

Manage Stress to Boost Productivity

We live in a time when it seems like we're regularly put into situations that cause us stress. Sometimes we feel a little stress for a short time and sometimes we feel a lot of stress for a long time. The fact is that when we feel stress, especially for extended periods of time, not only does our productivity drop, but the quality of our work drops as well.

Let's start with a discussion of how stress affects our work and our leadership. You've probably thought of a couple of consequences of stress already, but I've identified five areas of significant negative impact from stress.

When you suffer from continued stress, you will see a marked drop in:

- Health
- Energy
- Patience
- Creativity
- Productivity

Health - As stress settles into our lives, it begins to take a physical toll on our bodies and our health. High levels of stress can cause heart problems, weight gain, headaches, and sleeplessness. It often affects the balance in our life. By focusing strictly on our work or our challenging situation, and neglecting our health, eventually the Universe will swing the pendulum the other way for us. In other words, we'll become unhealthy and essentially be forced to care for ourselves (and sometimes have to neglect/abandon our work). Talk about a drop in productivity and a shift in time management!

Energy - Stress is an energy drain. If you've ever been or presently are under a lot of stress, you know how it just saps the energy right out of you. Your ambition drops, your stamina declines, and your focus isn't anywhere to be found.

Patience - We all know that when we are feeling stressed, our patience can go right out the window. Since leadership is a matter of effectively relating to others, our leadership competencies often get "high-jacked" whenever we feel stress/pressure. Since much of a leader's productivity is a result of the effort of others, productivity and long-term leadership effectiveness can suffer greatly when we experience long periods of high stress.

Creativity - The creative process takes place in the neo-cortex of the brain, while emotions (like stress) are processed in the amygdala. Here's the challenge we face: When our brain is focused in the amygdala, it essentially blocks out our ability to properly tap into our creative processes. It's like when we hear someone who's stressed say, "I'm so angry I can't think straight!" High stress blocks the creative process and hampers logical thinking.

Productivity - Our productivity drops significantly when we're under stress. We don't think clearly, we get overly tired early in the day, our self-discipline drops, and we aren't able to concentrate.

So what can we do about all this?

In my workshops, I'll ask participants for examples of stress-causing situations or events. They're always eager to offer real-life examples of stressful events. (Some examples may have already popped into your head as you read this.) But the reality is that there are no stressful situations! It's how we react to events and circumstances that cause us stress. I guarantee that I can find someone who will not be stressed out by a situation that causes you to feel stress. This is an important point...

It's not what happens to you that creates stress, it's how you react to what happens to you that causes stress.

It only stands to reason then, that we have the ability to reduce or eliminate our feelings of stress. They're not a "given". You're not obligated to feel stress, even if everyone around you feels stress. You are free to choose to experience your circumstances in any way you want. The question then, is how to affect how we experience the events in our life. Here is a list of things that can help change the way you are able to deal with the challenges in your life and to minimize or eliminate the feelings of stress.

1. Exercise
2. Meditation
3. Diet & Nutrition
4. Sleep
5. Perspective
6. Attitude
7. Play

1. Exercise: OK, OK, we've all heard about the benefits of exercise, but not always as it relates to the feelings of stress. When we work our muscles and our heart, we release the tensions held in our bodies. When we store tension, it causes fatigue, headaches, pains, and makes it hard to concentrate.

2. Meditation: Meditating allows us to gain intuitive insights and helps us gain new perspectives. Meditation does not have to mean sitting quietly and chanting (unless you want to). Meditation is about quieting the mind and eliminating the "chatter" we have running in our heads. There are a number of ways to accomplish this. It can be through classic seated meditation or through active methods. One of the classic forms of meditation is archery! For you, it may mean walking in nature, immersing yourself in a hobby, quietly listening to classical or new age music, or meditating in some other way that works for you - your own approach to meditating.

3. Diet & Nutrition: When our energy is low, our patience and our creativity drop, and our stress level rises. When our nutrition is lacking, it affects our blood sugar level, which in turn, causes us to deprive our brain and our muscles of necessary energy. Eating balanced meals (protein, carbohydrates & fats) maximizes energy levels and therefore productivity. Cut out fast foods and junk foods, and don't skip meals. Additionally, since the nutrient value of the foods we eat is nowhere near what it used to be years ago (that's a whole other discussion...), it's important to take a high-quality vitamin-mineral supplement or eat SuperFoods. Think of it as Health Insurance instead of needing Health Insurance!

4. Sleep: Besides the obvious requirement for sleep in order to have a good energy level, I've noticed that when I don't get enough sleep over a few nights, my outlook on the future and on the possibilities for success drop noticeably, which causes the feelings of stress to rise. I have found this to be true with other people as well and maybe you're one of them. Getting sufficient sleep is critical for high productivity, high energy, positive attitude, and high creativity.

5. Perspective: A smart way to manage your level of stress is to keep those stress-causing events in perspective. Very few incidents put our life or our health in jeopardy. Give yourself credit for having the ability to figure out a solution if things don't go as planned and let your feelings of stress drop. And by the way, ... learn from your mistakes.

6. Attitude: A major factor in determining the level of stress we feel from a situation depends on one's attitude. We live in a world where we're literally bombarded by messages day and night. Unfortunately many, if not most, of those messages are negative. Therefore, in order to protect our attitude we need to regulate what we see and hear as much as possible. First off, cut out the negatives. Stop watching and listening to the news, stop reading the newspaper cover to cover, and avoid negative people who are pessimistic or who belittle your goals, dreams, or abilities. Then, add positives. Read personal growth books - books that help you adopt new success attitudes and habits, or books about people you admire. Listen to tapes or CD's which do the same. (Two of my favorite sources for these programs are: www.nightingale.com and www.success.com)

Protecting your attitude is one of the best things you can do to lower stress and ensure your success.

7. Play: Sometimes the best way to break out of the cycle of stress is to stop working and start playing. Take a break and do something fun. (Don't confuse "fun" with "pleasurable". They're not always the same. Make sure that what you do isn't self-destructive.) Whether it's a hobby, a sport, a get-away, or a simple diversion, taking a break and taking your mind off your circumstances can really help you get things under control.

Working to effectively minimize or even eliminate stress will have a significant impact not only on your health, but on your creativity, energy levels, people skills and relationships. The most productive people I know have learned to deal with events in their lives in such a way as not to feel much stress. It's not that they are indifferent, thick-skinned, or robots. Instead, they've developed "rituals" to deal with situations that might cause others to feel stress. They carefully guard their attitude and their energy levels, along with having a clear sense of priorities.

If you want to be at the top of your game, spend the time to determine which "rituals" help you to alleviate stressful feelings and be committed to taking care of yourself. I have a Zen Buddhist saying on the wall of my office which says, "Live half for yourself, and half for others." It's a good philosophy to live by.

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