



Creating a Healthy Workplace

A healthy work environment and culture is crucial to the success of both the organization and its employees. A healthy workplace weighs the merits of a range of considerations including mental and emotional qualities as well as safe and nurturing environments for all employee types.

Building healthy organizations takes more than simply targeting single health-risk behaviors (e.g. smoking). There is consensus among occupational health and safety, workplace health promotion and epidemiological experts that successful interventions must target underlying workplace and organizational factors. To be truly successful, a comprehensive health and wellness program requires an investment of varied resources and a long-term commitment that ultimately affects the culture and values of an organization. As employees, having a better understanding of the challenges employers face when creating healthy work environments allows us to focus on key aspects where our contributions and approach influence and guide, not only the culture of an organization, but its' success in attaining the desired outcome.

The following article looks at several aspects of how, we as employees can contribute to the creation of a healthy work environment.

Inclusion and Diversity to Strengthen the Workplace

Organizations that embrace and promote inclusive practices often benefit from greater employee engagement. The business-related benefits of diversity include improved innovation, better decision-making and more effective utilization of the workforce. (1)

As important, is leveraging diversity with inclusive practices and an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome, safe, free to be themselves (2) and where robust opinions and collaborative thinking are embraced. The payoff is higher engagement, contribution, and a healthier work atmosphere.

77% of executives strongly support diversity initiatives. But just 40% of employees feel their organizations are truly diverse and inclusive.(2)

Diversity in the Workplace Includes:

- Age/generational
- Disability
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Personality type
- Race
- Religious affiliation
- Sexual orientation
- Thinking/learning style

One in three Canadians say work stress is getting them down. As an employee, there are ways to deal with the causes of stress and proactive strategies to help reduce stress and anxiety levels. Of course, not all stress is bad stress.

In fact, some people find stress in their lives helps them to perform at their best. The key is to determine the right amount, so we have energy, enthusiasm and drive, while not taxing our physical and mental well-being.

Why is reducing stress important to your overall health?

Stress can have negative effects on your overall health. A healthy workplace benefits from employees who have the skills, knowledge and resiliency needed to combat stress. When stress becomes unmanageable, it can cause physical, behavioural, and psychological challenges, which inevitably, impacts our ability to perform organizational and family duties. These stresses have a variety of symptoms that can lead to more severe problems, if left unchecked.

Physical

When you are stressed, it can impact your physical well-being. Stress reactions can range from symptoms such as loss of sleep, upper respiratory or digestive problems, to more life threatening conditions such as elevated blood pressure, hypertension, or coronary heart disease.

Behavioural

Stress reactions can take a variety of forms, including nervous habits and tics (e.g. nail-biting), increased smoking or alcohol consumption, and negative health-related behaviours (e.g. reduced activity levels).

Psychological

Reactions to stress may have negative effects on your mood (e.g. depression, anxiety or aggression), which may lower your tolerance and patience levels as well as disrupt your cognition (e.g. inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, lack of attention to detail).

Organizational

Some of the most common individual outcomes of stress include increased absenteeism, decreased performance, and reduced employee engagement, which may lead to increased accident rates, increased interpersonal conflict, impaired communication, and flawed decision-making within the organization.

Ultimately, any of these reactions can be devastating to each of us as employees. Remember, if you are beginning to feel symptoms of stress, use the strategies below to help alleviate your stress at work.

STEP 1: Change Your Thinking

How we think has a profound effect on our emotional and physical well-being. Each time we think a negative thought about ourselves, our bodies react as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation.

Use the tools below to change your thinking:

Re-framing your perspective can reduce your stress by looking at challenging or difficult situations as opportunities to overcome. People who practice re-framing tend to look at “problems” as opportunities, pausing, assessing the scenario and regrouping in the moment to formulate a solution.

Focus on the positive when stress begins to influence your mood and productivity. Take a moment to reflect upon the positive aspects of your life and profession and celebrate your achievements and milestones.

