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Managing to Manage Workplace Stress

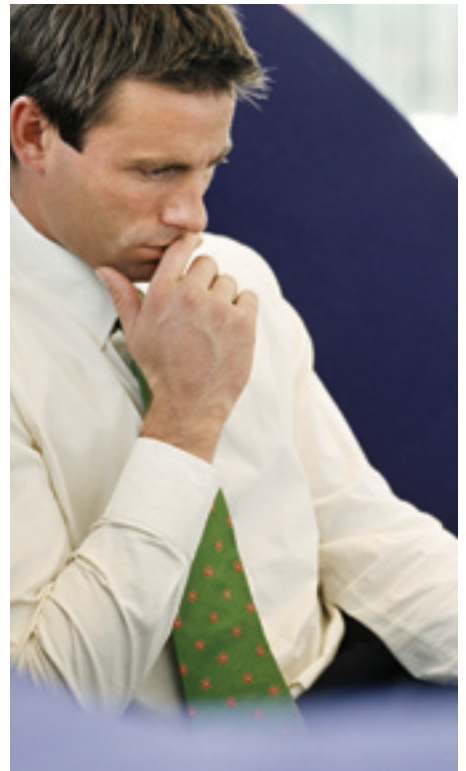


THE PSYCHOLOGY
FOUNDATION
OF CANADA

LA FONDATION
DE PSYCHOLOGIE
DU CANADA

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Stress It's For Everyone!

Just the mention of the word stress gets people's attention pretty quickly. That's because stress affects everyone – it is universal. Stress cuts across every economic, social and cultural boundary, so learning to understand it and manage it is important for everyone. If stress is not managed properly, it can have serious negative health consequences – both physically and mentally. In the workplace, if employee stress is not managed properly, it's not only individual health that is jeopardized. Consistently high levels of employee stress in the workplace can also jeopardize an organization's bottom line.

Excessive stress, as well as other mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, are estimated to cost the Canadian economy 51 billion dollars each year in lost productivity. Helping employees manage stress levels and maintain work-life balance can reduce these losses, as well as prevent more serious problems in the long run.

There are many sources of stress. Not only are they different for everyone, but they also depend on an individual's current situation. Yet, there seem to be some common causes of stress among Canadians. According to Desjardins Financial Security's *2008 Survey on Canadian Attitudes Towards Physical and Mental Health*, which surveyed a

representative sample of over 1,500 Canadian adults, 43% of Canadians point to **finances** as their top stressor, 17% say **family matters/problems** are, and 16% say meeting their children's needs is their biggest stressor.

In the same survey, a whopping 18% of Canadians say **work pressure** causes them the most stress. Fortunately, there are many strategies that can help people better maintain their personal work-life balance equations, therefore reducing their overall levels of stress at work and at home. Some of these strategies are outlined in this brochure. If you want more information, additional resources are listed at the end of the brochure.



" Stress is the single, non-specific reaction of the body to a demand made on it."

– Dr. Hans Selye (1974)

The Nuts and Bolts of Stress

But, what is stress, really?

There is an identifiable physiological stress response that occurs in the body when a person is excited, fearful, challenged, or anxious. When stress occurs, the brain signals the body to get ready to meet the challenge by stimulating the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is the control centre for many bodily functions including muscle tension, breathing, blood pressure, heart rate, pupil dilation and temperature control.

When the body or mind is challenged, a number of chemical and hormonal changes take place. These changes activate the body either to gear up to flee from danger, or to stand and fight it. This 'flight or fight response' was a healthy, necessary response to ensure our survival when most threats and challenges were physical in nature (e.g., prehistoric communities dealing with predators and hostile environments, etc.). Today, the threats and challenges we face are often social and emotional, rather than physical, but our bodies still react in much the same way as our ancestors' did.

Two of the important hormones that are triggered by that stress response are adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline is a fast-acting hormone that prepares the body for quick response by releasing chemicals that give an energy surge, sending extra strength to the muscles of the arms and legs, and increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen content in the blood stream. Adrenaline acts quickly and its effects go away quickly.

Cortisol, which acts in conjunction with adrenaline to increase energy, is a longer-lasting stress hormone that allows the body to remain alert for minutes, hours, or even days. Cortisol levels remain elevated in the body longer, keeping it “on alert” until the stress passes. However, problems can occur when stress continues and cortisol levels remain elevated – the body and mind can experience exhaustion, including a suppressed immune system, increased muscle tension, and reduced concentration. In fact, research has shown that chronic elevated cortisol increases our sensitivity and reactions to stress and impairs our ability to calm down after a stressful experience.

Ultimately, long-term stress can be dangerous. Too much stress can bring on illnesses or increase the severity of them – like diabetes, colitis and heart disease, to name only a few – and can also contribute to behavioural problems like substance abuse or difficulty socializing. **In the workplace environment, too much stress can affect employees’ abilities to concentrate, meet deadlines, make decisions, and manage professional relationships.**

As a manager, it is important to understand stress and know how it can affect people.

You can learn to recognize when employees may be under too much stress, and direct them towards a better understanding of what might be going on and some strategies that might help. As well, it is important to know how stress affects your own body, so that you can train *yourself* to recognize when you are personally under too much stress to function properly and take measures to manage it.

Bear in mind also that there is such a thing as ‘good stress’. A little bit of stress is enough to be energizing, motivating, performance enhancing, and helpful in the face of danger. Everyone needs enough stress to stretch, grow and keep life interesting! The key then is to manage stress levels so that stress does not become harmful – both to individual health and to the workplace environment.

Fostering work-life balance and reducing stress in the workplace is a two-way street. Organizations have responsibilities in this area, but individual employees have their own responsibilities too. Fortunately, there are many strategies that can help.

“ We need to stop and look at how important work is in people’s lives. By paying more attention to the emotional aspects of the workplace, we can make the work experience much more meaningful. The organizations that get this right are the ones that will compete successfully in the global workplace.”

– Dr. Steven J. Stein, from his book, *Make Your Workplace Great: The 7 Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization*



“ The ‘struggle to juggle’ is taking a toll on companies, families, and workers. This toll is showing up as increased job stress, declining physical and mental health, increased absenteeism, declining job satisfaction, weakening employee commitment, lower workplace morale, and reduced satisfaction with family life.”

– Dr. Steven J. Stein, from his book, *Make Your Workplace Great: The 7 Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization*

The “Struggle to Juggle” or that Elusive Work-Life Balance

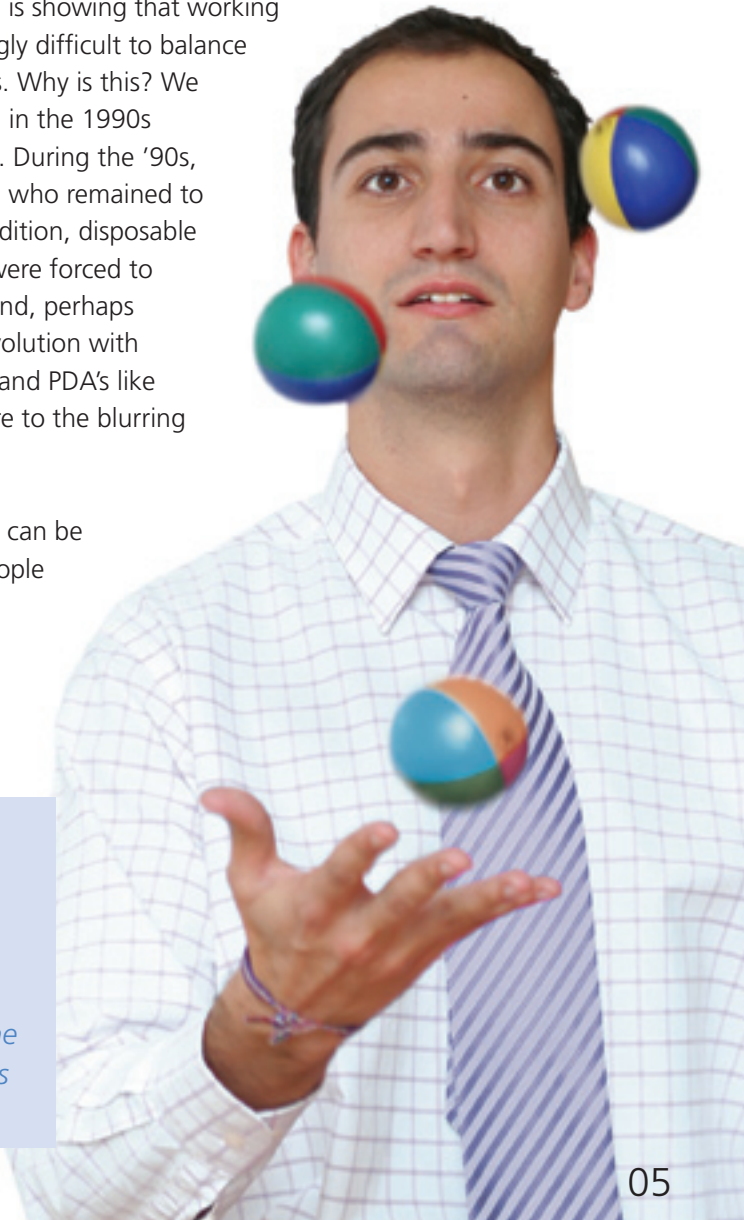


It's no secret that most people strive to reach a healthy balance between their job and other aspects of life, such as family responsibilities, physical exercise, and social activities. For most of us, that search is often an eternal work in progress.

Unfortunately, you are not alone. Research is showing that working people everywhere are finding it increasingly difficult to balance personal responsibilities with job demands. Why is this? We know that modern work trends beginning in the 1990s have certainly contributed to the situation. During the '90s, many employers downsized, leaving those who remained to do more work with fewer resources. In addition, disposable income levels declined, so many couples were forced to work more hours to pay the family bills. And, perhaps even most importantly, the technology revolution with the increased use of laptops, cell phones, and PDA's like the *BlackBerry*, contributed more and more to the blurring of lines between work and home life.

Fortunately, there a number of things that can be done in the workplace to not only help people achieve better work-life balance and manage stress, but to also increase workplace productivity, and ultimately improve the bottom line.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has recommended a standard workweek of no more than 48 hours per week. The ILO says that shorter working hours benefit workers' health and family lives, reduce accidents at the workplace and generally make workers more productive.



Ten Work-Life Balance Strategies for the Workplace

- 1** In cooperation with all stakeholders, including employees, **set and publicize a comprehensive policy in your organization** on stress and work-life balance.
- 2** **Create a method to track ongoing employee feedback** on their work-life balance and how they view stress in their workplace, and follow-up with policies that address those concerns.
- 3** Strive to **create a workplace that provides for time exchange**, to allow employees to maximize the use of their work-life hours. For example, shortening work hours in the summer on one day of the week, in exchange for working longer hours on other days, is an example of honouring the concept of work-life balance and encouraging employees to get active and get outside to enjoy the summer months.
- 4** **Give employees some choice over how they work and some control over their schedules.** In doing so, make sure that employees clearly understand their work roles and the company's expectations. Ask them for their input on decisions that impact them.
- 5** **Support and encourage employees to take their allotted vacations.** Everyone needs time off to re-group and re-charge. Create a work climate that makes it acceptable for a sick employee to take enough time off from work to get better.
- 6** **Create a healthy physical work environment for employees** as well, which includes details like proper lighting, safety measures and equipment, furniture, proximity to others, opportunities for privacy, and proper air quality. Allow employees to customize their own work areas if possible (i.e., music, plants, photos, etc.).
- 7** **Encourage employees to establish boundaries** between their work lives and home lives and model this kind of behaviour *yourself*.

According to Desjardins Financial Security's 2008 Survey on Canadian Attitudes towards Physical and Mental Health, 85% of Canadians feel that the work environment is increasingly stressful.



8 An important source of stress in the workplace can be a result of a manager's style in dealing with employees.

Promoting individuals with good people skills to management positions, and providing appropriate training for managers will go a long way in making employees feel that your company 'walks the talk'.

9 Make sure that you have effective, official communication processes to resolve conflict in your workplace.

10 Read about and understand signs and symptoms that may indicate an employee is dealing with more stress than usual,

such as frequent absences or being late to work, a sudden change in behaviour, high levels of anxiety, or strange mood swings. Check in with this employee regularly, and provide him/her with resources so that s/he can access a health professional if need be. See the additional resources at the end of this brochure.

According to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and the University of Athens Medical School (UAMS) in Greece (February 2007, The Archives of Internal Medicine), healthy people who take a 30-minute midday nap 3 times per week are 37 per cent less likely to die of heart disease than those who don't nap. The rationale is that napping may reduce stress, which can elevate blood pressure, and lead to hypertension – a major risk factor for heart disease. Have you considered providing "nap rooms" at your organization?

For Further Information

PUBLICATIONS

The Human Face of Mental Health and Mental Illness in Canada, 2006 ©. Government of Canada, Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2006. This report is available from the Mood Disorders Society of Canada at www.mooddisorderscanada.ca and the Public Health Agency of Canada at www.phac-aspc.gc.ca.

Make Your Workplace Great: The 7 Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization, and The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success, by Dr. Steven J. Stein.

