

Working with stress in the workplace

The modern workplace is fast-paced, challenging, forever changing and often subject to external forces such as economic climate and investor sentiment. The lack of stability in our workforce contributes to the level of stress in our lives; as does the way we behave as we go about our work.

A lot of our daily stress is avoidable through (a) being aware of yourself and your environment and (b) having in place strategies for minimising the impact of stressors. In essence, while you may not be able to avoid the factors that contribute to workplace stress you can take a lot of personal responsibility for how you behave in the workplace. The difference between being stressed out and going with the flow is in your hands. The choices are yours to make.

It is important you are able to identify the factor or events in your workplace that cause you stress. For some it might be people interrupting you at work. For others it might be their inability to say no to constant requests for help. **Grab a piece of paper and over the next week or so take note of the things you find stressful, do nothing more for the moment than write them down in a list.** Already you are on your way towards reducing your own stress levels.

Following this, **turn your sheet of paper over and on the other side; start to make notes about your behaviour when you are stressed. Write down the behaviour you exhibit and also write down the physical symptoms.** For example, you might feel overtired at certain times or have difficulty concentrating. These are the behaviours. Similarly you may experience shortness of breath or break out in a rash. These are the physical symptoms.

After a couple of weeks of making notes you will have built a very detailed picture of yourself. It is possible you will have discovered aspects of your behaviour or feelings you had never considered in the past. Don't be alarmed. Remain positive and be honest with yourself. It is your health and wellbeing that is at stake here.

The next step is taking your sheet of paper home with you. Find a quiet space where you can reflect upon your findings without interruption. Draw your own picture of you when you are stressed, create a mind map or a bullet point list, something, whatever works for you. **Begin to prioritise.** What events occur most frequently? What behaviours do you display most frequently? What symptoms do you display most frequently? Look for connections and linkages between events and behaviours and symptoms. When you have had enough put

your paper aside for a couple of days, take time to reflect and think, then return to your notes.

Now I would like you to look at the events that cause you the most stress, ask yourself what does this event look like, how will I know it is about to happen, what triggers of my stress? **Start to form your stress release strategies.** It could be, for example, that your biggest stress is being interrupted in your work. It could be that this occurs most frequently when you are completing a certain task. What are your options? Could you find space where you could work alone? Could you place a *please do not disturb* sign on your door or desk?

Identifying your personal stressors is the first step and the most important. For those in a leadership role with the ability to impact upon the stress levels of others, there are additional actions you can take to reduce the level of workplace stress. These include:

- Creating a positive workplace environment. Remove those things that create negative vibes in the workplace. That includes negative people.
- Anticipate when stressful situations may be about to arise. Be proactive. Work with your team. Discuss the potential for stress; brainstorm how everyone on the team can help each other.
- Create relaxation time in the workplace. Take everyone outside in the fresh air for a team meeting. Go to a cafe for lunch. Bring in a masseuse.
- Look out for stress in others. Make time to spend with someone likely to experience stress, facilitate conversation, and learn about them. Be observant and let them know you are there to help them.

This management tip has been brought to you compliments of John Coxon & Associates. We work with management teams and managers in the health sector and not for profit sector in Australia and New Zealand to help develop leadership capacity and management competencies. We achieve this through consulting, management coaching and professional development opportunities.

Telephone Australia (03)5561 2228 or NZ (0272) 583232. Email john@johncoxon.com.au or go to our website at www.johncoxon.com.au or www.johncoxon.co.nz. Please feel free to pass this information onto anyone you feel may benefit. Should you feel the need for further help with workplace stress or any other management issue please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss the options available.