

Don't let workplace stress wreck your life

Tame the tension with exercise and advanced planning

By Allison Van Dusen

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While a great motivator, stress isn't so great for your health.

When under stress, people don't turn to granola for comfort. Instead, they skip the gym, head for a double cheeseburger and fries at the nearest fast food joint and have a smoke, according to a 2006 random national survey of more than 2,000 people conducted by the American Psychological Association. Of those questioned, 59 percent said work was a leading source of stress and 47 percent said they were concerned about stress in their lives. It's also not great for the bottom line, often resulting in absenteeism, lowered productivity, turnover and health claims. Research has shown that people who are stressed out are more likely to experience hypertension, anxiety or depression and obesity.

But some businesses, particularly those small- to mid-sized, are hesitant to hire stress relief experts or pay for workshops aimed at helping employees find balance in their lives.

That's because, "companies don't look at the long-term result," says Sue Peterson, business manager of the publishing companies Healthy Learning and Coaches Choice, and an expert on workplace ergonomics. "If they spent a little in the long run, they'll save money and have more productive employees, happier employees. It's a good investment."

Stretch it out

Just ask Beth Superfin. The senior manager for AOL Media Networks was skeptical at first about the idea of doing yoga in her office conference room. But she quickly got over it when she saw how easy it was to pop down the hall for a free, hour-long class at 6 p.m. with sought-after instructors, then return to tie up loose ends afterward.

Her company contracts with Balance Integration, a corporation that provides an array of on-site services to foster balance and creativity in and out of work. Fees range from a couple

hundred to more than \$10,000 a month, depending on what a company wants to accomplish, says Balance Integration president Tevis Gale.

"If I don't have a break to go to the gym, I get very thrown off," Superfin says. "It would impact my stress level, anxiety, focus, and overall I think my well-being."

But if it seems unlikely that your company is going to push aside the table and chairs in the boardroom for afternoon meditation any time soon, experts on corporate stress relief say there's a lot you can do on your own to ease work stress.

Top tips

Start by knowing your body clock, suggests Mike Collins, who has presented programs on workplace effectiveness for companies ranging from American Express to IBM through his Raleigh, N.C.-based business, The Perfect Workday.

If you've got control over your schedule and you're not a morning person, be careful about calling early meetings. Do you tend to feel tired and irritable everyday around 3 p.m.?

Recognize the pattern and make sure you regularly eat a snack or get some caffeine beforehand, he says.

Likewise, plan before your next business trip to prevent stress. You can't control whether your flight is canceled or your reservation is lost. But you can manage your reaction, says Brian Kirshenbaum, a certified strength and conditioning specialist who designs custom workouts for executives through his business, Illinois-based Athletes of Corporate America. Getting to and from work could be taking a toll on your body. Here's how to take the edge off.

Begin by assuming you'll have an hour delay once you get to the airport and plan for how you'd use that time — by using the Internet, sending e-mails, taking a long walk around the terminal, finding a nearby gym or enjoying a healthy meal at a leisurely pace. You might end up disappointed when your flight takes off on time.

"One person might start freaking out because they're going to be late for a meeting," Kirshenbaum says. "Another person might see it as an extra hour."

Laugh it off

Even when the worst happens at work — a big deal collapses or an important presentation falls flat — there's something you can do, says John Morreall, president of the Virginia-

based company Humorworks, which studies the medical, psychological and social benefits of humor.

Try thinking about what the situation will look like a year from now, or if that's not long enough, 10 years from now. Will it still be so important? Could you end up laughing about any of it? Time and distance can provide the perspective we lack when we're caught up in the moment, Morreall says.

And don't forget that sometimes fun and relaxation take preparation, Collins, of *The Perfect Workday*, says. He keeps a file on his computer full of jokes and cartoons and a collection of humor books on his desk. When he feels stressed, Collins takes a moment, picks up a book and reads until something makes him laugh out loud. Much like exercise, laughter increases your heart rate and releases endorphins, making you feel like you're coming off of a high. Collins says busy professionals constantly dealing with stress should think of themselves as tightrope walkers, who have to stop and regain their balance to stay alive.

"During the work day," he says, "you have to stop every now and then to get your balance."