Simple Stress Busters in the Workplace
Illinois IPS Podcast Series*

My name is Jessica and I'm the Associate Director of the UIC Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy. Today, I'm talking about a common problem faced by employees across all types of jobs and work settings – that is, stress. No matter what your job, it's likely that you've had stress at work. Sometimes, a bit of stress can be healthy, if it motivates you to complete a challenging task, meet a deadline, or try something new that stretches and grows your skills. But, what about workplace stress that doesn't go away, and starts to impact your ability to concentrate and your job satisfaction? Overwhelming stress can be bad for your mental and physical health, and it can negatively affect your work performance. Realistically speaking, there are difficult situations at work over which most of us have no control. These include increased work demands without an increase in pay or the threat of layoffs due to economic downturns.

Take heart, however! Managing stress at work doesn't necessarily mean making huge changes or rethinking your job choice. There are simple things you can do to bust stress at work right now to start feeling better. Let's look at some of the easiest and most effective of these.

One of the first ways to bust stress is to recognize that you are stressed. Giving stress a name can help you feel calmer because it leads you to be mindful of your feelings. Saying to yourself, "I'm overwhelmed" or "I'm feeling upset because I have too much to do" can lead you to figure out what to do next. Sometimes, stress at work is so pervasive that you lose track of the fact that you are stressed. See if you recognize your own feelings in any of these common reactions to chronic stress:

- Loss of interest in your job or work
- Ongoing inability to concentrate on what you're doing
- Tension headaches or sore muscles
- Trouble sleeping
- Stomach problems
- Feeling highly irritable or anxious

If these problems sound familiar, it may be time to name your stress, so you can begin to manage it more effectively. The sooner you recognize your feelings of stress – also called your "stress reflex" – the easier you will find it to break the stress cycle.

When something stressful happens, immediately try deep breathing. Breathe in deeply enough through your nose that you expand your chest and belly. Hold your breath for one second, and then, breathe out slowly through your mouth. If you're discreet, you can practice deep breathing no matter what you're doing at work. If you can, also close your eyes while breathing deeply and visualize being someplace where you feel calm, such as out in nature or with your pet. You can also try silently repeating a calming word or phrase, such as "relax" or "let this go."

Another effective stress buster is to temporarily remove yourself from the stressful situation. If you're able, take a quick walk, especially outdoors, and think about something other than your stress. If you can't go outside, try taking a breather in your break room or even in the washroom if necessary. Just the act of moving to another place can help bust your stress, by giving you the feeling that you're doing something positive to feel better. Remember what I said earlier – you don't need to make huge changes to reduce your stress. Sometimes, just a small action can break that reflex.

At our Center, we consistently hear that one of the biggest stressors faced by people in mental health recovery is negative thinking. Although it may take practice, learning to reduce your negative thinking can go a long way towards reducing your stress. Seeing only the downside of every situation and interaction at work will leave you drained of energy and motivation. Recognizing that many things at work are beyond your control will turn your attention to what you can control: yourself and your reactions. Even if nobody else does, pat yourself on the back when you know you've done a good job or handled a difficult situation well. Remind yourself that even though there are some negative things about your job, having a steady pay check and structure in your day is a good thing. If you can, also reduce time spent with negative-thinking coworkers. Try to seek out coworkers who have a brighter outlook, or who can take the good with the bad. Being around positive coworkers can help you feel more positive too.

Believe it or not, sometimes we feel stressed at work because we're hungry or thirsty. If you haven't had enough protein before you start your workday, you will lose valuable energy half-way through your day or shift. Try eating a healthy protein before heading to work, like scrambled eggs or high protein yogurt and cereal. If you're able, pack high-protein and low-sugar snacks to have at work. Dehydration is a very common problem in our country. People consume so many caffeinated drinks that they forget to have the recommended 6 to 8 glasses of water every day. Try bringing a large water bottle to work, and finish it before allowing yourself anything else to drink. When you're well-hydrated, you'll have more energy and feel more able to tackle stressful situations. You also might find that you drink less caffeine and then sleep better, which can reduce your feelings of stress.

Speaking of sleep, there are other things you can do when "off the clock" that will help you feel less stressed while at work. Regular exercise is a great way to reduce stress when at work or home. It also can improve your concentration, while relaxing your mind and body. Although aerobic exercise is the best stress buster, you really don't need to join a gym or do high-impact exercise to reap the benefits of moving your body. Try walking your dog for an extra 15 minutes each day, dancing to your favorite songs, or chasing your kids around the park a few times. You also can try getting off the bus or train at an earlier stop to walk the rest of the way, or park your car farther away, to increase your steps. Once you get in the habit of moving your body, you might find yourself more able to engage in rigorous exercise to improve your well-being.

Another way to manage feeling overwhelmed at work is to talk with a trusted supporter. Talking through a stressful work situation with someone who is a good listener can reduce your stress. That person doesn't need to fix your stressful situation. Rather, he or she just needs to be able to listen in a caring and supportive way. You may find as you're talking that you come up with ways to manage your stress on your own. Writing it out in a journal may have the same positive effect.

Finally, being able to communicate in a clear and positive way with others at work can go a long way towards helping you reduce your stress. If you can stay positive and focused on the present situation, by disregarding past hurts or resentments, you're more likely to successfully resolve difficult situations on the job. Rather than thinking, "oh, here we go again," when faced with a challenge at work, try taking each situation as it comes. Focus on what you or your coworkers can do to resolve the problem, and let go of what is beyond your control. When others at work see you as a positive influence, then that can build your confidence and your outlook about work, which is a great way to reduce long-term stress.

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