

Practical Guide for Managing Stress

Introduction

Substantial evidence indicates that workplace stress can have significant effects on psychological, behavioural, social, and physical wellbeing. People experience stress when they perceive that the stressors and demands of their work are greater than their ability to cope. To prevent or minimize the effects of stress on individual and organizational performance, it is necessary to take a systematic, evidence-based and multi-level approach that involves identifying the scope of the problem, eliminating or modifying the sources of stress, improving detection and management of stress, and helping people recover from stress-related problems. This concise guide is designed to help organizational leaders, faculty and students identify the sources of stress, recognize organizational and individual symptoms of stress and develop effective interventions and prevention strategies.

Potential Sources of Stress

- Job insecurity
- Lack of control over work activities
- Ineffective communication
- Lack of involvement in decision making
- Unrealistic goals and expectations
- Lack of transparency
- Having responsibility without authority
- Lack of leadership support
- Poor relationships with colleagues
- Ongoing conflict with students
- Role ambiguity
- Conflicting organizational priorities
- Lack of feedback on performance
- Fear of failure
- High physical or cognitive job demands
- Insufficient time to complete tasks
- Lack of recognition
- Social isolation
- Inflexible work schedule
- Excessive workload
- Monotonous nature of work
- Uneven workload distribution
- Lack of work-life balance
- Limited availability of resources
- Major organizational changes
- Unwanted job restructuring
- No opportunities for career advancement
- Talents and skills not used at work
- Rapid technological changes
- Bullying and harassment
- Difficult or unsafe working conditions
- Peer pressure
- Lack of privacy and confidentiality
- Inadequate training
- Financial problems
- Family and personal problems

Organizational Symptoms of Stress

- Absenteeism
- Decline in team performance
- High staff turnover
- Reduced productivity
- Increased error rates
- Increased accident rates
- Recurring complaints
- Lower quality of teaching
- Increased operating costs
- Low staff engagement

Individual Symptoms of Stress

- Frequent headaches
- Hostile behaviour
- Sleep disturbances
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Resentfulness and cynicism
- Irritability and wild mood swings
- Chronic fatigue
- Dizziness
- Frequent colds and infections
- Chest pain and palpitations
- Upset stomach
- Back and neck pain
- Muscle spasms
- Decline in physical appearance
- Lack of concentration
- Reduced attention
- Forgetfulness
- Impaired decision making
- Communication problems
- Social withdrawal
- Anxiety, apathy or depression
- Substance abuse

Organizational Stress Prevention Strategies

- Demonstrate clear purpose and provide ongoing leadership support
- Proactively identify potential sources of stress and eliminate or minimize risks
- Involve people in decision making and create a culture of open communication
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities with the appropriate level of authority
- Reduce ambiguity and uncertainty with regard to job security
- Pay attention to people, listen actively and show that you really care
- Create positive work environment conducive to teamwork
- Develop effective working relationships based on trust and mutual respect
- Encourage people to freely express concerns and opposing viewpoints
- Promptly address destructive behaviours and facilitate collaborative problem solving
- Embrace transparency and involve people early in the change process
- Create flexible work schedules that are compatible with multiple demands
- Enrich jobs to provide stimulation and new opportunities to use skills
- Establish clear expectations, set realistic goals and balance the workload
- Streamline and standardize processes with focus on people
- Match job requirements to the knowledge, skills and abilities of people
- Design safe work processes by applying human factors and ergonomics principles
- Provide ongoing, timely and specific feedback on performance
- Promote team diversity and create opportunities for social interactions
- Provide opportunities for learning, mentoring and professional development
- Ensure equitable pay structures and compensation
- Recognize, reward and celebrate individual and team accomplishments

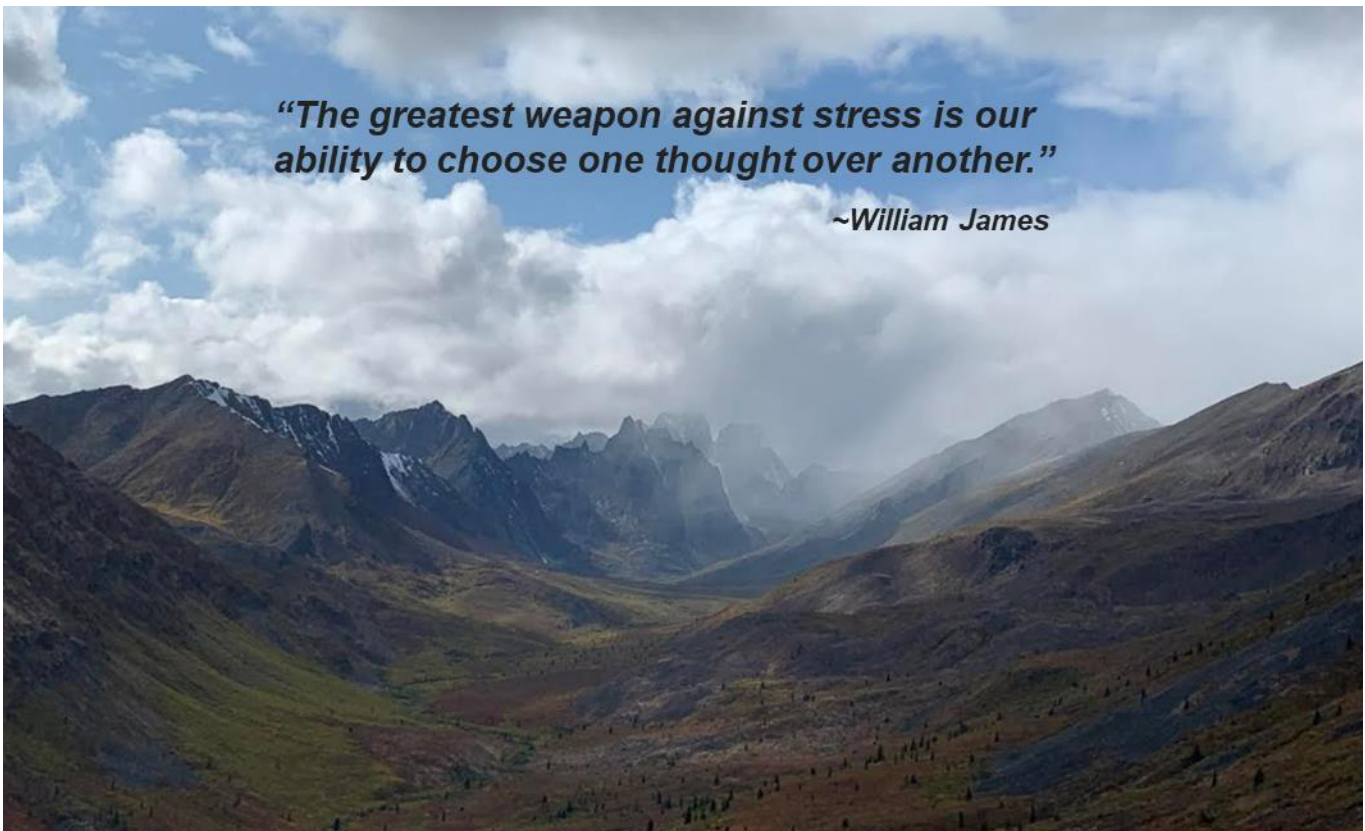
Individual Stress Prevention Strategies

- Become knowledgeable about the causes, symptoms and effects of chronic stress
- Identify the sources of stress in your professional and personal life
- Proactively eliminate, reduce or mitigate known risk factors
- Obtain the necessary training and experience to perform particular tasks
- Practice mindfulness on a regular basis and put things in perspective
- Set aside some time for yourself each day to reflect and be alone with your thoughts
- Recognize and understand your own emotions and biases in thinking
- Practice muscle relaxation, yoga or meditation to quiet the mind

- Stretch yourself without going too far outside your comfort zone
- Negotiate expectations and allocate realistic time to complete assigned tasks
- Ask for help and support as needed in accomplishing challenging assignments
- Identify opportunities to delegate selected tasks and responsibilities
- Take regular breaks, unplug from internet and turn off all your electronic devices
- Learn how to say no to taking on additional responsibilities
- Look for humour in difficult and challenging situations
- Learn biofeedback technique and control the physiological reactions to stress
- Take proactive steps to prevent or resolve interpersonal tensions and conflicts
- Recognize negative thoughts and alter behavioural responses to stress
- Practice good nutrition and engage in regular physical activity
- Improve your sleep by following good sleep hygiene practices
- Spend more time outside in natural environments
- Relax by listening to the soothing music or nature sounds
- Maintain positive social interactions and seek emotional support
- Spend more quality time with your family and close friends
- Pursue fun new hobbies, read a book or play with your pet
- Recognize when it is time to seek professional help

“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”

~William James



References

Carayon, P. (Ed.) (2012). *Human factors and ergonomics in health care and patient safety*. (2nd ed.). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
 Salvendy, G. (Ed.), (2012). *Handbook of human factors and ergonomics* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
 Flin, R., O'Connor, P., & Crichton, M. (2008). *Safety at the sharp end. A guide to non-technical skills*. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited.