



# EAP EMPLOYEE ENHANCEMENT NEWSLETTER

June 2023



## DEER OAKS PRESENTS

June On-Demand Seminar

### *Keeping an Open Mind*

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# THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSORS IN THE WORKPLACE

It's normal—even helpful—to experience some stress at work. The right level of stress can sharpen your thinking and motivate you to do good work. However, too much stress, endured for too long, can be draining. It can be bad for your health, your relationships, and the quality of your work. Also, your reactions to excess stress can have a negative effect on the people around you.

How can you deal with unhealthy and unproductive work stress? Here are some tips.

## **Recognize the warning signs of excess stress.**

The first step in dealing with stress is learning to recognize its warning signs. Excess stress affects your body and mind. Without knowing its signs, stress can build gradually to the point where you're paralyzed with anxiety, lash out in anger at coworkers, or feel like you can't succeed.

So, pay attention to the signs of work stress. These may include physical signs, such as

- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Trouble sleeping
- Low energy or fatigue
- Rapid heart rate

They can also include mental and emotional signs, such as

- Apathy and loss of interest in work
- Trouble concentrating
- Anxiety, irritability, or feelings of depression
- Misuse of alcohol or drugs

## **Identify your stress triggers.**

As you become more attuned to the signs of stress, make an effort to identify what causes your stress level to rise. This might be obvious: a long stretch with extra work, worry about the possibility of layoffs, or tense relationships with coworkers or your manager. There may also be triggers to your stress that you haven't recognized, things that might bother you more than other people—perhaps because of your past experience or simply your particular personality.



As an exercise, keep notes for a week or two on when you feel an extra level of stress and what might be triggering those reactions:

- Where were you and what were you doing just before your stress level started to rise?
- Who were you interacting with?
- What were you thinking and feeling?

These notes, and your reflections on them, can help you identify your unique stress triggers. Once you've identified your most important stressors at work, think about how you might deal with them. For each stressor you identify, write down steps you might take to address it in a positive way. That might mean getting a better handle on your workload to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Or it might mean learning to recognize and control negative thinking or irrational fears.

## Reduce work stress by taking care of yourself.

If stress from work is having a negative effect on your work output, your health, your relationships, or your life outside of work, it's time to step back and pay attention to your basic needs:

- **Get moving.** Physical activity is important to your health and is one of the most effective stress reducers. Take a walk during a break in the workday—even if it's just for five minutes—to interrupt a feeling of rising tension. Build more physical activity into your daily and weekly schedule.
- **Sleep well.** Adopt healthy sleep habits to get more rest. That means a regular bedtime and no work or electronic devices as you wind down for sleep.
- **Build healthy eating habits.** Avoid stress-driven eating, which can lead to weight gain and swings in blood sugar and energy. A regular schedule of healthy meals and snacks can help keep your emotions on an even keel.
- **Make time for fun and social connections.** Your emotional health is tied to your physical health, and it is important for sustained work performance. Include your own emotional needs in your priorities.

## Learn to relax.

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned. When you feel tense from work stress, practice relaxation techniques that work for you. These might include:

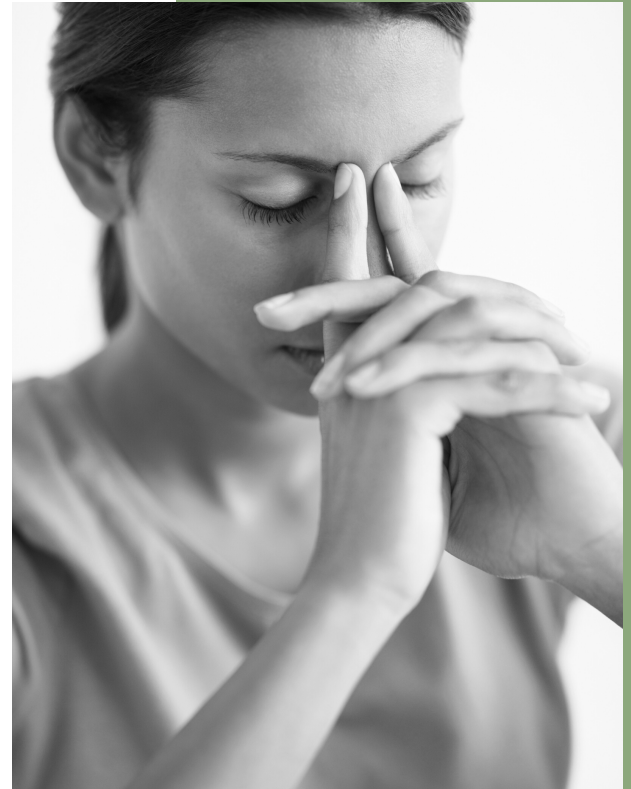
- Deep breathing to restore a feeling of calm
- Progressive muscle relaxation to intentionally relax your body and mind
- Mindfulness or meditation to pull your thinking out of a cycle of worry and restore an ability to focus
- Listening to calming music

Take quick relaxation breaks at work or use a relaxation transition as you begin and end the workday.

## Sharpen your focus at work.

If your stress is coming from feelings of overwork or a lack of control over your work, think about ways you might regain control, confidence, and calm:

- **Work with your manager to set realistic goals and expectations.** If particular aspects of your work are causing more stress than others, it might be a sign that you need more training on those tasks. Or perhaps work on the team might be shifted so that you and other team members focus more on what you enjoy and are good at.



- **Prioritize to focus on the most important work**—the work that will have the biggest impact on your team's and organization's success and that will meet the most important needs of your customers. Work that seems urgent but is less important may need to wait.
- **Break big tasks into small steps**, and map out a schedule to get them done.
- **Use to-do lists** to stay on top of your tasks.
- **Protect your time** to minimize interruptions and enable concentrated focus. Schedule time for planning and work on bigger projects.
- **Delegate and collaborate.** Where possible, share responsibilities and enlist the help and ideas of others.

### Take time to recharge.

No one can run a marathon at a sprinter's pace. To avoid burnout and succeed over the long term, you need to take breaks to recharge:

- **Take quick breaks.** A five-minute break for a walk or deep breathing can relax your body and restore your mind so that you can focus more efficiently and creatively on the problem at hand. The distraction of watching a funny video or having a quick conversation with a friend can have the same effect. The point is to get your mind off work so that you can come back to it with renewed energy.
- **Schedule time for your own needs**—for family, friends, exercise, and breaks to relax and restore your energy.
- **Use your vacation time to refresh and recharge yourself.** "Working vacations" tend not to be vacations at all and don't have the same restorative effect.

### Talk it over.

When you endure your work worries alone, stress can build up. A conversation with a trusted coworker or friend can release that tension. It may also give you a fresh perspective and new ideas on ways you might respond. You might even get an offer of help—if not with the core work issue you're facing, then with something else that can free you to focus on work with less distraction.

Be sure to return the favor when the opportunity arises. Helping, listening, and collaborating are keys to effective teamwork and a balanced, satisfying life.

If you need help prioritizing in a work crunch, talk it over with your manager. Knowing what's critical and what can wait can reduce the pressure you're feeling and help you regain a sense of control over your work.

### Flip negative thinking.

Some work stress is caused by negative thinking and unnecessary worry:

- **Practice positive reframing.** When you find yourself looking too quickly and too often at the downside of work events and interactions, push yourself to imagine alternative and more positive outcomes. Then think about the steps you might take to make those positive outcomes happen.

- **Focus on achievements.** When you feel daunted by the work ahead, take a minute to consider the progress you've made. Think back to past achievements and other challenges you've overcome.
- **Challenge negative thoughts.** Is what you are worrying about really true? What might be a more positive and equally reasonable explanation?

