

How to Handle Stress in the Moment

by Rebecca Knight

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You hear a lot of advice about how to reduce stress at work. But most of it is about what to do over the long term – take up yoga, eat a healthy diet, keep a journal, or get more sleep. But what do you do when you’re overcome with stress in the moment – at your desk, say, or in a meeting? Perhaps you’ve heard bad news from a client or were assigned yet another project. How can you regain control?

What the Experts Say

Eighty percent of Americans are stressed at work, according to a recent study by Nielsen for Everest College. Low pay, unreasonable workloads, and hectic commutes were the top sources of tension, followed closely by obnoxious coworkers. What exacerbates the problem is that “people walk into work already laden with stress,” says Maria Gonzales, the founder and president of Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting and the author of *Mindful Leadership*. “If there is a hardship at home, you bring that to the office and it gets layered with your professional stress and – if you’re not careful – it can spiral out of control.” How well you react to and manage daily stressors “impacts your relationships with other people, with yourself, and how others perceive you,” she says. Justin Menkes, a consultant at Spencer Stuart and the author of *Better Under Pressure* says it’s critical “to get a handle on your reaction to the stressful things that happen to you in the moment.” Here are some techniques to do just that.

Identify your stress signals

Train yourself to recognize “your physiological signs of stress,” says Gonzales. Perhaps your neck stiffens, your stomach clenches, or your palms sweat. These are all the result of what’s happening inside your body. “The minute you start to experience stress, your pulse races, your heart beats faster and hormones [including cortisol and adrenaline] are released,” she says. “This compromises your immune system and your ability to experience relaxation.” When you’re able to recognize the signs – instead of ignoring them – you’ll be able to start addressing the underlying cause of the stress.

Don’t think of it as stress

“Most often the reason your blood pressure rises at work is because you’re being asked to do something important” by your boss or a colleague and you want to succeed, says Menkes. “The stress symptoms are telling you: This matters.” Shift your thinking about the task causing you distress and instead try to view it as “an opportunity to move forward that you want to take seriously,” he adds. The goal is to “use that adrenaline pop” to focus your nervous energy, “heighten your attention, and really apply yourself.”

Talk yourself down

When you're stressed, the voice inside your head gets loud, screechy, and persistent. It tells you: "I'm so angry," or "I'll never be able to do this." To keep this negative voice at bay, "try talking to yourself in a logical, calm tone and injecting some positivity" into your internal dialogue, says Gonzales. "Say something like, 'I have had an assignment like this in the past and I succeeded. I can handle this, too.' Or, if you are faced with an unrealistic request, tell yourself: 'I am going to calm down before I go back and tell my manager that completing this assignment in this amount of time is not possible.'"

Take three deep breaths

Deep breathing is another simple strategy for alleviating in-the-moment tension. "When you feel anxious, your breath starts to get shorter, shallower, and more irregular," says Gonzales. "Taking three big breaths while being conscious of your belly expanding and contracting ignites your parasympathetic nervous system, which induces a relaxation response." You can do this while also lowering your shoulders, rotating your neck, or gently rolling your shoulders. Deep breathing also helps preempt stress symptoms if you need to, say, get on a tense conference call or deliver bad news in a performance review. "When your mind becomes crowded with negative thoughts, let deep breathing occupy your mental real estate," says Gonzales.

Enlist a friendly ear

You shouldn't have to face nerve-wracking moments at the office alone. "Everyone needs to have somebody they trust who they can call on when they're feeling under pressure," says Menkes. "Select this person carefully: You want it to be somebody with whom you have a mutual connection and who, when you share your vulnerabilities, will respond in a thoughtful manner." Sometimes venting your frustrations aloud allows you to regroup; at other times, it's helpful to hear a new perspective. This kind of relationship takes time to build and requires nurturing, and it's likely you will be asked to return the favor. "When you do, it's incredibly gratifying to be on the other end."

