

Work Place Stress



Lesson 3

Workplace Stress

Introduction

This lesson will increase your understanding of the effects of stress in the work place and identify ways to reduce complications associated with job stressors. Stress affects all of us in every area of our lives--whether manager or laborer, secretary or executive, at home or at work, stress is there. This lesson focuses on the effects of stress at work only.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to —

1. Demonstrate an increased understanding of the effects of stress in the workplace.
2. Identify five ways to reduce job-related stress.
3. Incorporate one new technique into your workday to successfully reduce workplace stress.



Getting Started

Time is Money

We spend over 60 percent of our waking time at work. For many, this is on the light side. In the military, there are periods when 100 percent of our time is spent at work. All of us know that our work does not stop when we leave our place of duty; there is house work and the children to take care of. Finally, a parent who chooses to stay home to take care of house and family will often report their time spent at work as 24 hours a day! What can be done to reduce stress in the workplace?

My Stress is Bigger Than Yours

Group Exercise: In groups of two or three, discuss who has the most stressful job: Military or civilian employee, officer or enlisted, service member or family member, secretary or manager. Allow 5-10 minutes for discussion.

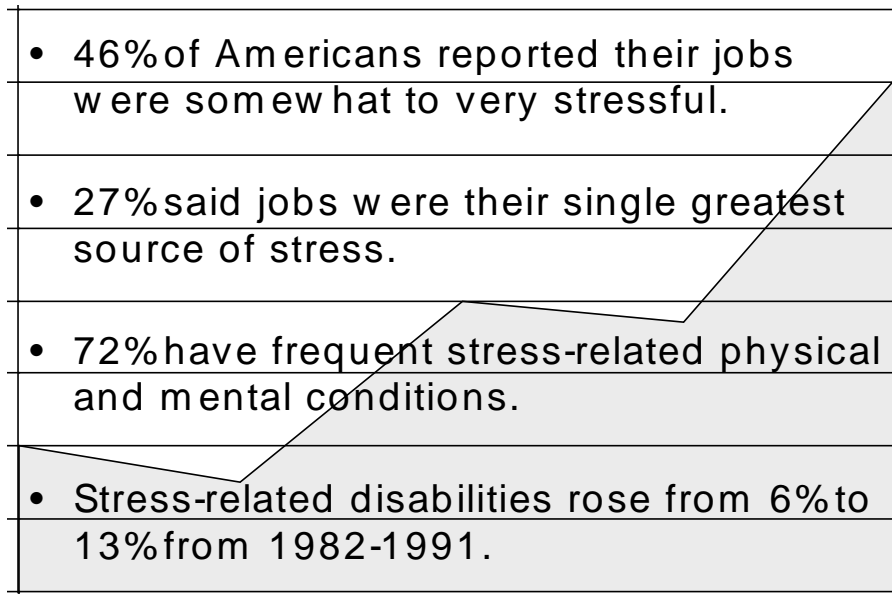
All of us are different. We have different strengths, abilities, and stressors. We also differ in the support systems (family, friends, support groups, co-workers) that we have available to help us cope with stressful situations and environments. These all affect the way we react to stress and our ability to cope with the consequences of stress. A senior leader may appear to have greater stressors, but he or she may also have more resources available to cope with those stressors than someone less senior. Let us look at some of the major factors that influence stress in the workplace.



The School House

The Greatest Source of Stress

Chart 3.1



In a nationwide survey by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company (as cited in Quick, J., Murphy, L.R., Hurrell, J., & Orman, D., 1992), 46 percent of American

workers reported their jobs were somewhat to very stressful. Twenty-seven percent reported that their jobs were the single greatest source of stress in their lives. Overall, nearly 72 percent said that they have frequent stress-related physical and mental conditions. In fact, stress-related disabilities have gone from 6 percent to 13 percent over the past 9 years.

Workplace Stressors

The sources of workplace stress are many. The chart below lists some of these sources (see Chart 3.2). Perhaps you can identify additional sources of workplace stress.

*Chart 3.2 **

Sources of Workplace Stress	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role Conflict • Role Ambiguity • Work Group Relations • Job Future Ambiguity • Autonomy • Supervisor Performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overload • Control • Feedback • Co-worker Support • Demands & Pressures • Frequent Disagreements

*Adapted from Bunker, K. A. , 1994, p. 72.