### Avoid unproductive conflict and draining work interactions.

Some conflict with coworkers is healthy and productive. Talking through different opinions on the best solution to a work problem can get your team to a better solution than any one of you might come to on your own. However, some work conflicts and interactions are emotionally draining and should be avoided:

- **Steer clear of gossip.** It can lead to negative talk and undermine team morale.
- **Avoid people with consistently negative outlooks.** Complainers and doomsayers create stress for the people around them. If you're forced to work closely with a coworker who spreads negativity, talk to your manager about ways to handle these interactions.
- **Be cautious in sharing political and religious views at work.** If your views are not relevant to your work or the work of your team, they're probably best kept to yourself. If political or religious discussions are fueling conflict at work, talk with your manager or human resources (HR) representative for help in setting boundaries.
- **Strive to resolve conflict in positive ways.** Focus on the present and what you can agree on to move forward. Don't dwell on past hurts or resentments. If a conflict can't be resolved and isn't critical to work progress, agree to disagree and walk away from it.

- **Focus on what you can control, and let go of what you can't.** In working with other people, you may be able to influence the way they behave, but you can't control it. You can control your own behavior and how you react to what others do and say. Put your focus there.

### **Know when to seek help.**

If you've tried the steps above and you're still feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or discouraged, you might benefit from talking with a mental health professional. Your employee support program is one source for this help. An expert at the program can listen and offer practical suggestions in a phone or video consultation and can refer you to a mental health counselor for additional support.

You might also find a psychologist or mental health counselor on your own. An expert can help you understand the source of your stress and help you take steps to address it. That might be by changing ingrained habits of thought and behavior, by forming a strategy for better communication with your manager and coworkers, or by treating a clinical problem such as depression or anxiety disorder that could be contributing to your feelings of stress.

Source: Fournier, E. (2023, March 28). *The effects of psychological stressors in the workplace* (B. Schuette, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO). Retrieved April 18, 2023, from the WPO Blog: <https://www.workplaceoptions.com/news-media/blogs>



## **OVERCOMING PARENTAL GUILT**

### **What is parental guilt?**

Parental guilt is the feeling that you're not doing enough for your children—that you're letting them down in some way, even though you're trying hard to be a good parent. Working parents can also feel parental guilt when they sense that their family priorities are keeping them from doing their best at work. Parental guilt can make you feel that you aren't being successful as either a parent or a worker.

### **What causes parental guilt?**

Parental guilt is based on your love for your children and your efforts to be the best parent you can be for them. It often arises when you have competing priorities in life—as a parent, as a worker, or as a supporter of a friend or family member who needs your help. You might feel parental guilt over:

- Not spending more time with your children, perhaps because of other responsibilities, such as holding a job or caring for an aging parent

- Not earning more money to provide for your children, perhaps because you've chosen to work less and spend more time with them
- Being irritable or short-tempered at times with your children
- The less-than-ideal meals you serve your children when you're rushed for time or when money is short
- The amount of screen time you allow your children
- Not being able to do it all—not being the perfect parent, partner, worker, friend, and family member

Guilt can be a useful emotion when you've really done something wrong. It can motivate you to correct your behavior, apologize, or make amends—but parental guilt is often unproductive. When it's driven by unreasonable self-criticism and unrealistic expectations, it can make you feel like a failure when you're doing the best you can.

### How to Overcome Parental Guilt

- **Understand that you are not alone.** They may not talk about it, but many parents have similar feelings of parental guilt. It can be hard to be a parent, and you aren't alone in feeling that you sometimes fall short of your ideals.
- **Notice what triggers your feelings of guilt.** Pay attention to situations that make you feel parental guilt more strongly. Is it when you're with certain people? When you're looking at certain social media accounts? When you have certain thoughts that cause you to judge yourself in negative ways? Noticing the triggers of parental guilt can help you take steps to avoid or move past them.
- **Challenge negative and self-critical thinking.** Often, feelings of parental guilt are caused by automatic thoughts and habits of self-critical thinking. When you have self-critical thoughts, challenge them. Is what happened really because of some shortcoming of yours? Use positive reframing to look at a situation or thought pattern in new ways. Consider what you can learn from this and what it shows about your strengths.



