

Handling Stress in Today's Economic Environment

G013 School of Nursing Building
June 11, 2009 ♦ 12:00 to 1 PM

Larry Long, Ph.D.
Senior Director / Licensed Psychologist
KUMC Counseling & Educational Support Services

Overwhelmed by Workplace Stress? You're not alone.

Americans are known for placing great emphasis on work and career. Working hard, however, should not be confused with overworking at the expense of relationships and physical health. According to a 2007 nationwide poll by the American Psychological Association, three-quarters of Americans list work as a significant source of stress, with over half of those surveyed indicating that their work productivity suffered due to stress. Furthermore, almost half stated that they did not use their allotted vacation time and even considered looking for a new job because of stress. Job stress is also a concern for employers, costing U.S. businesses an estimated \$300 billion per year through absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and direct medical, legal and insurance fees.

Stress can significantly affect physical health. The APA survey found three quarters of people have experienced physical symptoms as a result of stress, such as headache, fatigue, and an upset stomach in combination with feelings of irritability, anger, nervousness, and lack of motivation.

The stress people are experiencing comes, in part, from the pressures of today's connected world. Because of e-mail, cell phones and the Internet, Americans are finding it increasingly difficult to switch off from the stresses of the workplace and concentrate on their personal priorities--over half of respondents said that job demands interfered with family or home responsibilities.

“While technology undoubtedly improves our lives, information overload can add to the stress levels of an already overworked nation and lead to using unhealthy behaviors to cope with that stress,” says psychologist David Ballard, Psy.D, MBA, of the American Psychological Association. “What is important is to learn how to effectively manage your stress, so you can perform at your best both at home and at work.”

Increased stress can lead to using unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, comfort eating, poor diet choices, inactivity and drinking alcohol to manage their stress. APA warns that reliance on such behavior can lead to long-term, serious health problems and offers these strategies for managing your work-related stress:

- **Know yourself.** Be aware of your stress level and know what stresses you out. People experience stress in different ways. You may have a hard time concentrating or making decisions, feel angry, irritable or out of control, or experience headaches, muscle tension or a lack of energy. Learn your own stress signals.
- **Recognize how you deal with stress.** Do you engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking or eating poorly to cope with your stress? Do you lose patience with your children or spouse or coworkers when you feel overwhelmed by work pressures?
- **Turn off and tune in.** Communication technology can take you to productivity heights never imagined, but it can also allow work to creep into family time, dinner and vacations. Set rules for yourself, such as turning

off your cell phone or BlackBerry when you get home, or establishing certain times when you return calls. Be sure to communicate those rules to others, so you can manage their expectations. Let technology be a tool that works for you, rather than the other way around.

- Keep a "To-Do" list. Worried that you'll forget something important? Constantly thinking through all the things you need to get done? Clear your head and put those thoughts on paper (or in an electronic task list) by creating a list of work and personal tasks and marking those with the highest priority. Not only will you reduce the risk of forgetting something, you'll also be better able to focus on the task at hand.
- Take short breaks. Stay energized and productive by taking a minute or two periodically throughout the day to stand up, stretch, breathe deeply and shake off the accumulating tension. Short breaks between tasks can be particularly effective, helping you feel like you've wrapped up one thing before moving on to the next. Take a 10-15 minute break every few hours to recharge and avoid the temptation to work through lunch. The productivity you gain will more than make up for the time you spend on break.
- Find healthy ways to manage stress. Work to replace unhealthy coping strategies, such as eating junk food, smoking or drinking alcohol with healthy behaviors, like exercise, meditation or talking with friends and family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Take it slow and focus on changing one behavior at a time. Some behaviors are very difficult to change and may require the help of a licensed professional such as a psychologist.
- Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water and engage in regular physical activity. Ensure you have a healthy mind and body through activities like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. Take regular vacations. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself—even if it's just simple things like reading a good book, listening to your favorite album or enjoying a leisurely Sunday brunch at your favorite café.
- Ask for professional support. Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. Your employer may also have stress management resources available through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), including online information, available counseling and referral to mental health professionals, if needed. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by work stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behavior.

Employers can visit www.phwa.org for information and resources to help your employees and organization thrive.

(c) Copyright 2009 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.

Mind/Body Health: Job Stress

Jobs and careers are an important part of our lives. Along with providing a source of income, they help us fulfill our personal aims, build social networks, and serve our professions or communities. They are also a major source of emotional stress.