Chart 3.2 does not include stressors outside of the work environment that may affect a worker's job performance. Family demands, particularly on dual career or single-parent households, can be significant work disrupters. Marital conflict, problems caring for elderly parents, the health status of a family member, and more can also affect us at work.

In general, workplace stress can be reduced to four core areas:

- Lack of Control over the Work and Workplace.
- Presence of Uncertainty.
- Existence of Dysfunctional Conflict.

- General Task and Work Demands.

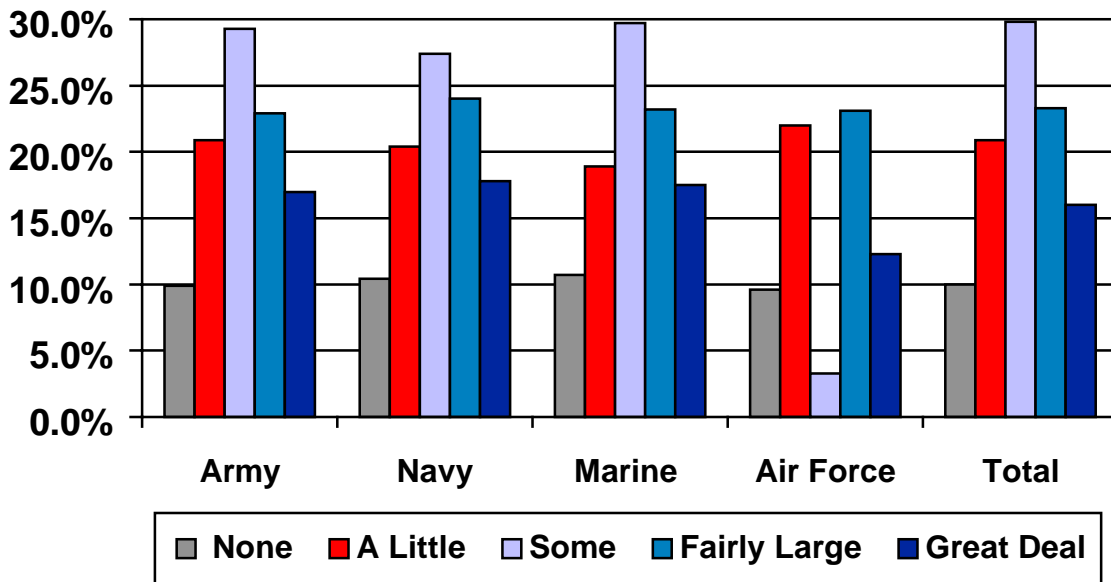
Any attempt to positively affect stress in the workplace must address each of these areas. Improving workers' skills at coping with stress may prove initially beneficial. However, a reduction in the negative effects of workplace stress in all four areas can only be achieved by management and employees working together to develop effective stress management policies and programs.

Military Stressors

Let us focus on stressors for those on active duty. The 1995 Department of Defense Worldwide Survey of Health Related Behaviors (DOD Survey) found that 69 percent of service members reported some job related stress and 16 percent reported being under a great deal of stress due to life in the military (see Chart 3.3). Family stress was also high at 50 percent. The types of stressors varied depending on your sex. However, regardless of whether you are male or female on active duty, the top stressors were very similar (see Chart 3.4).

Chart 3.3*

Reported Level of Stress in Military Life



*Source: 1995 Department of Defense survey of health related behaviors among military personnel

Chart 3.4*

Rank Ordered Sources of Stress Among Military Personnel

MALES	FEMALES
1. Being Away From Family	1. Being Away From Family
2. Deployment	2. Changes in Family
3. Increases in Work Load	3. Increases in Work Load
4. Financial Problems	4. Conflict with Supervisor
5. Conflicts Between Military and Family Responsibilities	5. Work Relationships
6. Work Relationships	6. Conflicts Between Military and Family Responsibilities
7. Conflict with Supervisor	7.5. Financial Problems
8. Changes in Family	7.5. Having a PCS
9. Having a PCS	13. Deployment

*Source: 1995 Department of Defense survey of health related behaviors among military personnel

So What?

We know that work can be stressful and that working in the military, at times, can be quite stressful. That is just part of life in the military, right? Just suck it up and drive on?

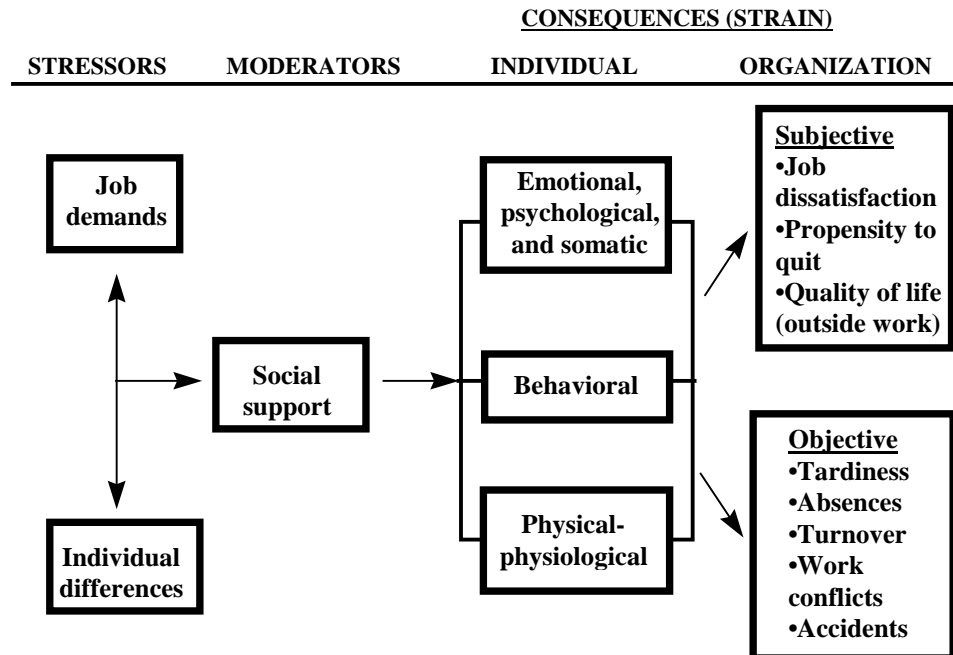
In some situations, we do have to grin and bare it. For example, we know that the best defense against developing combat fatigue is tough, realistic training. In fact, stressful situations can serve to bring out our best performance. But that is not the whole story.

Take a moment to look over the stress model at Chart 3.5 (Dolan, 1994). We have already discussed **Stressors**, both individual sources of stress and stressors that are found in the workplace. Earlier we looked at how **Individual differences** influence what stressors we bring to the workplace, what we view as stressful, and how we respond to stress. Stressors also come from **Job demands**, such as long hours, high workload, and frequent deployments. These job demands require either adaptation on the part of the worker, changes in policies and procedures, or all of the above. However, there are other sources of workplace stress that should not be tolerated. These are violence in the

workplace, sexual harassment, and unsafe work conditions. These three sources of workplace stress need to be addressed directly through the chain of command, your Inspector General, or safety office.

Chart 3.5

A Stress Model



From: Dolan, S. (1994). Stress management intervention and assessment: An overview and an account of two experiences. In A. Korman & Ass. (Eds.) *Human Dilemmas in Work Organizations*. New York: Guilford Press, p. 40.

Social Support serves as a stress moderator. If our spouse is supportive, then our ability to cope with stress in the workplace increases. If there is a high degree of unit cohesion, more stress can be tolerated than when a unit is disorganized and co-workers are not supportive of each other. Supervisor support, at least for men, may play a more important role in moderating stress than does spousal or family support.

All workplace stress has **Individual** and **Organizational** outcomes. The effects of high levels of stress or stress continuing over prolonged periods on the individual can be emotional or psychological, such as depression or anxiety attacks. They can result in behavioral consequences, such as difficulty getting up in the morning to aggressive verbal and physical behavior. Additionally, stress can contribute to developing ulcers or high blood pressure and decrease the body's ability to fight illness to include cancer. Organizational consequences of stress are lowered morale; decreased work quality and

productivity; and increased employee tardiness and turnover, accidents, injuries, and conflicts.

Stress and Organizational Effectiveness

We know from researchers in organizational psychology that the role stress plays in the effectiveness of individuals and organizations, including military organizations depends on a number of factors. In general, these factors are —

- Extent and duration of the stressor.
- Organizational or unit climate.
- Extent of ambiguity in one's job or directions.
- Supervisor or leader support.

The role these factors play in individual and organizational stress are discussed below.

Extent and Duration of Stressor

Too much stress or stress lasting too long can cause a decrease in the ability to do work. Probably the clearest example is stress from too little sleep. Research has shown that four hours of sleep is the minimum required for sustained operations. Severe drops in judgment, problem solving, and the ability to do work occur when sleep falls below this level for even a few days. Getting too little sleep is only one form of stress. As shown earlier, work-related stressors may lead to accidents, illnesses, tardiness, complaints and grievances, conflict with co-workers, or decreased quality of work.

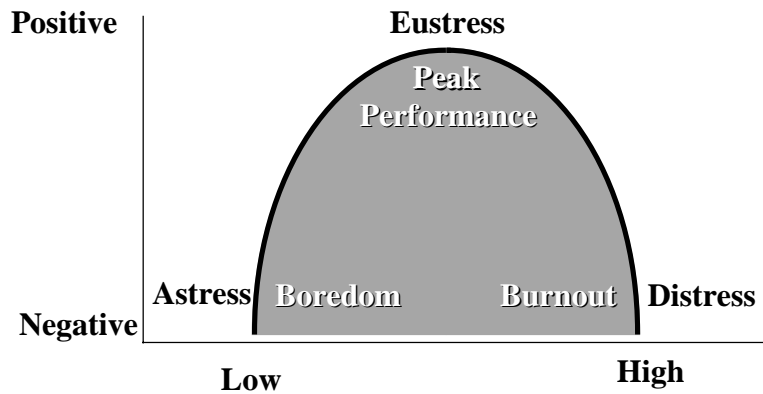
Too little stress can have an effect on work performance as well. Some degree of stress is helpful to improve job performance, learning, attention, and concentration. For example, the best defense against developing combat fatigue is tough, realistic training. If training is not stressful enough, then self-confidence decreases, learning and physical conditioning are hampered, and necessary survival skills are not developed.

The right combination of intensity and duration of stress leads to optimal performance. Runners improve their performance by the appropriate mix of road work and speed work

(intensity) and short and long work-outs (duration). This dynamic of stress is called the “inverted-U”. This “inverted-U” relationship was demonstrated first by Dr. Robert Yerkes and Dr. John Dodson (as cited in Harig, P., Halle, J., Mosier, R., Reagan, J., & Richardson, M., 1995).

There is an optimal point at which stress increases performance, with either too little or too much stress associated with decreased performance.

Optimal Performance



Organizational or Unit Climate

The climate of the organization or unit sets the tone for the amount of stress experienced by individual members. Working in an environment where personal needs and feelings are considered will decrease the amount of stress in the workplace. Whereas, in organizations where people distrust one another and “back biting” is common, the stress level greatly increases. Can you think of any other ways the tone of the office can affect the level of stress? Write your answers in the box below.

Worksheet 3.1

Setting The Work Place Tone

Now compare your list with the one below (Chart 3.6).

Chart 3.6

Organizational or Unit Climate

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thefts• Accidents• Reduced productivity• High turnover• Increased errors• Absenteeism• Disability payments• Sabotage• Damage and waste• Replacement costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inflated health-care costs• Unpreparedness• Lack of creativity• Increased sick leave• Premature retirement• Organizational breakdown• Disloyalty• Job dissatisfaction• Poor decisions• Antagonistic group action |
|--|---|

From: Jones, J.W. & Boye, M.W., 1992.

Extent of ambiguity in one's job or directions.

For most people, uncertainty is a stressor. When there is uncertainty at work, productivity suffers and tolerance for stress decreases. Examples of uncertainty in the workplace are reductions in force, job changes, changes in raters or supervisors, and changes in missions or mission requirements. Many of these are a necessary part of living and working in the military. You can probably list additional sources of uncertainty in the workplace. However, one source of uncertainty that can be controlled is ambiguity in one's job or directions.

Clearly defined jobs and roles leads to enhanced performance. It is easier to hit a target you can see than one you cannot see. When people know what is expected of them, they can better judge their own performance. It also becomes easier for a supervisor to rate a subordinate's performance. Evaluation reports (Officer Evaluation and Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Reports) and their accompanying support forms are attempts to clearly describe roles and responsibilities.

Lack of clear direction or guidance increases worker ambiguity and stress. It is easier to hit a target if you know which one you are suppose to aim at and which targets are the most important to hit. Clear guidance reduces costly errors and wasted time. An operational order (OPORD) follows a standard format. A medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) request follows a set format. These are attempts to ensure that directions and priorities are clearly understood. Communications on the job are often less clear and open to greater ambiguity. However the more critical the task, the greater the need to communicate clearly. Clear communication improves task accomplishment and decreases work place stress.

Supervisor or Leader Support

Supervisor support plays a critical role in reducing stress. The supervisor is in a unique position to either increase or reduce many of the stressors experienced at work, and not just by reducing workload.

A leader should consider adjusting workload to maintain the optimal mix of duration and intensity of stress, as discussed earlier. However, even without changing workload, the supervisor can buffer the effects of stress by providing information, support, and esteem. In fact, the supervisor may be more important than an understanding spouse in buffering the employee from the effects of stress (Greller, M., Parsons, C., and Mitchell, D., 1992).

- Information
- Support
- Esteem



Think back to different supervisors you have had. You can probably identify those whom you would consider “good” supervisors and those who lacked supervisory skills. What was it that made him or her a “good” supervisor? Was it technical competence? Good people skills? Skill at managing projects?

What Makes a Good Supervisor?

Think of the characteristics of a good supervisor or leader. What makes them effective? What makes people want to follow their direction? Below are suggested characteristics of good leadership (see Chart 3.7). What would you add to this list to describe a good leader or supervisor?

Chart 3.7

Characteristics of a Good Supervisor

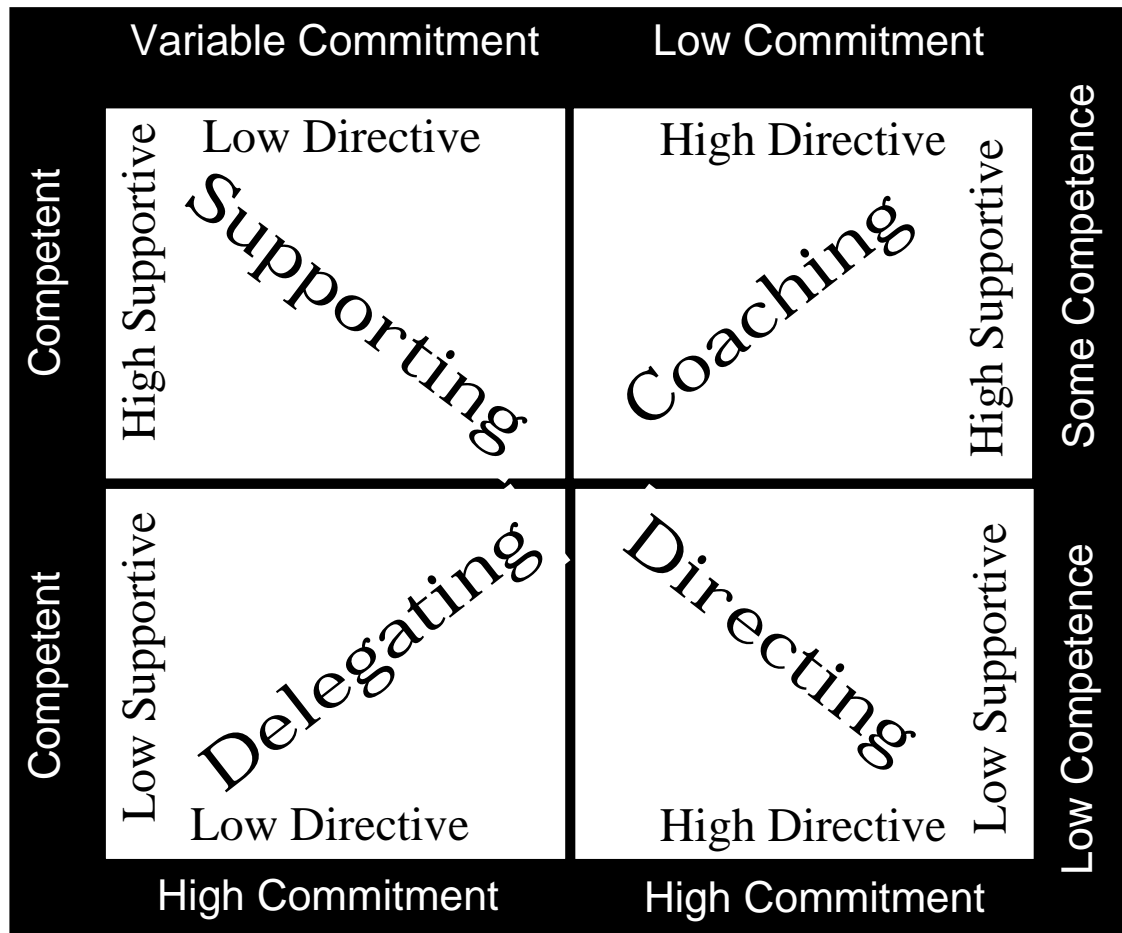
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listens • Supportive • Vision • Goal Oriented • Flexible • Caring • Even Keeled • Decisive • Team Player • No Favorites • Knows Limitations of Self and Co-workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher • Mentor • Good Sense of Humor • Clear Expectations • Communicator • Integrity • Trusted • Humble • Understands the System • Acts as a Buffer between Outside Demands and Workers
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What makes a good supervisor is often the ability to adjust leadership style to a worker's ability, knowledge, and commitment to the organization. (Refer to *Chart 3.8*)

A "coach" is for someone who has some competence, but still needs guidance on how to accomplish a task and support to get it done. A worker who is high in commitment and competent does not need a coach. They respond best to a supervisor who is "delegating". They can be given a task to do and, with little support or direction, be expected to accomplish the task. A new employee without a lot of experience, may need more "directing" to accomplish a task. Someone who is competent, but not very committed to the organization, needs more encouragement to achieve a given task. They do not need to know how to do it; they need "support" in doing it.

Chart 3.8

Flexible Leadership Style



From: *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (FM 22-103, June 1987).

Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Organizations

The following is adapted from Leadership and Command at Senior Levels (FM 22-103, June 1987).

As a supervisor, how can you assess the health of your organization? Take a moment to look at Worksheet 3.2. This questionnaire is a tool that will help assess your organization's health. This questionnaire has not been standardized, but your responses will give you a picture of how well your organization is functioning. It may point out areas where improvement is needed and, if given more than once, measure progress towards positive change. The hope is that your organization will become functionally healthier over time, and organizational stressors will decrease.

Instructions: In each item below there are two paired descriptions of an organization: Healthy and Unhealthy. Please check the box next to the statement that best describes your organization. Check only one box per paired descriptions.

Worksheet 3.2

Characteristics of a Healthy vs. Unhealthy Organization	
Healthy	Unhealthy
1. <input type="checkbox"/> Goals are shared by all.	<input type="checkbox"/> There is little personal investment in goals except at top levels.
2. <input type="checkbox"/> People are free to talk about problems and explore constructive alternatives.	<input type="checkbox"/> People are afraid to talk openly about problems.
3. <input type="checkbox"/> In attacking problems, people work informally and are not preoccupied with status, territory, or second-guessing "what the leader will think."	<input type="checkbox"/> Egos complicate problem solving. People treat one another in a formal and polite manner that mask problems.
4. <input type="checkbox"/> Factors such as ability, sense of ownership, work load, timing, and leader development determine who makes decisions. Complaints are handled positively.	<input type="checkbox"/> People at the top try to control as many decisions as possible. People complain about decisions.
5. <input type="checkbox"/> There is a noticeable sense of team play in planning, in performance, and in discipline--in short, a sharing of responsibility.	<input type="checkbox"/> Leaders feel alone in trying to get things done. Somehow orders, policies, and procedures do not get carried out as intended.
6. <input type="checkbox"/> The judgment of team members is respected.	<input type="checkbox"/> The judgment of people lower in the organization is not respected outside the narrow limits of their jobs.
7. <input type="checkbox"/> The range of problems tackled includes individual needs and shortfalls in the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/> Personal needs and feelings are not considered.
8. <input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration is freely encouraged. People readily request the help of others and are willing to give in turn.	<input type="checkbox"/> People compete rather than cooperate. People distrust one another and "back biting" is common.
9. <input type="checkbox"/> When there is a crisis, people quickly band together to work until the crisis is solved.	<input type="checkbox"/> When there is a crisis, people withdraw or start blaming one another.
10. <input type="checkbox"/> Differing opinions are considered important to decision making and personal growth.	<input type="checkbox"/> Conflict is mostly hidden. Arguments drag out and frustration grows.
11. <input type="checkbox"/> There is a great deal of on-the-job learning based on willingness to give, seek, and use feedback and advice.	<input type="checkbox"/> Learning is difficult. They get little feedback on performance, and much of that is not helpful.

Worksheet 3.2 (Cont.)

Characteristics of a Healthy vs. Unhealthy Organization	
Healthy	Unhealthy
12. <input type="checkbox"/> Joint critiques of progress and counseling are routine.	<input type="checkbox"/> Counseling is avoided.
13. <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships are honest. People do care about one another and do not feel alone.	<input type="checkbox"/> People feel alone and lack concern for one another. An undercurrent of fear exists.
14. <input type="checkbox"/> People are "turned on" and are highly involved by choice. The workplace is important and fun.	<input type="checkbox"/> People feel locked into their jobs. They feel stale and bored. Meetings seem to drag on.
15. <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership is flexible, shifting in style and emphasis to suit the situation.	<input type="checkbox"/> The leader is dominating and overbearing.
16. <input type="checkbox"/> There is a high degree of trust among members and a sense of freedom and mutual responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/> The leader tightly controls new ideas and demands justification. He/she allows little freedom to deviate..
17. <input type="checkbox"/> Risk is accepted and valued for growth and development.	<input type="checkbox"/> Minimizing risk has a very high value.
18. <input type="checkbox"/> People are free to learn from honest mistakes.	<input type="checkbox"/> One mistake and you're out.
19. <input type="checkbox"/> Poor performance is confronted and a joint solution sought.	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor performance is glossed over or handled arbitrarily.
20. <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational structure and policies are flexible and designed to help members get the job done and keep the organization healthy and growing.	<input type="checkbox"/> Organizational structure, policies, and procedures stifle the team.
21. <input type="checkbox"/> There is a sense of order, yet a high rate of innovation. Old methods can be changed and often give way.	<input type="checkbox"/> Tradition is the only answer.
22. <input type="checkbox"/> The organization adapts swiftly to opportunities or other changes in the situation.	<input type="checkbox"/> Innovation is not widespread but consolidated in the hands of a few.
23. <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrations are handled positively and openly.	<input type="checkbox"/> People swallow their frustrations: "I can do nothing. It's their responsibility to save the ship."
24. <input type="checkbox"/> A lot of energy is devoted to developing and clarifying standards. There is a sense of pride in attaining goals.	<input type="checkbox"/> Standards are not clear, are often misinterpreted and do not seem to relate to important organizational concerns.

Next look back over your answers. Your responses will help you focus on areas where your organization could improve and areas where your organization does a good job at reducing sources of organizational stress. Some characteristics of healthy and unhealthy organizations are summarized below.

Chart 3.9

Organizational Health

HEALTHY	UNHEALTHY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shared Goal and Direction• Problem Solving Orientation• Innovation Tolerated• Decision Making Distributed• Team Work• Respect• Personal Needs Heard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Investment Only at the Top• Problems Hidden• Form and Ego Over Function• Decisions Bottlenecked• Leaders Isolated• Limited Respect• Personal Needs Ignored

From: FM 22-103, P. 85.

Now that you have completed the exercise above, you may want to take some time to think about how you have an impact on your organization. Do you personally practice healthy work characteristics? What are the areas where you could improve? Write these down on Worksheet 3.3.

Worksheet 3.3

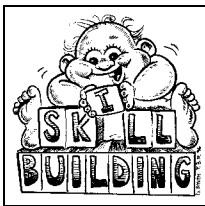
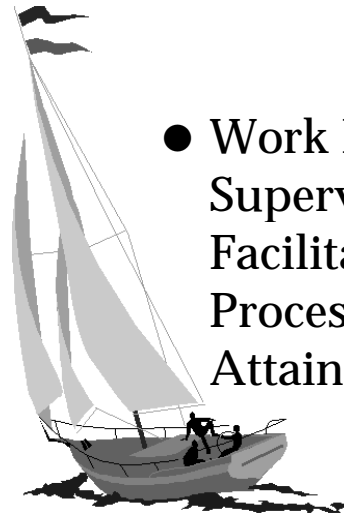
I Can Improve My Workplace By:

There are many ways organizations can work to reduce problems with workplace stress. In many cases, stress is inevitable. However, stress and workplace demands need to be offset by positive programs and policies. Take sailing as an example. It is the balance of forces that makes the boat move. The wind blows against the sail, but without the pressure of the water on the keel and hull a sailboat would slide across the water and lack direction. Here are a list of ways to reduce organizational stressors.

Chart 3.10

Countering Stress

- Stimulating Work
 - Physical Activity
 - Fair Rewards
 - Good Environment
 - Build Self-Esteem
- Work Leaders and Supervisors Facilitate the Work Process and Goal Attainment.



Skill-Building

Work can be stressful. Supervisors can do a lot to make the demands at work less stressful even if they can not reduce the workload. But what can the average person—the worker bee—do to reduce his or her stress at work? Here are a few ideas that may help. There are no guarantees that they will make all the stress go away, but they are tried and true ways of helping you manage your stress better in the work or home environment.

Practice Time Management

- ☞ Make and follow a “To Do” list
- ☞ Don’t play the paperwork shuffle
- ☞ Take mini-vacations
- ☞ Exercise
- ☞ Other options

Many of our daily stressors are due to failure to practice good time management. We stay up too late, get up too late, do the paperwork shuffle, don’t prioritize our work, and on and on. The bad news is that these are things we do to ourselves that increase stress at work. The good news is that these things are within our power to change. Here’s how:

Make and follow a “To Do” list

Don’t put off those top priority items. If it is going to cause you to lose your job—or your life—do it! Rank the other items accordingly. Tasks at the bottom of the list, you will do time permitting, or you may find that you can drop them from your list. Not everything is “Do or Die”.

Don’t play the paperwork shuffle

Moving the paper from your in-box to a holding box just postpones the inevitable. Eventually, you will have to file it, respond to it, or junk it. Besides, it often leads to missed suspenses and lost paperwork—not to mention the stacks of paper on your desk. Make it your goal to handle each piece of mail or paperwork only once. It may not always be possible, but it does not pay to be a pack rat either. If it is important, take care of it now. Problems that cannot be solved immediately can be added to your “To Do” list.

Take mini-vacations

There are many health hazards from smoking. However, there is one area where smokers have developed a healthy habit: They take frequent breaks throughout the work day! This is a health habit that more of us need to cultivate. One suggestion is to set your digital watch to chime every hour. It may be annoying for those around you, but it is for your (and their) mental health. When your watch chimes, take a short, one to two minute break. If you are sitting down, get up and stretch. If you are staring at a computer screen, look at something else or close your eyes and relax. By so doing, you are not allowing stress to build up throughout the day with its occasional stress headaches between 1500 hours and quitting time. You are controlling stress instead of stress controlling you.

Exercise

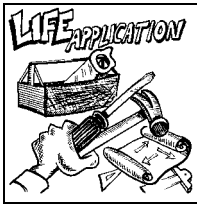
During your “mini-vacation”, you can do a few exercises or a couple of stretches to break up stress. In fact, exercise is great at helping manage moods (such as relieving depression), decreasing stress, and generating an overall sense of physical and mental well-being. Exercise could be as easy as going for a walk at lunch or more strenuous, such as running a marathon. See the special article “Exercise and Stress” in Part B of the *Targeting Stress Workbook* for more information on how you can start a healthy exercise program.

Other options

You may have more suggestions on how to personally reduce the adverse effects of workplace stress. Record these in the space below (Worksheet 3.4) and share them with your group.

Worksheet 3.4





Life Application

Look back over this lesson and pick just one of the suggestions and begin to practice stress reduction at work. Record your selection in the space below (Worksheet 3.5).

Worksheet 3.5

Chart 3.11 contains some additional ways to manage stress that you may or may not have thought of. Compare your personal stress management strategy against these. Try to increase the number and variety of strategies you use to keep on top of your stress.

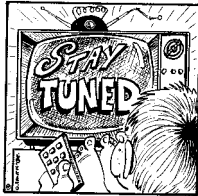
Chart 3.11

Ways to Manage Stress

- Reduce Caffeine
- Regular Exercise
- Relaxation
- Meditation
- Sleep
- Time-out and Leisure
- Realistic Expectations
- Reframing
- Belief Systems
- Ventilation/
Support System
- Humor



Slowly add more ways to reduce stress each week. Remember to vary your routine and make it fun! If you can include a friend, the easier the change will be, and you will be using another way to reduce workplace stress—developing a support system!



Stay Tuned

The next lesson will cover stress on the home front. How do you cope with the demands of work and family life? We have talked about keeping life in balance. This course would be out of keel if we did not talk about managing stress at home.

Stress is everywhere, but it is not the enemy. It motivates us and improves our performance in the same way an Olympic athlete gets psyched up to produce a world class performance. The key is learning to control stress and harnessing its energy to help us accomplish our work.



Give Us Feedback

Please take a moment to complete the feedback form provided and return it to your instructor or mail it directly to USACHPPM. This information helps us know how we

are doing, so we can do better at providing helpful solutions for today's problems. Thank you.

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