

Ways to Support Employees Who May Be Overloaded or Under Stress

2nd May 2022

Supporting employees who may be overloaded or highly stressed is a vital part of every manager's job. Job stress can be caused by numerous work-related factors, including workplace changes, high workloads, breakdown of effective communications, as well as by personal concerns, such as caring responsibilities, relationship issues, financial worries, difficulty with a child or household member, or an illness that affects the family.

Whatever the cause, overload and stress take a toll on people and, in turn, have a negative effect on workplace morale, productivity, and engagement. Overload and stress can also result in higher rates of absenteeism and workplace accidents. Watching for signs of stress and overload in both yourself and the people you manage will help you to respond effectively.

Manage your own stress

Managing your own stress is the first step toward supporting employees. If you're not aware of your own stress level, you may unintentionally impose your stress on those around you. Watch for signs of stress in yourself. Then develop a plan for managing any symptoms you may be experiencing.

Signs of stress include:

- sleep problems
- fatigue
- depression
- feeling nervous, anxious, irritable, or on edge
- trouble concentrating, focusing, or making decisions
- overeating or having no appetite
- withdrawing from family or friends
- tearfulness or frequent crying
- tense muscles, shakiness, or trembling
- stomach pain, upset stomach, or headache
- increase of drug or alcohol use
- lower productivity at work

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Here are ways to manage your stress:

Remain mindful of the hours you work each week, and be intentional about balancing the working week and your time outside of it in a meaningful way

Make exercise a regular part of your life. You can ease stress through activities as simple as going for a 30-minute walk three to five times a week. Find other ways to get regular exercise, too.

Learn a few relaxation techniques. Try deep breathing, yoga, or meditation. Using relaxation techniques regularly, even if only for a few minutes once or twice a day, can reduce stress all day long. If these techniques are not for you, think back to another time when you felt stressed and spend some time reflecting on how you managed to decrease that feeling. You may want to apply the same solutions to the stress you are presently experiencing. A helpful resource is *Declutter Your Mind: How to Stop Worrying, Relieve Anxiety, and Eliminate Negative Thinking* by S. J. Scott and Barry Davenport.

Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy. This will help you take a step back and gain a fresh perspective on any stress and pressure you're experiencing.

Talk to a trusted mentor or colleague. Even if you are an experienced manager, you may have sources of stress that are too big or complex to handle on your own. You'll benefit from getting a different perspective from someone you respect.

Take advantage of resources provided by your organisation. Look into resources and benefits your employer offers, such as your assistance programme, to help you reduce stress.

Contact your GP if you are having trouble managing your stress. Talk to them if you are concerned about any aspect of your physical or mental health.

Causes of stress in the workplace

Employees may be under stress for some of the same reasons that you are, such as a workplace change that is affecting everyone. Or they may have their own concerns. Some

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common causes of job stress include:

- interpersonal conflict
- tasks that waste time and effort, interfering with the ability to do productive work
- lack of control at work
- roles or responsibilities that aren't clearly defined
- unreasonable deadlines
- poor communication
- information overload from email, phone calls, texts, social media, and other sources
- lack of training, technology, or other resources needed to do the work
- workplace changes, such as relocation, redundancies, high staff turnover, job insecurity, new systems, or schedule changes
- excessive workload

Ways to help employees manage feelings of stress and overload

Be positive and supportive in your interactions with your team. Ask how people are doing. Encourage questions and conversation at individual and team meetings. Make a point of asking how you can help or what your employee needs from you. When an employee identifies an area of stress, make sure that you follow up with them so that they feel that you are offering genuine support rather than just making an empty gesture.

Help people prioritise their work. Perhaps assignments with a lower priority could be eliminated to allow employees to focus on the most value-added work. Perhaps a tight deadline could be extended. Maybe other resources or newer technology would help an employee achieve needed results. Encourage people to talk to you if they have questions about deadlines or how to prioritise tasks.

Make sure that roles and expectations are clear. Lack of information or uncertainty about roles, goals, duties, or responsibilities is often a source of stress in the workplace. Offer consistent feedback after the initial expectations have been set so that employees know how they are doing.