Stress at work

Even “dream jobs” have stressful deadlines, performance expectations, and other responsibilities. For some, stress is the motivator that ensures things get done. However, workplace stress can easily overwhelm your life. You may continually worry about a particular project, feel unfairly treated by a supervisor or co-workers, or knowingly accept more than you can handle in hopes of earning a promotion. Putting your job ahead of everything else can also affect your personal relationships, compounding the work-related pressures.

Layoffs, restructuring, or management changes can heighten anxiety about your job security. In fact, a Norwegian study showed that the mere rumor of a factory’s closure caused rapid increases in workers’ pulse and blood pressure. Research in the U.S. has found that workplace injuries and accidents tend to increase in organizations that are being downsized.

The body reacts

Along with its emotional toll, prolonged job-related stress can drastically affect your physical health. Constant preoccupation with job responsibilities often leads to erratic eating habits and not enough exercise, resulting in weight problems, high blood pressure, and elevated cholesterol levels.

Common job stressors such as perceived low rewards, a hostile work environment, and long hours can also accelerate the onset of heart disease, including the likelihood of heart attacks.

This is particularly true for blue-collar and manual workers. Studies suggest that because these employees tend to have little control over their work environments, they are more likely to develop cardiovascular disease than those in traditional “white collar” jobs.

Your age is also a factor. A University of Utah study found that as stressed workers get older, their blood pressure increases above normal levels. Interestingly, many of the study’s over-60 workers reported that they did not feel upset or unduly pressured by their jobs, even though their blood pressure levels were significantly higher.

A loss of mental energy

Job stress also frequently causes burnout, a condition marked by emotional exhaustion and negative or cynical attitudes toward others and yourself.

Burnout can lead to depression, which, in turn, has been linked to a variety of other health concerns such as heart disease and stroke, obesity and eating disorders, diabetes, and some forms of cancer. Chronic depression also reduces your immunity to other types of illnesses, and can even contribute to premature death.

What you can do

Fortunately, there are many ways to help manage job-related stress. Some programs blend relaxation techniques with nutrition and exercise. Others focus on specific issues such as time management, assertiveness training, and improving social skills.

A qualified psychologist can help you pinpoint the causes of your stress, and develop appropriate coping strategies.

Here are some other tips for dealing with stress on the job:

Make the most of workday breaks.

Even 10 minutes of “personal time” will refresh your mental outlook. Take a brief walk, chat with a co-worker about a non-job topic, or simply sit quietly with your eyes closed and breathe.

If you feel angry, walk away. Mentally regroup by counting to 10, then look at the situation again. Walking and other physical activities will also help you work off steam.

Set reasonable standards for yourself and others. Don’t expect perfection. Talk to your employer about your job description. Your responsibilities and performance criteria may not accurately reflect what you are doing. Working together to make needed changes will not only benefit your emotional and physical health, but also improve the organization’s overall productivity.

[Click here to take the online Stress Smarts quiz](#)

The American Psychological Association Practice Directorate gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Sara Weiss, Ph.D., and Nancy Molitor, Ph.D., in developing this fact sheet.

(c) Copyright 2009 American Psychological Association

Economic Worries Tax Out Americans as April 15 nears

With cash-strapped Americans already worried about the effects of an economic downturn, the April 15 deadline to file federal income taxes may seem overwhelming or frightening, especially for those who fear that they will owe the government money.

The American Psychological Association (APA) cautions that while this time of year may seem excessively difficult, relying on harmful behaviors to alleviate stress may contribute to physical and emotional health problems in the future.

“The nation’s troubled economy is causing a strain not only on wallets but also on how stressed we feel,” said Dr. Stephanie Smith, a Colorado psychologist. “Many of us bury our heads in the sand because our finances are so overwhelming. This can just make the problem—and ultimately our anxiety about the problem—worse. Start small and start somewhere. Think of tax-filing time as an opportunity to evaluate your financial situation and money habits and figure out ways to change.”

Money is a leading concern for most Americans. According to APA’s 2008 Stress in America poll, more than 80 percent of Americans say money and the economy are two significant stressors in their lives. And with the nation in a recession, more Americans may feel panicky about their future, leading to an increase in stress about their finances and job.

The survey also reveals that many Americans choose unhealthy ways to cope with their stress. Nearly 50 percent say they overeat or eat unhealthy foods during stressful times.

“It’s tempting to turn to bad habits, but stress and health are so strongly linked that it’s important for people to take care of themselves,” said Dr. Nancy Molitor, a Chicago-area psychologist. “Engaging in unhealthy behaviors usually makes things worse and then distracts you from making the necessary changes in your financial situation that could ultimately make life better.”

