



# Stress Management in the Workplace

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

**Course Number: BS-1028**

**Credit: 1 Hour / 1 PDH / 1 CPD**

# Stress Management in the Workplace

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## Introduction

### What Defines Stress?

Stress is regarded as a widespread phenomenon that can be observed throughout human life (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). The demands of daily life for the average American and others around the world can bring about periods of stress, and a large proportion of this stress can be found within the workplace. The workplace is where most people spend a substantial portion of their life, so at one point or another, an issue will arise that will bring stress to light. There have been a number of studies that have indicated the job stress is one of the major sources of stress for American adults and within other developed nations around the world (American Institute of Stress, 2021). According to the American Institute of Stress, the main causes for stress stem from the workload or demands, which contribute up to about 46% of cases of stress that can be placed on a person. Stress is considered to be an unavoidable aspect of every person's life that lives in the world and will, unfortunately, continue to reoccur for most if not all of the remainder of a person's life. Stress is synonymous with having a negative impact on an individual's mental and physical well-being if allowed to exist for some time without having a proper resolution (Sahao, 2016). Before stress from workplace experiences can overpower a person, it is important for them to learn techniques to apply to quell its impact.

Most people venture to the workplace each day of their life without the desire to experience distress, exhaustion, or burden; however, these can be potential outcomes that can result from interactions and activities that can occur on any given day. For most people, stress tends to appear when there are many demands that are made of them that do not necessarily align with the resources that are available to meet expectations. Also, the demands may not fit with the knowledge base, comprehension level, and/or capabilities of the individual. Within large cities such as Los Angeles, New York, or other municipalities, the connection between stress and heart attacks is well known and recognized as a growing problem among working adults (American Institute of Stress, 2021). Over time, the lack of cohesion between workplace demands and what is available to successfully meet expectations can weigh heavily on a person and prove to be detrimental to their overall health and quality of life. Chronic stress at work can lead to burnout, with several consequences being felt on employees' well-being and health (Salvagioni et al., 2017). It has become almost commonplace for stress to coincide with workplace and potential turmoil that can be experienced, but this does not have to be the case.

## Signs and Presentations of Stress

The signs of stress can present differently, depending on the person and the context of the given situation. One of the first signs to appear would be a change in behavior and reactions in daily life. Some of the acute responses that can be identified with stress can be related to feelings such as anxiety, depression, lethargy, or fatigue. The behavioral manifestations that can develop include being aggressive, tearful, or withdrawn (Michie, 2002). However, there can be more serious or troubling manifestations of stress that can produce, which include alterations in neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, or autonomic functioning that can lead to mental health issues. The risk and effects of mental health issues related to stress in the workplace can include poor team cohesion, having little control over one's work, bullying and psychological harassment, or a lack of poor health and safety policies (American Institute of Stress, 2021). Over time, an individual's ongoing presence within a poor workplace has the potential to contribute to lost productivity, absenteeism, or physical and mental health issues (American Institute of Stress, 2021). Employees can miss a significant amount of work as a result of stress compared to physical ailments, with the development of mental illness leading to more lost workdays for Americans than any other. As soon as the signs and symptoms of stress are identified, it is important that they are taken seriously, and measures are taken to appropriately address them within the workplace. The longer the issue is allowed to exist, the more damage it will cause in the long term, not only to employees but to organizations.

## Types of Stress

There can be a number of factors in daily life that can bring about stress, and the ability to appropriately manage this is not a skill that is shared by every person. Stress management can be a skill that some people possess, but it can also be learned when needed. Stress can either be viewed as external (environmental factor or source serving as the origin), or it can be caused by an internal perception by the individual (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). A person's internal perception can be the result of both personal and professional experiences, and stress that stems from the workplace can lead to the development of negative symptoms, anxiety, or the development of serious psychological disorders (Tse, Flin, & Mearns, 2010). Stress can be categorized based on the nature of the stress (physiological or psychological stress), according to the stress influence on the individual (positive eustress or negative distress), or according to exposure duration to stress (acute or chronic stress) (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). Each can present with unique manifestations of stress, and responses that can be elicited as a result of the occurrence can also differ. The commonality that can be shared by people as it pertains to stress is that over time it can cause a significant disturbance in the life of the person that is being impacted to where something has to be done to address it.

One of the most important stresses to highlight is occupational stress, which has gained a significant amount of attention within recent years due to its impact on employees, both personally and professionally. Regardless of the origin of the stress, it has the ability to impact various facets of an individual's life if it is ignored. Stress can have an impact on the performance and activity level of any employee of a company or an organization. When presented with psychological stress, the employees of an organization can behave in a manner and engage in activities that deviate from what is considered to be normal within the work environment. Given the rapid changes that can occur within organizations related to structure and goals to pursue to be successful, there can be an observable increase in stress that can present in various forms. If these strains are ignored by an organization, they can have the potential to cause significant damage to employees as well as to the organization (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). For the employee, stressful workplaces can present as having less holiday time, an increase in work hours, lack of support from leadership, or minimal to no connection with coworkers and leadership.

### **Opportunities for Stress in the Workplace**

Within any workplace, the presence of long hours, no breaks, and continuous demands to meet unrealistic expectations can significantly contribute to the development of stress which can negatively impact health (Despreaux et al., 2017). The presence of stress is believed to account for more than a third of the cases of work-related health and half of the working days that are lost by employees on an annual basis (Despreaux et al., 2017). There can be a myriad of times when stress can present within the workplace either without warning or can be the result of a slow build over some time until the results can be felt. Some examples of occupational factors that can lead to the development of stress can include having conflict over values, such as being asked to do a lackluster job or cut costs for an individual who wants to keep high standards in their work), the inability to make decisions about when or how to stop work, feelings of isolation at work, or work overload (working after hours), or on the opposite spectrum having insufficient workload (Despreaux et al., 2017). These elements culminate in the creation of a workplace environment that is not conducive for peak performance but rather works against an employee's ability to succeed. The contributing factors of stress can diminish the value that a person places on not only the quality of their work but also the way that they view themselves.

## General Overview of Workplace Stress

It can be challenging for some people to believe that stress is a normal part of life, especially when it originates from the workplace. Along with personal stress, major workplace stress are an inevitable part of life, but the ability to successfully navigate through situations that can bring about stress can make a difference in terms of whether an individual thrives or fall prey to stress (Healthfield, 2020). During stressful times at work, people can get into the habit of blaming themselves for their level of weakness or the inability to appropriately handle the situation. There are moments where managers or leaders of an organization are not cognizant of the progression of change or situations that are promoted to producing stress. Given this unawareness, managers or leaders may expect employees to return to their normal productivity after experiencing a stressful event, and this is not the outcome (Healthfield, 2020). In the aftermath of a stressful event, an employee requires time to process the situation and work towards recovery. When consideration is given for stress in the workplace, it is critical that times are given to understand the elements of stress, situations that are more likely to produce stress, and how an employee chooses to react to it can provide a better understanding of self and how to effectively manage stress and engage in change that is beneficial (Healthfield, 2020).

## Workplace Experience

At one point or another, an individual will experience a stress-induced or exacerbating situation within the workplace. These events have the potential to cause distress, uneasiness, and long-term detriments if not appropriately address. When one feels stress, the body sends out signals that prepare it for the danger to come, known as the fight or flight responses. Within the workplace, this can contribute to decreased productivity and lack of effectiveness in a person's established role. At any given time, stress will become an inevitable of life, and given that a large number of Americans spend more of their time at work, stress is bound to arise. By having an awareness of the proper manage stress, the negative impact can be curtailed, and an individual can become more productive and functional in life. In order for stress to be appropriately addressed within the workplace, it has to be taken seriously by the leaders of an organization with the goal of implementing strategies to improve working conditions.

## Examples of Workplace Scenarios

The workplace can present a number of examples in which stress can be brought to the forefront of the conversation. The thought of heading to work for some people can cause a high level of anxiety. Based on a study that was conducted by the American Psychological Association, work was one of the items that was most frequently identified as a contributor of stress, and it was found in 70% of participants as the primary cause of their day-to-day stress (Parker, 2021). On any given day, an employee can be faced with situations that can increase their level of stress and can lead to fight or flight responses to address the specific situation.

### Scenario 1

An example of a situation that can induce stress would be an employee not being able to meet an established deadline for a project or task, and this brings about undue stress (Parker, 2021). In order to prevent a situation such as this from developing in the first place, it is important for an employee to not accept a deadline that is not feasible to meet. The approach that should be taken in this scenario is to inform one's superior of the unrealistic deadline in a professional manner and the desire for more time in order to deliver the best possible results. This will allow the employee to come through as promised rather than scrabbling to meet a deadline that only leads to stress.

### Scenario 2

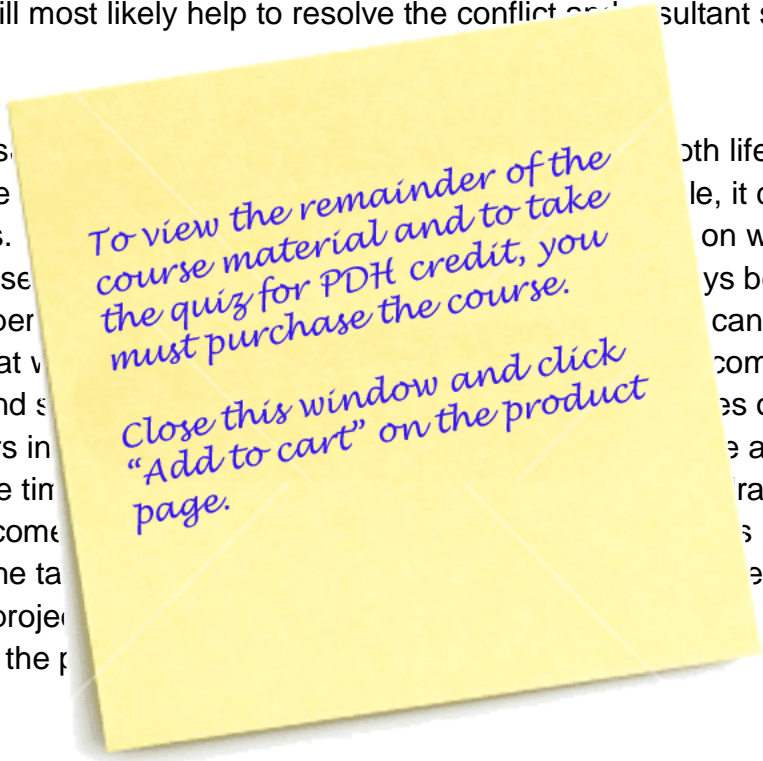
An example of another potential stress-inducing workplace situation would be the rumblings of potential layoffs within the company. This can bring about feeling of confusion, worry, and unrest among employees. The existence of rumors within the workplace can create chaos and discord. In order to address this situation, it is important for employees to not be focused on heresy and speculations but only focus on what is known for certain. Until definitive information has been released by the leadership of an organization, it would not be a best practice to become bothered by speculations of impending layoffs. In the event that the rumors are confirmed, it is important for an employee to start to develop a backup plan in order to minimize the outcome of the stress that can result from having to look for another position. The ability to have options and alternatives in place will help to significantly lower the impact of stress that can be experienced.

### Scenario 3

Another example of workplace stress can result from receiving a troubling message that presents an air of passive-aggressiveness on the part of a coworker or a superior. In order to address this sensitive situation, it is always important to err on the side of caution by taking a professional approach when responding to the message. Before responding to the message, time should be dedicated to formulate the response that will be provided and not focus specifically on the tone that is delivered through the message. It has been reported the majority of the stress that results from email messages is not necessarily from the content of the message, but how the message is interpreted by the receiver (Parker, 201). The sender of the message may not have intended for a negative tone to be projected in the message, but this can be challenging when it is simply reading words on a screen rather than having a conversation with the person. A course of action to address this situation would be to have a discussion over the phone or face to face in order to address any glaring issues that are causing hostility in the workplace. The ability for individuals in the workplace to discuss their apparent issues openly will most likely help to resolve the conflict and resultant stress.

#### Scenario 4

There can be issues with work/life balance that do not always achieve at times. Stress can appear. The presence of stress can take a toll on a person's health and their time while at work. On a particular day and situation, there are barriers in the way. It is also important to optimize the time (Parker, 2021). When it comes to breaking down the tasks, working on the project can be overwhelming in the p



both life and work. While it can be difficult to balance work, stress can be managed. Always being busy can be a challenge. One can strive to optimize their time and complete on a number of projects. If you are successful, it is best to stay away, it is best to stay away. In the recruitment process, it is important to seek out the best process of recruitment. It is important to not feel