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## An Introduction to Stress and Stress Management

Stress — it kills, it causes illness, and it impairs performance. Yet, it also motivates, excites and promotes healthy productivity. Stress is one of the major characteristics of modern life. And the ability to capture its positives while minimizing its negatives is an extremely valuable skill for both individuals and organizations.

We all can name stressful events in our lives: school, marriage, having children, getting the promotion, losing a loved one. Yet people often react very differently to these same events. What is extremely stressful for one person may be mildly stressful to another, and stress-related reactions are often stronger for some people than others. Like anything else, however, we can learn specific methods and develop skills so that managing stress is planned. Those who do manage stress effectively realize a positive impact in all areas of life: at work, at home, and in their mental and physical health.

### From An Organizational Perspective

Organizations today are a whirlwind of quick business decisions and constant pressure and change. Employees at all levels need to deal with the associated stress, and use their personal stress management skills effectively. Your company can take an active stance in promoting a healthy and effective workforce. By encouraging employees to engage in more effective personal practices, your company will be better prepared for the future as health and productivity costs associated with stress continue to rise.

Company-sponsored stress management activities can have a positive impact on the bottom line. In addition, sponsoring such activities shows that the company cares about employees and values their health and well-being. However, it's crucial to avoid the employee perception that stress management is a one-way responsibility. Stress management shouldn't act as an organizational "band aid" that allows the employer to look good while continuing to pour on the stress.

### Stress Management Skills

Educating staff on stress management skills is the key to a successful program. To maximize effectiveness, you must have an organizing framework that focuses on specific, teachable behaviors. Shown below are five stress management skill areas, one or more of which can address virtually all stressful situations:

**Organizational Skills** - organizing and prioritizing work and other responsibilities to minimize stress.

- Time Management
- Goal-setting
- Prioritizing
- Problem-solving

**Relationship Skills** - building communication and social skills to minimize conflict and misunderstanding in relationships.

- Assertiveness/Self-confidence
- Listening
- Networking

**Health Perceptions** - developing and maintaining healthy and positive attitudes.

- Hardiness
  - Faith/Acceptance
  - Self-talk
  - Imagery
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**Relaxation Skills** - learning to relax by controlling the body's physiological functions and states.

- Progressive Muscle
- Deep Breathing
- Meditation
- Biofeedback

**Wellness Behaviors** - using exercise, diet and lifestyle to increase physical resilience to stress. Exercise

- Recreation
- Nutrition
- Weight Control
- Smoking Cessation

### What Can Your Company Do?

Organizations have an immense amount of power to promote healthy practices. For instance, organizations:

- Bring large groups of people together and can reach these people efficiently.
- Have resources and company norms that can be used to train, reward and shape healthier practices.
- Have employees for the majority of their day and often for years at a time.

As a result, an employer can be very influential in shaping employee behavior. Managers and supervisors can be very instrumental in controlling stress on the job and teaching employees about stress. However, management needs to be able to tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy stress on the job. Two fundamental criteria must be met before success can be likely. First, a healthy organizational culture should be intact. Second, a program coordinator (and perhaps a committee) should be named.

### Culture

A company's culture is the single most important element to begin organizational stress management efforts. This means that "the way things are" at work sets the tone for whether employees will take stress management seriously. Stress management works best in an environment that treats employees like partners, with both accountability and respect. In such an environment, employees will see stress management as a legitimate way to help improve health and performance.

### Coordinator

Your company can begin its stress management efforts through external resources, internal resources or both. External resources include outside consultants, community agencies or vendors. Internal resources may be your own loss control, human resources, or training and education staff. If you decide to use internal personnel, a few criteria for coordinator responsibilities should be met:

- The assignment should be an important part of the coordinator's job.
- The coordinator should be held accountable for the program's successes and failures. These accountabilities could be handled through performance reviews.
- The coordinator should be a good role model and leader. Someone who is stressed-out or causes a lot of stress in the organization should not lead your stress management series. Although this appears to be common sense, it is frequently overlooked.