STEP 2: Manage Your Feelings

It is important to realize that managing your feelings not only impacts your stress level, but also those around us. Stepping back from stressful situations and thinking about the solution can help you move away from the emotional reaction, allowing you to deal with the task at hand or finding a solution to a problem.

Here are some exercises to manage your feelings:

Learning to express your feelings in a controlled manner is a skill that takes time to master. When encountering difficulty with something or someone, communicating your concerns in an open and respectful way is an important step in reducing stress. Being proactive in your approach when dealing with difficult situations reduces the risk of building resentment and sustained stress.

Take a deep breath. Breathing exercises are a simple and very effective way to reduce stress and manage feelings. This can be done anywhere, and it only takes a few seconds. Taking deep breaths during stressful situations can help your brain switch from a stressed state to a relaxed and calm demeanor, re-energizing body and mind.

STEP 3: Learn to Relax

Relaxing during challenging or uncomfortable moments can be difficult, but it is possible by taking small steps to keep you grounded during your day. From the moment you awake, to your commute, to managing your workday, there are little things you can be doing to help your body relax and focus.

Here are some steps that may help you relax:

Cut back on caffeine. This may seem like an impossible task for those who feel they need a caffeinated beverage in order to function. However, it is important to know that caffeine increases the production of the stress hormone called cortisol. Cortisol is often associated with the reaction called “fight-or-flight”, where your body has a physiological reaction due to perceived harm or threat. By substituting caffeine with herbal teas, juices or water, you can lower cortisol levels, allowing you to relax more easily.

Meditation at work. Using scheduled breaks for meditation is a simple but effective method to relax your mind and body. Find a comfortable place, close your eyes, clear your mind and begin to take deep breathes. If your workplace is noisy, try sitting in your car or closing the office door to minimize external stimulation. Repeating a mantra or creating a rhythm or pattern can help you stay focused. Think of a mantra - a positive, inspiring word or phrase. For example, “Life is Beautiful.” Practicing meditation regularly can lead to deeper levels of relaxation, which can enhance your energy and increase your level of concentration and your overall feeling of well-being.

STEP 4: Staying Connected to Purpose and Meaning in Life

When stress begins to take over your life, it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture. It often feels like everything around you is going wrong and there is no end in sight. Although this is often not true, the feeling of being stuck in a predicament can be overwhelming.

Here are some tactics to use to alleviate stress in those situations:

Keep the big picture in perspective. Remind yourself of what is important; will it matter in a month, or a year? Some people use the “five by five rule”; if it’s not going to matter in five years, don’t spend more than five minutes being upset by it.

Don’t try to control the uncontrollable. Many things in life are beyond our control, particularly the behaviour of others. Rather than stressing over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to perceived problems.

STEP 5: Time Management

Everyone has moments when they feel like there just isn’t enough time in the day. Using time management skills and tactics can greatly reduce stress at work.

Here are some common practices in time management:

Take time to plan ahead. When you’re stretched too thin and running behind, it’s hard to stay calm and focused. Planning ahead and making a list allows one to visualize what needs to get done and what is of priority. Having an agenda or online calendar can help with planning and time allocation.

Re-evaluate your goals and prioritize them. Make a list of tasks you need to complete. Review your list and tackle each item in order of priority. Try to leave a portion of your day free for unexpected tasks or emergencies. Identifying goals and priorities in groups of “complete today”, “nice to have”, and “ongoing” can help with organization and makes your list more manageable.

STEP 6: Get Active

Being active is important to reducing stress and living a healthy life. When participating in physical activity your body creates endorphins, chemicals in the brain that act as natural stress reducers.

Here are some simple strategies to get active:

Morning exercises. Doing exercises in the morning can have a positive effect on one's stress levels throughout the day. Findings suggest that getting 20 to 40 minutes of aerobic activity can result in a reduction of stress levels for several hours.(2)

Sleep. It may be obvious, but getting a restful night's sleep helps you cope better with the stresses of the day and prepares you for tomorrow. If you have difficulty sleeping, adjust your evenings and try an earlier bedtime.

Remember, you aren't alone. Many people face work related stress. Taking small steps each day to reduce your work related stress will benefit your overall health in the long run which in turn influences your colleagues and their approach to a healthy work approach and environment.

Organizations benefit from considering the stresses and pressures employees face beyond the workplace and how those pressures affect productivity and related organizational performance measures. People lead increasingly busy lives, yet time remains finite. No matter how dedicated we as employees may be, we are not immune to stresses resulting from juggling any number of activities outside of work, such as maintaining a household, raising a family, caring for elders, maintaining supportive relationships, commuting to and from work, staying involved in the community, and more.

Finding Work-life Balance

Are you feeling overwhelmed and having trouble completing tasks or managing time? Do you find yourself being late for various commitments or unable to juggle your professional, parenting and social responsibilities? Have you forgotten the last time you and your partner spent quality time together? If you're answering yes to some of these questions you may benefit from some help to better manage your precious time.

Work-life balance initiatives are proactive measures that acknowledge we lead lives outside of the office. In finding a healthy work-life balance, you may also find increased job satisfaction, lower stress, and improved loyalty and commitment to your work as well as increased enjoyment and renewed enthusiasm within your personal life.

Here are a few suggestions to help you better manage your time at work and at home.

At Home

Don't shoulder all the responsibility. Involve the whole family in getting things done. Assign age-appropriate chores to the kids, ask your partner to play a greater role at home and enlist the help of extended family members and friends where possible.

Use the 80/20 principle at home. What are your most important responsibilities? Focus on these first. If possible, consider outsourcing time-consuming jobs, such as hiring a cleaning service (even once a month can make a big difference), snow removal services or a handyman.

Organize your errands. Try to find a centralized location that accommodates multiple tasks like groceries, pharmacy needs and banking. In today's fast-paced world, time is often your most precious commodity. Budget wisely, use it economically and save some moments for yourself.

Learn to say "No", avoid taking on more than you can handle. Try this quick tip when saying 'No'. State two positives, followed by the "No", and finish with a final positive or suggestion. For example, "Thank you for asking me to participate in the school bake sale as I enjoy supporting the school and our community. I have other commitments this fall, but please keep me on the list for next spring."

At Work

Create a daily plan. Either as your first activity in the morning, or at the end of the workday. Try to stick to the plan as much as possible.

Assign a time limit to each task. For example, finish task (A) by 10 am, task (B) by lunch, task (C) by 3 pm, and task (D) by the end of the day. Leave a five to ten minute buffer in-between to help you wrap up one task and start on the next one.

Use a calendar. There are multiple options when it comes to using a calendar. Where possible, your email program may be the simple and easy solution. Clearly mark deadlines so you know exactly when you need to finish important jobs. Scheduling after-work time for yourself or to connect with family and friends allows you to ensure you are also taking time for important social activities.

Prioritize. Apply the 80/20 principle that states that 80 percent of results come from 20 percent of efforts – or that you waste 80 percent of your time on just 20 percent of your workload. Ask yourself, what the core functions of your job are? What are the things that, if done right, mean you're doing your job well? What matters the most to your manager/department/clients? Do these first and worry about the rest of your work later.

Focus. Are you multi-tasking so much that you're just not getting anything finished? If so, focus on one key task at a time. If you work at a computer, close all applications you aren't using and all tabs in your browser that are diverting your attention. Focus solely on what you're doing.

Even if you absolutely love what you do, at times the pace of work and family commitments can become overwhelming and exhausting. Many aspects of work can be stressful: co-worker issues, a demanding boss, an unhappy customer, a looming deadline, too much paperwork, and so on.

It is important to take time during our busy days to replenish and re-energize. Taking time to relax is important, and it doesn't have to be difficult or time consuming. Sometimes even small investments of time for relaxation can yield great results. Through consideration and adoption of small changes, you can contribute positively to creating a healthier workplace.

References

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