5 Scientifically Proven Ways to Reduce Stress at Work

By Martha C. White   Jan. 22, 2014

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Is stress as much a permanent fixture at your job as the office coffee machine? If so, you've got plenty of company. According to the American Psychological Association, workplace stress costs American companies an estimated $300 billion annually.

There's been workplace stress as long as there have been workplaces, but if you think you're more stressed now, you're probably right. "Ability to do their job well and therefore keep their job is a major stress for most employees, especially in a fluctuating economy," says Heidi Golledge, co-founder of CareerBliss.

But this doesn't mean you're relegated to spending 40 hours (or more!) each week as a bundle of nerves. Social scientists who study how, when and why our jobs stress us out have

Sit up straight. Your mother probably told you to sit up straight, but she probably didn't know good posture can affect how well you do on the job. "Your posture influences psychology and that influences behavior," says Andy Yap, a post doctoral associate and lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Yap conducted experiments and found that when we sit in tight, contracted positions — like squeezed into a too-small seat or hunched over our phone — we feel more stressed and less powerful. "Power buffers you from stress," he says.

If your desk or workstation is cramped, see if you can move things around to give yourself a little more physical (and mental) breathing room. If that's not an option, periodically strike "power poses," where you take up more space and stretch out a bit.

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Get organized. Researchers at UCLA found that just looking at clutter can spur the body's production of stress hormones, so working in a messy office or cubicle can make you stressed even if the work itself isn't high-stress. It's OK to start small. "We know from research that little acts of neatness cascade into larger acts of organization," UC Berkeley sociologist Christine Carter tells CNN. Tackle that pile of papers you never get around to filing, or the overflowing inbox.

"In general, clutter is simply a delayed decision," says Scott Roewer, who owns organizing company Solutions by Scott & Company. "Start by simplifying the decision process by using these three categories: reference, action, and recycle," he advises, then subdivide from there. "If you have 10 to 15 pieces of paper on your desk in an action pile, it may work for you, but as the number of action items grows, your system will become less productive. If you group your papers by the type of action, you'll be able to act on them more efficiently," he says. Your tasks can be things like "call back," "file" and "send out."

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Abandon unrealistic goals. Ambition is good, but sometimes we can fall into the trap of setting goals for ourselves that are too high, which just discourages us when we fail to reach them. Peter Creed, a psychology professor at Griffith University in Australia, studied nearly 200 college students and noted how they reacted when faced with an unachievable goal. "When contemplating unachievable goals, those with a higher capacity to adjust their goals… report less distress, more career planning, and more exploration." Like many other things in life, being able to be flexible is key.

Aim high, but with the understanding that you can go back and change those goals. "Taking pride in everything you do, no matter how big or how small, is key to confidence and success," Golledge says.

Try to avoid interruptions. Yes, it can be easier said than done when your phone is ringing and your voicemail light is already flashing, your email inbox is filling up and a co-worker sticks their head in to ask a question. But researchers in Germany found that addressing interruptions rather than staying focused less to stress. "Workflow interruptions had detrimental effects on satisfaction with one's own performance, the forgetting of intentions, and irritation," they wrote.

When the inevitable does happen, don't let it derail you, Roewer says. "If you find yourself interrupted in the middle of a task, write a quick reminder to yourself about what and where you left off," he suggests. "By using this method, you'll have a reminder of where to begin when you return, and won't lose time trying to retrace your steps."

Embrace your stress. Yep, it sounds crazy. But researchers at Yale University discovered that experiment subjects who were presented with the idea that stress can be beneficial "reported improved psychological symptoms and better work performance" compared to other subjects who were taught that stress is debilitating. It didn't take much to change people's attitudes, either; subjects watched less than 10 minutes of video about stress, and that was enough to change their outlook about stress. Having a positive outlook on stress makes people more likely to rise to whatever challenge they're facing when stressful situations occur.