- **Practice self-compassion.** When you find yourself being self-critical and sinking into parental guilt, imagine how you would talk to a good friend facing the same challenges. Practice talking to yourself with that same compassion. "You are doing your very best." "Just take a few deep breaths, calm down, and you can handle this."
- **Make space for your own needs.** As you make sure your kids have what they need, pay attention to your own needs, too. Coordinate with your partner or with friends or family members to make time for occasional breaks to recharge. Take a nap when your child is napping. When you're able to attend to your own needs, you'll be happier, calmer, and more present for your children when you're with them.
- **Connect with supportive people.** Build a support network of people you can talk with about your experiences as a parent. Cultivate relationships with people who make you feel better—calmer, more confident, and happier. Spend more time with those people (and less with people who leave you feeling judged and not heard). Build relationships in which kindness, attention, and help are shared in both directions.

- **Notice the good.** When people are feeling parental guilt, they tend to focus on what's going wrong. Turn that around by thinking about what's going well. Consider your whole day, not just the most difficult moments, remembering the good parts. Think about what your child can do now that they couldn't do six months or a year ago, what you've done well, and what you're grateful for.
- **Stop comparing yourself to others.** Much of parental guilt comes from false comparisons, and comparing yourself to others on social media is one of the biggest traps. Social media tends to present a sunny fiction, not the way life really is. When was the last time you saw a post from someone about the meal they overcooked or the afternoon their child cried for two hours?
- **Adjust your expectations.** Parental guilt is often rooted in unrealistic expectations. There's no such thing as a perfect parent. Accept that you are human and do the best you can.
- **Accept that you are continually learning as a parent.** Just as there's no such thing as a perfect parent, there's no one right way to parent. Every child has a unique personality and unique needs, and those needs change over time. Approach parenting as a learning process, one in which you're constantly exploring what works best for you and your family. As with any learning process, you're bound to make mistakes. Accept them as lessons to learn from, rather than unforgivable failures. Learn how to parent through your own and your child's ups and downs. If you're not feeling as calm or even-tempered as you'd like, take a quick break to compose yourself. If you make a mistake or have a lapse that warrants an apology, apologize, acknowledge your child's feelings, and move on.



- **Get support if you need it.** Sometimes talking with supportive friends or family members isn't enough. If low mood or feelings of guilt or overload are making it difficult to cope, seek professional help. Your doctor or your employee assistance program can offer guidance and direct you to appropriate support. That might be a mental health counselor, a parenting specialist, or both.

Source: Morgan, H. (2023, January 24). *Overcoming parental guilt* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).

# TIPS FOR A SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE

People who live green at home are likely to practice similar habits at work. Incorporating sustainability into your lifestyle means becoming aware of the impact of your choices in food, products, and energy use. Focus on the small steps you can take at home, at work, and in your community. You can start by calculating your environmental footprint ([www.footprintcalculator.org/home/en](http://www.footprintcalculator.org/home/en)).

## **Do your part to live smart.**

According to the World Health Organization, 13 million deaths annually and nearly a quarter of all disease worldwide—including 33 percent of illnesses in children under age five—are due to environmental causes that could be avoided or prevented. Doing your part to take care of the environment helps you protect yourself and others from the climate's effects on health. Health issues such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cardiovascular disease, and stroke can be aggravated by an unhealthy environment. Here are a few actions you can take to do your part to live smart.

## **Make sustainable food choices.**

Production, processing, packaging, and transportation of food is highly dependent on the use of fossil fuels and chemical fertilizers. These can greatly harm human health and the health of the environment. As a consumer, you have power to make a difference by considering the impact of your choices. Opting for local, healthy, environmentally responsible food helps promote both personal health and the overall health of the community.

