

Stressed for Success

As I write this column, the holiday season has just begun, and its incumbent demands lie ahead. By the time this article reaches you, we will have outlasted the season and its associated stress. But it's not just the holiday baking, gift-wrapping, and decorating that overwhelms us—we face enormous professional stress during this time of year, with its emphasis on home, family, good health, and harmony.

Stress is simply a part of human nature. And despite its bad rap, not all stress is problematic; it's what motivates people to prepare or perform. Routine, "normal" stress that is temporary or short-lived can actually be beneficial. When placed in danger, the body prepares to either face the threat or flee to safety. During these times, your pulse quickens, you breathe faster, your muscles tense, your brain uses more oxygen and increases activity—all functions that aid in survival.¹

But not every situation we encounter necessitates an increase in endorphin levels and blood pressure. Tell that to our stress levels, which are often persistently elevated! Chronic stress can cause the self-protective responses your body activates when threatened to suppress immune, digestive, sleep, and reproductive systems, leading them to cease normal functioning over time.¹ This "bad" stress—or distress—can contribute to health problems such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes.

Stress can elicit a variety of responses: behavioral, psychologic/emotional, physical, cognitive, and social.² For many, consumption (of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, sugar, fat, or caffeine) is a coping mechanism. While many people look to food for comfort and stress relief, research suggests it may have undesired effects. Eating a high-fat meal when under stress can slow your metabolism and result in significant weight gain.³ Stress

can also influence whether people undereat or overeat and affect neurohormonal activity—which leads to increased production of cortisol, which leads to weight gain (particularly in women).⁴ Let's be honest: Gaining weight seldom *lowers* someone's stress level.

Everyone has different triggers that cause their stress levels to spike, but the workplace has been found to top the list. Within the "work" category, commonly reported stressors include

- Heavy workload or too much responsibility
- Long hours
- Poor management, unclear expectations, or having no say in decision-making.⁵

For health care providers, day-to-day stress is a chronic problem; responses to the *Clinician Reviews* annual job satisfaction survey have demonstrated that.^{6,7} Many of our readers report ongoing issues related to scheduling, work/life balance, compensation, and working conditions. That tension has a direct negative effect, not only on us, but on our families and our patients as well. A missed soccer game or a holiday on call are obvious stressors—but our inability to help patients achieve optimal health is a source of distress that we may not recognize the ramifications of. How often has a clinician felt caught in what feels like an unattainable quest?

Mitigating this workplace stress is the challenge. Changing jobs is another high-stress event, so up and quitting is probably not the answer. Identifying the problem is the first essential step.

If workload is the issue, focus on setting realistic goals for your day. Goal-setting provides purposeful direction and helps you feel in control. There will undeniably be days in which your plan must be completely abandoned. When this happens, don't



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➤ **There are many different triggers for stress, but "the workplace" usually tops the list.**

fret—reassess! Decide what must get done and what can wait. If possible, avoid scheduling patient appointments that will put you into overload. Learn to say “no” without feeling as though you are not a team player. And when you feel swamped, put a positive spin on the day by noting what you have accomplished, rather than what you have been unable to achieve.

If you find that your voice is but a whisper in the decision-making process, look for ways to become more involved. How can you provide direction on issues relating to organizational structure and clinical efficiency? Don’t suppress your feelings or concerns about the work environment. Pulling up a chair at the management table is crucial to improving the workplace and reducing stress for everyone (including the management!). Discuss key frustration points. Clear documentation of the issues that impede patient satisfaction (eg, long wait times) will aid in your dialogue.

Literature has identified common professional frustrations related to base pay rates, on-call pay, overtime pay, individual productivity compensation, and general incentive payments, which are further supported by our job satisfaction surveys.⁶⁻⁸ Knowing what’s included in the typical compensa-

tion packages in your region can reduce not only your own stress, but your employer’s as well. While this may seem a futile exercise, the investment in evaluating your own value, and the value your employer places on you, is well worth the return.

Previous experience dictates our ability to handle stress. If you have confidence in yourself, your contribution to your patients, and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, you are better equipped to handle the stress. If you can put the stressors in perspective by knowing the time frame of the stress, how long it will last, and what to expect, it will be easier to cope with the situation.

While trying to write this column, I was initially so stressed that I could barely compose a sentence! I knew that the stress of meeting my editorial deadline was “good” stress, though, so I kept taking short walks, and (as you can read) I got through it. Whether you turn to exercise or music or (as one friend does!) closet purging—managing your stress is key to maintaining good health. **CR**

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DID YOU KNOW?

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPIEST

The infographic consists of three blue rectangular boxes stacked vertically, each containing a white number and text. The first box has a large '1' followed by 'Making a difference'. The second box has a large '2' followed by 'Collegiality and respect'. The third box has a large '3' followed by 'Quality patient relationships'.

Source: Job satisfaction. *Clinician Reviews*. 2017;27(12):25-30.