APA offers these strategies for managing financial stress:

Identify your stressors and make a plan. Take a look at your particular financial situation and what causes you stress. List specific ways you can reduce your spending. Although this may seem daunting, putting things down on paper and committing to a plan can reduce stress.

Examine your priorities. Ask yourself what your money goals are. If your priorities are not matching up with your spending habits, this can be a source of anxiety and conflict, especially between partners.

Talk about your worries. We tend to be secretive about our financial situation, especially when things aren’t

going well, and this can lead to more stress. Open up to your partner, a trusted friend or family member about your concerns.

Recognize how you deal with stress related to money. Some people deal with stress by comfort eating, smoking, drinking or gambling. Pay attention to how you manage your stress, and consider the damage that negative coping methods can do to your health.

Substitute healthy for unhealthy ways to manage stress. Healthy stress-reducing activities can be inexpensive and quick—like taking a short walk, meditating or talking things out with friends or family. If you're feeling overwhelmed by talk of the economy on the evening news, turn it off. Remember that unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time and can be difficult to change, so focus on changing one thing at a time.

Credit counseling services, tax advisors and financial planners are available to help you take control over your money situation. If you continue to be overwhelmed by stress or the unhealthy behaviors you use to cope, you may want to talk with a psychologist who can help you address the emotions behind your financial worries, better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors. Psychologists are experts trained to understand the connection between the mind and body as well as the factors that promote behavior change.

This tip sheet was made possible with help from APA members Stephanie Smith, PsyD and Nancy Molitor, PhD.

Updated April 2009

(c) Copyright 2009 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.

Staying Hopeful After a Job Loss

Beyond providing us with an income, jobs can serve multiple roles in our lives, such as providing us with a sense of identity and purpose. In these challenging economic times, those who are laid off or facing a potential job loss can find themselves feeling significant stress. In fact, according to an April 2009 poll by the American Psychological Association, 82 percent of American workers whose employers have instituted layoffs report that their stress has increased in the past year as a result of employment changes in their household.

Those who lose their job may feel shocked, sad, angry and fearful, asking themselves anxiously, “What do I do next?” It’s a good question to ask—especially with a hopeful, positive attitude. Staying open to new opportunities is one way to lessen worries and move on with your job search, psychologists recommend. Whether you’ve worked with an employer for less than a year or more than 20 years, change is a constant in life and workplace change is no exception.

It may seem frightening to make a fresh start. But accepting a new job, switching to a different industry, returning to school or starting your own business doesn’t have to mean an overhaul of your identity. Rather, you are finding a new setting in which your skills and strengths are valued and useful.

Here are some things you can do to get through the hardship of losing a job and looking for a new one:

Take action right away. It may be tempting to consider a layoff a mini vacation and initially enjoy watching daytime television in your pajamas. After all, it can be a struggle to build the motivation needed to look for a new job. But some research has found that people who wait ultimately have regrets. Those who are successful are the ones who start planning and searching immediately after their final day of work, if not before.

Connect with those around you. It could be tempting to sit at a computer for hours, zapping off your resume to every job opening you can find. But most people find their jobs through a network of people they know. Keep in touch with former co-workers, classmates and friends—anyone who cares about the outcome of your job search. Online social networks can be a valuable way to connect and let people know of your job search. Such a network might serve as both the link to your next job and a critical source of support along the way.

Keep your eyes—and mind—open to new opportunities. Be curious and engage the world around you. Talk to friends about the work they do, attend free seminars and workshops in your community, volunteer for a few hours a week for a cause that means something to you. Sometimes a job opportunity will find you when you aren’t looking. And you may discover you’d enjoy work that is different than what you’ve done previously.

Take care of yourself. You may not feel like doing much of anything. Or you want to spend every moment

pouring over job listings. Give yourself a break from the search—go for a walk, meet up with a friend, read a book. Pay attention to how you are managing your stress—some people are more likely to relieve stress by turning to unhealthy activities like smoking, drinking, gambling or emotional eating. Be alert to these behaviors.

Ask for professional support. Job placement agencies and college career offices are two services available to help you find a new job. If you continue to be overwhelmed by stress or find it increasingly difficult to cope with your feelings about job loss, you may want to talk with a psychologist who can help you address your concerns and manage life's changes.

Special thanks to APA member Dr. Chris Ebberwein for help with this article.

Updated May 2009

(c) Copyright 2009 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.