

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Got stress? Identifying and mitigating on-the-job stress

Frazzled. Argumentative. Withdrawn. Forgetful. These are just a few signs of work-related stress, and according to Statistics Canada, stress in the workplace is on the rise. While a certain level of stress is to be expected from time to time, incessant stress can lead to high employee turnover, reduced productivity, poor employee morale and general job dissatisfaction.

Read on to learn how to identify workplace stress, and discover how you can become part of the solution and not the root of the problem.

Sourcing stress

Unrealistic performance expectations, workplace culture, a lack of training and even your own management style can all create stress for employees. Add in today's job security anxieties, the need to do more with less and increased workload due to budget cuts, and voila—the perfect storm for on-the-job stress.

The stress test

Take a good, honest look at your team and seek-out signs of stress. Are they irritable and anxious? Do they often forget deadlines or simple instructions? Are they frequently tardy or absent? Do they exhibit indifference or flat-out defiance? If you answered "yes" to one or more of these questions, then it's likely that your employees are under the influence of stress.

It's not you, it's me

When your team is stressed out, it's time to take action. But before you recommend the latest self-help book, stop and self-assess. What portion of the stress do you own? Are your expectations realistic? Are you downloading a side of stress with the latest to do list?

You have the tough task of optimizing your team's potential, helping employees remain satisfied on the job all while meeting the demands of your organization. While it's certainly not easy, especially when times are tough, you can be part of the solution by following these simple steps:

- **Be proactive**. Take the initiative to inventory your team's workload and assess their stress level.

Don't rely on your employee's to raise the white flag when workload or stress levels are out of control. Look for the signs of stress, talk to your team and negotiate priorities when needed.

- **Make first things first**. As a manager, you have the bird's eye view of your teams' workload and the priorities of the organization. When stress rears its ugly head, refocus your team on the most important tasks. When possible, reshuffle the workload and re-assign the deadline for other less important or less pressing tasks.

- **Listen**. Meet regularly as a team, and touch base individually throughout the week. For a high-stressed team, knowing their manager understands their pressures and is committed to making their work-life better actually helps to reduce stress.

- **Just say no.** If your team is at the workload brink, then resist the urge to take on additional projects. Or if you must, negotiate the deadline to a realistic time frame to give your team the breathing room they need. Most people are reasonable—they'll understand if you need a little extra time to deliver on their request if they know your team is already working beyond capacity.

- **Encourage wellness.** Whether personal or professional stress is the issue, it is always a good idea to promote the usage of your organization's wellness programs and resources—including your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

- **Promote work-life balance**. It's not enough to encourage your team to take their breaks and to leave on time; you have to lead by example. If you continue to work 60 hour weeks, then your stressed-out team may continue to follow the leader. While working overtime might help to reduce workload in the short-term, it will only contribute to the stress your team is under and will eventually backfire, perhaps even causing burn-out.

- **Give feedback**. Regular informal feedback lets employees know you recognize and value their contributions. Expressing appreciation and being tuned into your team sends the message that you're approachable and informed—two critical attributes for effectively managing a stressed team.

- **Conduct performance reviews**. In addition to ongoing feedback, conducting performance reviews every six months or at least once a year will help you manage stress on your team. This formal dialogue is another opportunity to set priorities, recognize a job well done, and create a plan—such as additional training or conferences—to tackle problem areas.

- **Celebrate accomplishments**. Take time to step away from the daily grind to celebrate accomplishments by enjoying time outside of the work environment together with an activity your team would enjoy. These team-building exercises help to foster good morale and will showcase your softer side.

- **Review this article with your team.** One of the best sources of information about stress relief on the job is your own employees. So talk about it. Chances are they will open up quickly about their on-the-job stress and how you can help them alleviate at least some of the sources.

As a manager, you are one of the most important people in your employees' lives. You have the unique ability to mitigate stress levels on your team by spotting them early and taking a few simple steps to reign it in before it takes the wind out of your team's sail.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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