### Program Development and Content

Educating employees about stress management involves a lot of planning on the part of your coordinator/committee. Such planning keeps costs down, uses outside resources effectively, and increases the chance of success. The main parts to developing a program include:

- Deciding on Training Content
- Choosing Media (DVD/VHS, audio CD's, lectures, seminars/workshops, technical bulletins, etc.)
- Teaching and Practicing Skills
- Evaluating Your Efforts

### Training Content: What to Teach

First, you need to identify employee needs and wants. In addition, you will want to gather information about what employees want to do or will do. A mini survey is a good way to learn about employee interests, schedule preferences and if they would share in service costs. Another method to gather information is to use employee focus groups. This method allows employees to be a part of the planning phase which in turn gives them some ownership of the program. Involving employees in this way generally results in higher employee participation and a program more tailored to their needs.

The next step is to identify program goals and objectives at both the organizational and individual level.

These objectives will then dictate what types of resources are needed and whether outside agencies should be involved.



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Employees should be encouraged to use stress management techniques that fit their individual needs and lifestyles. For example, deep muscle relaxation is not for everyone. Some just do not like it and others have trouble making it work for them. Therefore, focusing on a variety of skills helps employees choose the ones that are most appropriate and enjoyable for their situations.

It is important to build in feedback and evaluation systems early in planning. Without feedback, there will be no way to systematically assess your efforts. Plus, planning evaluation strategies early on makes it easy to carry out cost/benefit evaluations later on. Feedback and evaluation systems pertain to both the organization and individual employees, since you need to know how both are doing in relation to the program's goals.

### Choosing Media

There are many options for using media in delivering stress management programs. The effectiveness of each medium depends heavily on your company's organizational structure. For example, seminars/workshops may be good for a centrally located workforce, but are a poor choice for a company with field staff or employees that are spread out across several regional branches. It is also important to use updated materials. Videos that are old or outdated may give employees a good laugh, but probably won't be effective learning tools.

### The Basics for Teaching Skills to Employees

**Keep it Simple-** The first rule of thumb is to keep the lesson or exercise as focused and simple as possible. Employees are most interested in one or two key points that they can use in their own lives. Second, present the same material in different ways when both introducing and reviewing material.

**Mix Up Materials-** People take in information and learn differently. A variety of methods can help educate a diverse group, increase retention and keep the sessions interesting and motivating.

**Personal Value-** Pointing out the personal value in the material is another way to enhance learning. Generally, people want to know what's in it for them. Make sure to point out the personal value of stress management as well as organizational benefits.

**Practice Makes Perfect-** To make new skills and ideas stick, employees need to practice them. Include role-play and interactive exercises in your stress management sessions. These methods create interest, motivation and help employees apply their learning.

**Get Their Attention-** Last but not least, keep it interesting and interactive to gain/maintain motivation.

### Training Tips

Here are a few suggestions to ensure a successful stress management program:

**Gain Management Support-** Gain the support of management to ensure the resources needed to support the program.

**Assess Employees-** Assess employee stress levels and coping skills in both personal and work environments. Identification of employee strength and weaknesses can help tailor and focus the program on employee's greatest needs.

**Educate Employees-** Educate employees about stress, through such methods as workshops or video training.

**Teach a Variety of Stress Management Skills-** Help employee acquire skills in each of the five areas. Employees need a wide repertoire of skills to deal appropriately with different types of stress in different situations.

**Develop Individual Action Plans-** Encourage employees to develop their own personal goals. Goals should be realistic, specific and measurable. Give homework so employees can practice their skills.

**Involve Family Members-** Invite spouses or significant others to attend with employees. These individuals are an integral part of the employee's lifestyle and can support the employee in meeting his or her goals.

**Offer on Company Time-** Allow employees time off to attend stress management activities. This encourages participation and prevents select groups from being singled out for attendance.

**Hold Regular Meetings-** Meet regularly and for a substantial length of time. More effective programs typically last from four to eight weeks with sessions lasting 45 minutes or longer. Also, follow-up or booster sessions should be offered.

**Use Medium Size Groups-** Encourage participation by maintaining a moderate group size of 12-15 members.

**Offer/Recommend Training Sessions Outside Your Company-** Provide a list of community programs and resources. Off-site sessions can encourage participation because confidentiality may be an issue for some employees.



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**Provide Continuous Feedback-** Let employees know how they are doing. Provide them with a resource who will answer their questions.

**Evaluate the Program on a Regular Basis-** Are employees making progress? Are organizational goal(s) being met? What should be changed or added to make the program better?

### Evaluating the Program

Evaluation is essential to a healthy and effective program. Program evaluation is necessary because employee needs change, and therefore, so should the program's content. Documenting success and future opportunities should be done regularly and at both the organizational and individual level. Organizational evaluation includes looking at both objective and subjective data. Track such things as: health care costs, absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, and accidents and errors. Also consider employee morale and reactions.

On the individual level it may be harder to track results. Consider changes in feelings, attitudes and health. Encourage participants to personalize a system to help them track their individual progress.

Participation rates are often low when a program is new, and you should not be discouraged. People may be unsure about why the program or service is being offered or what will happen if they join in.

Employees may also be afraid to make a commitment. Make sure the purpose of your efforts is clear, and put a lot of effort into marketing a top notch program.

### Promoting Your Program

Here are a few ideas to help your organization promote stress management.

**Newsletters/Bulletin Boards-** Publish and post stress management material. Display information on community resources. These media help communicate a serious concern for employee health and a willingness to help.

**Classes/Lunch Hour Sessions-** Provide on-site educational opportunities through classes and brown-bag lunches. Classes could include information on the five stress management areas. Brown-bag lunches, held over employee lunch hours, could include videos, workshops or lectures. Employee cafeterias or large conference rooms work very well for these classes.

**Screening-** Encourage employees to have health screenings: blood pressure checks, cholesterol and cancer

screenings, and health risk appraisals. Screenings educate and motivate employees and are often used in conjunction with other educational activities. Screenings also provide your company with a picture of how healthy your employees are. This information can help you plan various health-related activities.

**On-The-Job-** Encourage employees to engage in healthy behaviors on-the-job including exercising and eating right. Require a 10 minute stretch prior to starting work and after lunch for all employees whose job duties require constant lifting, bending, stretching, or walking. Provide a reasonably priced selection of healthy foods in vending machines and the cafeteria. Indicate calorie, sodium, and fat contents on menu choices. Use community resources to help educate employees about nutrition.

**Facilities-** Provide permanent on-site classes and facilities such as aerobics and exercise equipment, if possible. A qualified doctor or nurse might be hired part-time to provide on-site medical services and to supervise employee wellness activities. If on-site activities are impossible to implement, encourage employees to utilize community resources (e.g., YMCA, YWCA, sports clubs). Many organizations offer corporate discounts.

**Group Outings-** Plan group activities that involve recreation, socialization and exercise! Softball, volleyball, golf or bowling leagues are a few popular options.

**Incentives-** Offering incentives such as contests, raffles and recognition may motivate some employees. For example, every time an employee attends a formal exercise workout or a lunch hour session, his/her name is entered in a prize drawing. Some companies offer a "health" day off rather than a sick day for improved health and wellness behaviors.

### Resources

Many resources are available in the stress management area. A few key organizations and vendors are listed. In addition, don't forget to tap into local resources such as schools; adult education; colleges and universities; area hospitals; YMCA/YWCA; or other companies of similar industries, size, location that are engaged in similar efforts. Consider your organization's specific needs when shopping for stress management programs.

#### American Institute of Stress

<http://www.stress.org/>

#### National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

#### Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP)

<http://www.odphp.osophs.dhhs.gov/>