Try to create solutions to manage your employees' job demands and reduce their stress.

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Help your team by encouraging people to schedule focused project time during the day with minimal disruptions. Lead by example and do the same yourself. Enable and encourage employees to find private workspaces to get away from interruptions if available and it is helpful for them.

Check-in regularly with your team. As you give employees deadlines when you assign tasks, find out if they have enough time to complete them. Schedule regular check-ins for updates.

Make sure people have the resources and support they need to do their work. Research shows that employees who feel adequately supported by their organisation feel less overworked and are more willing to give extra effort. Do your employees have adequate direction and support from you on projects and tasks? Do they know where to go for additional support? Have employees received adequate training to provide them with the skills they need to accomplish their work? Is there a solid IT team readily available and responsive to their needs?

Identify jobs or tasks where stress is a problem and look for ways to ease it. For example, if an employee is falling behind with a project because of a lack of cooperation from another department, you or your manager may need to intervene and get the cooperation the employee needs. Help your employees find ways to automate or reduce repetitive tasks or low-value work.

Work with employees to create a work schedule that offers them the flexibility needed to meet personal responsibilities. If they talk openly about it, take note of employees' commitments and priorities outside of work. Offer whatever scheduling adjustments you can – as long as they don't interfere with your department's effectiveness or create unfair situations for other employees.

Understand your organisation's flexible work and time-off policies. Know where to get answers to questions about flexible work hours, part-time work, working from home, and other alternative work arrangements.

Be collaborative. Including employees in planning, scheduling deadlines, and organising how they do their work as much as possible allows them to feel empowered to make

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important decisions to complete a task.

Give employees the support and training they need to handle difficult customers and colleagues. If the interpersonal issues between colleagues extend beyond the support a manager can offer, refer them to the assistance programme for coaching or counselling on how to resolve the issue.

Consider simple adjustments that might make an employee's work easier or less stressful. For example, if an employee struggles with a particular task that could easily be assigned to another employee and exchanged for another task, a significant reduction in stress for everyone can be achieved and will probably result in better performance as well. Different employees have different skill sets, and making the most of them will help everyone to feel successful—success breeds success.

Encourage employees to take short breaks at work to reduce stress and protect their health. Even a 10-minute break from a stressful or tense situation—to get a few minutes of fresh air or to practise deep-breathing or relaxation techniques—helps. One study found that a small amount of time—even less than one minute—spent looking at nature improves performance upon returning to the work task.

Take a break as a group. Stress is another indication that your department might need to take a break as a group. Plan activities that are not connected to work performance. Ask members of your group for their ideas for team activities. Don't forget to consider your virtual team members; there are lots of team-building activities that can be inclusive of everyone, such as a coffee or tea break via video chat.

Be aware of how many hours people are working. If someone's workday seems particularly long, step in and encourage the employee to take the time off they need. Are people taking their annual leave? You don't want anyone to burn themselves out and become less productive.

Help employees succeed. Stress is often the result of someone feeling they aren't doing a good enough job or aren't completing the work that's expected. Training, coaching, and regular feedback are three ways you can help people succeed.

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Set a positive example. Be aware of the signals you send with your work schedule and work habits. When you take time for personal needs, don't hide it from employees. It helps to show them how you balance work and personal life.

Offering support to employees

Personal concerns may also be the cause of or contribute to stress at work. These concerns may include a family illness, legal or financial difficulties, or other issues as listed earlier in this article. It's important to offer support if an employee shows ongoing signs of stress.

Know when and how to refer an employee to your organisation's assistance programme. Remind employees that the programme is free and confidential. Contact your assistance programme or human resources (HR) representative to learn more about how to make a referral or receive a consultation on how to best support an employee.

Continue to be supportive. Provide support to an employee who is going through a difficult or stressful time—and continue being supportive without being intrusive.

Make your employees feel valuable. Take the time to listen to what's going on with employees. And remember the value of saying "thank you." You can express gratitude in many ways—in individual or group emails, in a company newsfeed or departmental newsletter, and, of course, in person.