Sustainable food systems operate in a cycle of sustainable production and support. Farmers can make their food more sustainable by limiting pesticide use and treating their animals humanely and responsibly. Consumers can select food produced close to home and reduce the impact of today's food system on the environment by lessening the distance food travels from farm to table.

Choose foods that:

- Do not harm the environment
- Support and preserve rural communities
- Are healthy and nutritious
- Respect farm animals
- Provide farmers with fair wages
- Are free of added toxins
- Are grown locally
- Do not harm the health of farm workers



## **Use alternative transportation.**

Pollutants released by vehicles greatly increase air pollution levels and have been linked to adverse health effects, including premature mortality, cardiac symptoms, exacerbation of asthma symptoms, and diminished lung function. To minimize the damaging impact of our current transportation choices, try adopting more sustainable methods of travel. Consider using the alternative commute options featured below, as well as onsite electric vehicle charging programs to shift to sustainable transportation. Alternative commute options include:

- Walking and bicycling
- Public transportation
- Carpools and vanpools
- Telework and alternate work schedules

## Make green updates at home.

Sustainable homes are not only better for the planet but offer opportunity for great cost savings. Here are some tips for saving energy:

- Make sure your home is well-insulated to conserve energy and spend less on heat and air conditioning.
- Use a programmable thermostat to time your heat and air conditioning for when you are in your home. These can shut off while you are away, saving both energy and money.
- Weatherproof your home. Caulk, seal, or weather-strip outside openings to prevent air leaks.
- Conserve water by installing aerating and low-flow faucets and showerheads. Choose garden plants that don't have a high demand for water.
- If you are looking for a major upgrade, tankless and on-demand water heaters can save up to 30 percent of energy compared to standard natural gas tank heaters.

## Purchase green products.

There are many stages in a product's life cycle, and each one can negatively affect the environment. Before making a purchase, consider the full impact of the product's material, manufacturing method, and usage.

To convert raw (or recycled) materials into a product, elements are processed, shaped, and manipulated. These steps consume energy and deplete nonrenewable natural resources. For example, plastic products are made from petroleum, a finite resource.

Transportation of products (including food) using fuel-burning vehicles releases carbon emissions and contributes to particle pollution. This lessens air quality and can impact personal health.

Additionally, many products affect the environment throughout their useful life. Using these items responsibly can reduce their environmental impact. Any equipment with a plug requires electricity to operate. To prevent wasting energy, turn equipment off when not in use.

At the end of a product's useful life, consider what parts may be reused and how to dispose of the product or its components responsibly. Plastics, glass, paper, and other materials may be recycled. Many manufacturers will take products at the end of their lifecycle. Check with vendors in your area for specifics on disposal practices.

## Green Purchase Checklist

A good indication that an item is green is if it:

- Contains 30 percent or greater post-consumer recycled content (paper)
- Is made of biobased content
- Is environmentally preferable, energy efficient, and/or water efficient
- Has minimal lifecycle costs
- Has minimal risk of toxic/hazardous chemicals
- Is durable or has a long product life
- Is necessary

## Recycle electronics.

Electronics impact the environment and human health. Fabricating and shipping electronics use water and energy, and often create industrial waste. The disposal of electronics results in a massive amount of waste going into landfills. Toxins commonly found in electronics can leak into the soil or release into the air through burning.

To prevent toxic leakage from electronics, look for e-waste recycling programs in your community. Specialized centers can safely dispose of these products and may be able to recycle some of the material. Many manufacturers will also take old products to recycle their parts.

Only through management over the entire lifecycle of electronics can people mitigate the negative effects on soil, water, air, and health. Check for special programs in your area to recycle:

- Batteries
- Old laptops or phones
- Printers, keyboards, and other computer accessories
- Televisions
- Wires and plugs

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Sustainability. (Reviewed 2018, May 3). Sustainable lifestyle. Retrieved September 6, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov>