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## Stressed Out? You're Not Alone

By Todd Gutner | [Business on Main](#)

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**A recent survey shows that stress is affecting more than two-thirds of employees. Here are some tips to help make your workplace a little less stressful.**

**Stress (n.):** A physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation; a state of bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium. — Merriam-Webster

Few of us could give a word-for-word definition for stress like the one above, but we certainly know stress when we experience it. Racing nerves, pounding headaches, lower back pain — sound familiar?

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Indeed, more than two-third of employees claim high stress levels, and

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29 percent are too stressed to be effective at work on five or more days per year, reports the annual StressPulse (SM) survey by ComPsych Corporation, the world's largest provider of employee assistance programs. As the economy continues to sputter, organizations are still doing more with less —and that can take a toll on workers. Employees are reaching a point of unprecedented burnout.

The good news is that companies are taking stress management more seriously, spending time and resources to address the issue. "Bottom line — too much stress detracts from focus and performance at work and can lead to loss of talent. So companies have a vested interest in helping employees deal with stress," says Dr. Richard A. Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of ComPsych.

So what can be done to keep the stress levels of you and your employees in check? "An effective strategy in stress management is to get at the root causes of stress, and then to take a mind-body approach to addressing it," says Chaifetz. Here are a few steps for a less stressful workplace:

### 1. Assess

You can't change what you don't know —so the first item on the agenda is to do a stress assessment. "Figure out what the level of stress is and try to identify the stressors," says professor Jeff LePine, who teaches organizational behavior at Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business. Survey your employees and find out how much of the stress is due to little things like red tape or technology glitches, and how much is due to the real challenges of the job.

"Give people the tools to deal with the challenges and stressors better. If it's responsibility, give them additional training. If it's time pressure, give them training and time-management types of things," says LePine. Make sure employees address family and relationship issues, financial or legal problems, and child or elder care issues, which can spill over and cause a great deal of stress in the workplace.

### 2. Communicate

People feel better when they understand the big picture and are told what's happening around them. "Employees need to be treated like responsible human beings and engaged in problem-solving," says Seymour Adler, a partner in the

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talent practice at Aon Hewitt. This gives them a sense of control, which in turn reduces anxiety. It can also promote a sense of community and help employees feel like they're working toward a common good.

### 3. Be equitable

It's human nature to compare ourselves to others. Imagine being in a work environment where you feel that a colleague is "getting a better deal than you" because he or she is the supervisor's favorite and thus getting a smaller workload or more recognition. Naturally, that would create stress. "The most important thing is keeping supervisors from giving any appearance of favoritism," says Dr. Dave Reiss, a San Diego-based psychiatrist who has evaluated over 10,000 stress claims for California's workers' compensation system.

### 4. Plan and anticipate



It turns out that the best predictor of whether someone will feel stress has to do with how good the person is at planning, anticipating and avoiding stress. "Avoiding stress is the most powerful way to manage it, and people *can* learn such things," says Robert Epstein, a senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology.

For example, reroute your day — use a different entrance at work, take frequent breaks, adopt a relaxation posture at your desk, learn deep-breathing techniques, squeeze a stress ball. Any one of these planned activities done consistently can help you and your employees avoid stress, or at least manage it. "Help cultivate resiliency through seminars and coaching to give people tools to mentally manage stress," says ComPsych's Chaifetz.

### 5. Get healthy

Truth is we can never really wipe out stress entirely. Life is stressful. But fortunately, there's a lot we can do to stave it off. The easiest areas to address, of course, are those within our immediate control, such as ensuring we're eating a proper diet and getting enough exercise. Studies abound about the benefits of these proactive measures. They can't all be wrong. So the next time you feel a wave of stress coming on, take a walk. It'll save more than just your sanity.

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