Make a list

Creating a to-do list that prioritizes your most important tasks is another way to combat feeling overwhelmed. "The act of writing focuses the mind," says Gonzales. "Do a brain dump and write out everything you need to do and note whether it's professional or personal, so you make time for both," she says. Next to each item, indicate when the task needs to be completed. And here is a critical step: "Identify which are 'important' and which of those items are 'urgent.'" Those are the ones to tackle first." Once those are finished, move on to the other things that are more routine. "If you spend all your time on the time-consuming mundane things, you may never get to the important things which is how we get ahead," she says.

Project an aura of calm

Ever notice how when you're speaking to someone who's agitated, you start to feel agitated too? That is because stress is contagious. "When someone palpably feels your tension, they react to it," says Menkes. He suggests "trying to modulate your emotions" when you find yourself in a tense conversation. Force yourself to "keep your speaking voice gentle and controlled," adds Gonzales. Talk in a reasonable and matter-of-fact manner. "If you are persistently calm, others will be too," she says.

Do

- Identify what your physiological signs of stress are so you can work to alleviate the tension
- Counteract stressful situations by taking deep breaths
- Find someone whose judgment you trust who can listen and provide counsel

Don't

- Forget the reason you feel stressed in the first place – you are being asked to do something important and you want to succeed
- Let the negative voice in your head spiral out of control – talk to yourself in a logical, gentle tone
- Project your stress onto others – speak in a calm, controlled way and others will too

Case study #1: Think positive thoughts

Cha Cha Wang was seven months into her job as a business analyst at an online services company when her manager came to her one afternoon and asked for assistance. He needed her to turn around a comprehensive financial forecast for the company. And she had a week to finish it.

"My heart started racing," recalls Cha Cha. "Our company was newly public and I wanted to do as good a job as possible. I felt like I had two voices inside my head. One was saying: 'That is impossible. There's not enough time to do it,' and the other was saying: 'You have no choice; it has to get done.'"

Cha Cha excused herself to the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and took a deep breath. She reflected on her days as an MBA student and her stint as a consultant. "In business school and in consulting, you're inundated with a lot of different assignments and you have to juggle multiple deadlines," she says. "I told myself: 'I can do this. My personal life will go on hold for a week and I will not get much sleep, but it will get done.'"

Having calmed her initial stress reaction, Cha Cha then focused on the "tactical execution" of the project. She made a detailed list of all the financial data she needed; she then scheduled meetings with colleagues who had that information. After each session, she incorporated new figures into her statistical models. She worked late every night that week, but she finished the financial forecast by the deadline.

“When I was younger, I reacted more emotionally [to stress],” she says. “But now that I am a little more seasoned, and I’ve worked in several different jobs and tested my limits, I know what I can do.”

Case study #2: Vent to someone who will help you recover and move on

Pablo Esteves, the director of strategic partnerships for Emzingo – a company that runs leadership immersion programs for business schools – had been working on a proposal for a potential client for months. He had visited the prospective client on site and the two had gone back and forth over the proposal numerous times before he submitted it. Pablo expected to hear good news.

But instead, he received an email from the school’s administrator that said: “We see the value in what you’re doing and we like what you’re doing, but it’s not for us.” Pablo immediately felt stressed out. His pulse started racing and he knew that he needed to talk to someone to calm down. “I knew exactly who I could vent to,” he says.

Pablo, who is based in Madrid, sent an email to his colleague and friend, Daniel, who lives in Peru. He explained what had happened. Within an hour, the two men were on the phone. Daniel patiently listened to his problems, agreed with Pablo on certain points, and then offered his own perspective and advice. “He helped me understand why things maybe didn’t work out this time, but he also told me that we had other clients who were going to come through,” says Pablo. “He helped me regroup.”

The pep talk helped. After the call Pablo felt less stressed about the rejection and energized about focusing on new projects.

More on reducing stress:


Nine Ways Successful People Defeat Stress

The Best Way to Defuse Your Stress

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Camilla Ning 23 days ago

Actually,my stress comes from the low pay,and I don't know how to change the situation.I an always thinking to have a job-hopping,but I haven't been worked for three years and I can't meet the demand of other companies.So I am very gloomy and have to wait for the opportunity to have a change.

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