelmed by it all, try these four stress-fighting tactics:

Make a long-term to-do list. Think about all the small, incremental things you can do to build career success over the course of a year, or five years - take someone out for a networking lunch now and then, work on picking up a new skill, put in a little extra time helping the boss solve a knotty problem. Making a list of these, and doing something on the list when you feel "stuck" in your regular job, will help you feel you're getting somewhere and not just spinning your wheels. That sense of accomplishment is a powerful stress reducer.

Several times a day, just chill. "From taking a deep breath, to stretching, to going over your schedule to cross off non-essential commitments, we each have things we know we can do to ease our stress level," says Gale. Get in the habit of taking a few minutes several times a day to consciously manage stress. Take a short walk. Call a loved one on the phone. Check out a web site that makes you laugh. It sounds simple but, over time, you'll probably find you're less exhausted.

Fight perfectionism. Many successful people suffer from a neurosis I call "A-student syndrome," which makes them feel they have to be perfect at everything. This is a dandy way to stress yourself out even more than your job, or your life, actually requires.

"When you carry the expectation in your head that you must eat healthy foods at every meal or make it to the gym for an hour every day" - or (insert your self-imposed demand here): make your child's Halloween costume instead of buying one, for example - "you often condemn yourself to failure and raise your stress level," Gale notes. Instead, try embracing the idea that sometimes a B or a C is just fine. Set realistic goals, and celebrate when you achieve them.

Mark necessities on your calendar in ink, not pencil. "Sure, we all know people who seem to fit in a weekly massage, get a haircut every six weeks without fail, and somehow make time for volunteer work and book clubs," says Gale. Never mind those people. Instead, Gale advises, ask: "What are the things that you know are non-negotiable to you over the course of a year?" From dental exams to your annual vacation, commit to the really necessary stuff as soon as possible. "By holding these times as 'sacred' in your calendar," Gale says, "you'll carry a calming sense that there is a baseline of self-care in place no matter how chaotic things get in the meantime."

Of course, one popular stress-buster is a good old-fashioned coffee break, and a survey by CareerBuilder.com found that 49% of us take at least one per day; 32% take two or more. The survey asked 5,600 people to reveal the most unusual thing they or a colleague had ever done while pausing for a cup of joe.

The top 10 answers:

1. Proposed marriage
2. Judged a "Best Legs" contest
3. Shrink-wrapped a coworker's new car
4. Did step aerobics in his cubicle
5. Left the office to chase a weasel outside
6. Held a burping contest
7. Ran a race in a wedding dress
8. Kissed a fellow employee in the stairwell
9. Did a fast re-enactment of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show"
10. Walked a newborn turkey around the building.