

Stress for Success



You can balance the stress in your life if you don't think of balance as keeping things steady or maintaining an equilibrium.

MOST OF US HAVE A GREAT deal of difficulty in achieving and maintaining balance in our lives — and the result is stress. Job stress, which *Time* magazine called "The Epidemic of the Eighties," is a major culprit. This is far and away the leading source of stress. And the problem has escalated over the past decade. Almost nine out of ten adults experience "high levels of stress" at least once or twice a week, with more than one out of four complaining of this daily.

There are many reasons for this. The way business is conducted has changed dramatically during this century. Technology enhancements have resulted in an information overload. Television and the media inundate us with instantaneous information from all over the world — and then make us think that we need to process all of it, regardless of whether it is of any interest or importance. Technostress also stems from accelerated speed of data acquisition and communication. Computers, fax machines, cellular phones, call forwarding, call waiting, conference calls, remote-access answering machines and services, beepers, express mail, and same-day courier service now make it feasible to contact anyone, anywhere, at any time! Consequently, human contact and personal relationships have steadily disintegrated. In some offices, workers only a few feet apart seldom speak to each other, communicating primarily through their computer terminals. Many become so enchanted with or accustomed to the consistent speed and accuracy of the computer that it starts to spill over into their personal lives. Some become irritable or depressed when they don't get the same immediate and flawless responses from family or friends.

Our forbears were more likely to be involved in trades, professions, careers, vocations, and avocations that furnished feelings of fulfillment and fostered strong

social support and ties. Artisans and craftsmen could take pride in their work, and farmers in their crops and livestock, deriving great pride from the visible proof of the pleasure and benefits that others derived from their labors. Today's workers are more apt to be cogs in some complex, cumbersome, technocratic venture. They usually have little control over or identity with the finished product, little opportunity to fully utilize their talents, and rarely enough time to do the job to the best of their ability. Not enough time. That seems to be the universal complaint. As one harassed worker griped, "The only person who got all their work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe."

Sources of Job Stress

Any one of several sources of job stress can upset your balance, such as:

- Having lots of responsibility but little authority
- Not being able to voice complaints, or express strong feelings
- Prejudice because of age, gender, race or religion
- Inadequate recognition or reward for good job performance
- Not being able to utilize personal talents and abilities to full potential
- Lack of a clear job description or chain of command, with too many different people demanding different things
- Unpleasant working conditions due to polluted air, excessive noise, fear of exposure to toxic or cancer-causing chemicals, crowding
- Inability to get along with superiors, subordinates, coworkers, and customers, because of basic differences in goals and values
- Chronic and unpredictable commuting problems beyond your control
- Fear, uncertainty, and doubt

Working women may have particular difficulties in trying to balance their lives, as they have to juggle career demands with being a single parent, housewife, supermom, or providing custodial care for aged parents and relatives. And they are paying the price for it with increased rates of heart attacks and breast and ovarian cancer that many researchers believe to be stress-related.

The Roller Coaster Ride

Stress is difficult to define, because it is different for each of us. However, one thing is clear: the sense or feeling of being out of control is always stressful.

For example, watch people on a gigantic roller coaster ride. Some are crouched in the back seats, eyes shut, jaws clenched, white-knuckled as they grasp the retaining bar. They can't wait for the ride in the torture chamber to end so that they can get their feet on terra firma and scamper away. But up front are the wide-eyed thrill seekers, yelling and relishing every steep plunge, who rush to get on the very next ride. And in between, you may find a group with an air of nonchalance that borders on boredom. So, was the roller coaster ride stressful?

Obviously, it's a case of "different strokes for different folks." It wasn't the roller coaster ride itself that was inherently distressful, but rather how it was perceived. The difference between the people in the back and those up front



was the sense of control they perceived over the event. Similarly, some individuals thrive on the hectic pace of life in the fast lane and the pressures of doing several things simultaneously that would overwhelm most of us—provided they perceive that they are in control.

The most important thing you can learn about stress is to recognize that frequently it is not external events or situations like roller coaster rides or a job that cause stress, but rather how such things are perceived. This is often something which is entirely under your control. Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent. And you can learn to move from the back of the roller coaster to the front, if you can correct faulty perceptions that allow you to gain more control and balance in your life.

A good way to start is to learn how to manage your time and prioritize your needs. Make an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, and take time to get in touch with your feelings, needs and desires. That includes allowing adequate and specific time for relaxation,

recreation, and sleep. Learn to say "no" when confronted by a request you suspect will be stressful or time consuming, or disrupt your personal schedule. It's just not possible to please everyone all of the time. No one will respect you if you don't respect yourself and your personal time.

Some stresses you can't influence, but others you can do something about. The trick is distinguishing between the two so that you are not constantly frustrated, like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, and trying to change things you can't possibly alter.

Learn to identify those stresses in your life over which you can gain more control by using your time and talents most effectively. As for the others, if you can't avoid, escape, or lessen their impact, learn how to accept them. If you can't fight and you can't flee, try to flow.

You can also achieve a greater balance in your life if you establish some meaningful goals that allow you to more fully utilize your skills. They should be within your reach, but not your grasp. Unrealistic aspirations will simply lead to frustration and depression. Insignificant achievements will only rob you of the powerful stress-reducing benefits that come with pride of accomplishment. A strong social support system is also a powerful stress buffer. If your work, family or existing relationships fail to satisfy that need, get involved in group activities, volunteer work, or hobbies, preferably with individuals who have similar interests. Try to do something you enjoy that benefits others.

Stress is not necessarily bad, and some stresses are pleasurable. A passionate kiss and the promise of what might ensue could be stressful, but quite different from having root canal work. And increasing stress results in improved performance and productivity — up to a point, and this differs for each of us. It's when we exceed this level that the damage starts. We all have to discover our own personal optimal stress zone.

It's like the stress or tension in a violin string. Not enough causes a dull, raspy noise. Too much results in a shrill, irritating sound, or causes the string to snap. However, just the right amount of tension produces a beautiful tone. Similarly, we need to discover how much stress is required to allow each of us to make beautiful music. In doing so, you will learn how stress can make you more productive, rather than self-destructive, and how it can help to restore equilibrium and balance in your life. **EE**

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