StressCosts- Stress Cures, by Ravi Tangri. This book shows you how to calculate what stress costs your organization's bottom line. It then guides you through the two strategies for recovering productivity lost to stress.

What You Need to Know About Mental Health: A Tool for Managers, by Allison Cowan, Judith MacBride-King, November 2005. Available from The Conference Board of Canada at www.conferenceboard.ca.

Why Men Never Remember and Women Never Forget, Marianne J. Legato, MD, FACP. Chapters included in this book discuss the changing face of parenting, depression in men and women, and why men and women respond differently to stress (and why it matters). Dr. Legato is Founder of the Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine at Columbia University.

Note: Some of the information in this brochure on the physiology of stress is taken from *Kids Have Stress Too!*®, a program of The Psychology Foundation of Canada. (Creator: Claire McDerment, B.Sc.(N), R.N.)

WEB SITES

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

An organization with a variety of information on mental health and mental illness, including a short work-life balance quiz. The CMHA has chapters across Canada with various local services and programs. For example, the Calgary Region chapter has a workplace program called, "The Copernicus Project: Risk Management for Workplace Mental Health" and the Ontario chapter has a workplace program called "Mental Health Works".
www.cmha.ca

Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)

The CPA site also directs visitors to its provincial and territorial associations to find a psychologist, and provides information on psychology in Canada. Ask about the 'Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards Program'
www.cpa.ca

(The American Psychological Association Web site is also a very good resource at www.apa.org)

Centre For Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

www.camh.net

Centre for Studies on Human Stress

(Douglas Mental Health University Institute, McGill University)

Web site that provides information on the nature of stress, additional tips on coping with stress, a youth corner, a newsletter and more.

www.douglasrecherche.qc.ca/groups/stress/general-public

Families and Work Institute (United States)

This is a non-profit research organization that studies the changing workforce, the changing workplace, the changing family and the changing community.
www.familiesandwork.org

Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada

Visit this Web site to test stress levels, find information on healthy eating, exercise tips, and more.
www.heartandstroke.ca

Mental Health Canada

Comprehensive directory of mental health professionals included here.
www.mentalhealthcanada.com

Mental Health Works (Workplace Mental Health Program)

Mental Health Works is an initiative of The Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario. For more information on the program, visit their Web site.
www.mentalhealthworks.ca

National Quality Institute (NQI)

NQI is an independent, Canadian not-for-profit organization that focuses on workplace excellence based on quality systems and healthy workplace criteria.
www.nqi.ca

The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC)

PFC offers programs like *Kids Have Stress Too!*®, *Parenting for Life*, and *Diversity in Action*.
www.psychologyfoundation.org and
www.kidshavestresstoo.org

The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Desjardins Financial Security are pleased to partner to bring you the information in this booklet.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada

The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) is a national registered charity that supports parents and strengthens families through a number of initiatives including creating educational resources, developing training programs for professionals, and delivering community-based education. Founded in 1974 to promote the understanding and use of sound psychological knowledge to better people's lives, the Foundation is guided by a Board of Trustees comprised of psychologists and business and community leaders. PFC's programs, like *Kids Have Stress Too!*®, *Parenting for Life* and *Diversity in Action*, help Canadians better understand how to manage situations and relationships more effectively at home, school, community and work. To find out more, or to order materials, please visit PFC's Web sites at www.psychologyfoundation.org or www.kidshavestresstoo.org.

Desjardins Financial Security®

Desjardins Financial Security, a subsidiary of Desjardins Group, the largest integrated cooperative financial group in Canada, specializes in group and individual life and health insurance, and savings products and services. Every day, over five million Canadians rely on Desjardins Financial Security to ensure their financial security. With a staff of nearly 3,900 employees, Desjardins Financial Security manages and administers close to \$22 billion in assets from offices in major cities across the country, including Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, Québec, Lévis, Halifax and St. John's.

Desjardins Financial Security is committed to improving awareness of mental health promotion through a number of partnerships as well as its annual Health is Cool! survey. To find out more information about the Health is Cool! survey and other mental health promotion initiatives, please visit our Web site at www.healthiscool.ca.

Feeling rushed puts pressure on kids.

It's hard for kids to understand why they're being rushed. If mornings are too rushed, make a little more time by getting clothes, lunches and backpacks ready the night before. Set aside time to play or just unwind and relax – it helps take the pressure off everybody.

Remember, parents can slow down the pace.



Kids Have Stress Too!®
is a Program of The Psychology Foundation
of Canada. For more information, go to
www.kidshavestresstoo.org.



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