

**Highlights:**

Steps to help your reaction to workplace stressors:

- Know what job stress is
- Understand the conditions leading to stress
- Recognize the early warning signals of stress

Source(s):

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999). *Stress at Work*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Understanding Workplace Stress

Everyone experiences stress to some degree at some point in their life. As many as 40% of workers report their jobs are either stressful or very stressful. One-fourth see their jobs as the major stressor in their lives.

Some stress may be good, providing a cutting edge. Many tend to be more productive and creative when working under some tension. However, keep in mind that stress is very individualized—what causes stress for one person may motivate another.

When creative tension begins to cause physical and emotional problems, take time to take stock of what is happening. Some stress is usually a normal part of the work environment. There may be little, if anything, that can be done to eliminate or reduce the stress, but there are steps you can take to help your reaction to the stressors where you work.

First, it is important to know what job stress is. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), job stress is “. . . the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker” leading to poor health and injury. In other words, stress occurs when the demands of the job exceed the ability of the worker, which may lead to physical and emotional problems. Some individual and situational factors, such as caring for a chronically sick child, further increase the likelihood of injury or illness while other factors, such as finding a balance between work and family, may minimize the effect of stressful working conditions.

Second, understand the conditions leading to job stress. NIOSH identifies the following conditions as more conducive to creating stress:

- Design of Tasks—heavy workload, infrequent breaks, long hours, repetitive tasks
- Management Style—No voice in decision-making, poor organizational communication, lack of family friendly policies
- Interpersonal Relationships—Isolation, lack of support from coworkers and supervisors
- Work Roles—Unclear job expectations, too much responsibility, too little authority
- Career Concerns—No opportunity for growth or advancement; lack of preparation for changes
- Environmental Conditions—Dangerous, unsafe working conditions

Third, recognize the early warning signals of job related stress. Most workers have an occasional headache or have trouble falling asleep once in a while. These are normal for most individuals. Being preoccupied and unable to concentrate occasionally are also common. If these symptoms become frequent and begin to impair your ability to do your job or function as an individual, they may be stress related and help should be sought. Having an upset stomach, general dissatisfaction with your job, and a lack of confidence or self-esteem may also be stress related.

Job related stress doesn't usually happen all at once. Stress generally builds gradually over a period of weeks or even months, making it difficult to know exactly when or how it first started. Before steps can be taken to reduce job related stress or one's reaction to stress, it is imperative to understand conditions that are more favorable for increased stress and to recognize common symptoms of stress.

Free assistance is available. There is no cost for the services of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Assistance with the development of workplace training programs is available free through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Seminars and workshops can be tailored to meet the needs of the audience. Workshops may be two or four hours. Additional information on ways of coping with stress in the workplace or other employment issues is available at the address below.

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