

Addressing Workplace Stress: A Comprehensive Wellness Imperative for Individuals and Their Organizations

By Patricia Fisher, Megan Cleghorn

Identifying the most pronounced sources of stress in your life is rarely difficult. However, pinpointing some of the less overt stress triggers is more challenging. Understanding how multiple sources of stress in your life act in concert to create your own individualized risk and resiliency profile is even more complex.

One thing we know with certainty is that your health and wellness cannot be compartmentalized. No area of your life is exempt from impact if one or more other areas of your life are burdened with high stress. Similarly, just as no discrete part of your life is singularly impacted by high-stress exposure, you are not the only one impacted. Your stress level has many consequences for **your organization's health that manifest in terms of direct** and indirect costs as well as detrimental effects on the work environment. As a result, your organization has a vested interest in your ability to effectively address stress **and burnout, because your wellness drives your organization's performance.** Accordingly, creation of a robust organizational wellness infrastructure and implementation of research and experience based stress-management programs should be embraced as a central operational priority.

A comprehensive approach to stress management requires a thorough understanding of the many sources of stress in your life as well an appreciation of all the sources of support and resilience. This provides a balanced framework to examine the wide-ranging impacts of stress on your physical and mental health, your professional and personal relationships, and your overall capacity to function optimally. Gaining an accurate understanding and awareness of your stress profile supports meaningful actions and the development of a comprehensive wellness plan that will reduce the negative impacts of stress on your mind, body, relationships and performance. Consider the following integral steps to raising awareness and spurring meaningful progress :

What Does My Risk Profile Look Like?

Gaining an accurate awareness of your stress risk and resiliency profile in your professional and personal life is an important initial step toward enhanced wellness. There will be factors that are supportive and resilience-building and other factors that increase your experienced stress. With respect to your professional life, for example, consider factors such as workload, level of control, job demands, role ambiguity, and compensation and advancement opportunities. Also consider your individual risk factors such as work/family conflict, and your belief in the value of your work. Consider the same in your personal life. This analysis helps you determine how at risk you are to develop stress and trauma symptoms.

How Well Am I Taking Care Of Myself?

Our bodies and minds are not designed to sustain consistent exposure to high levels of chronic stress. Evaluate what you are currently doing to manage your stress professionally and personally. Take a holistic approach to your self-assessment because a balanced lifestyle is central to effective self-care. Often we find that our self-care may be quite good in some areas of our lives and neglected in others. The more balanced we are, the more we are able to cope with the stresses and demands that we face. Unfortunately, many of us find ourselves caught in a tornado of work, family responsibilities, household tasks, and other personal obligations. Life can then become a succession of stressful events, deadlines and obligations, leaving little opportunity for renewal or even for simple pleasures. Consider what steps you are currently taking to manage your self-care physically, psychologically and emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, interpersonally and spiritually.

What Is My Stress Symptom Profile?

We know that chronic stress plays a central role in the development of stress-related physical and mental health challenges, cognitive functioning, professional and personal relationships, and the ability to see life with optimism, hope and energy. Once you have established your risk and resiliency profile and your self-care profile, consider your individual profile of stress symptoms and effects, focusing on physical health challenges such as stress-related illness and disease, and mental health consequences such as depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse. It is also essential to probe the specific symptoms you experience relating to job stress, burnout, harassment, and exposure to direct and vicarious trauma.

Where Do I Go From Here?

In moving from awareness to action, it is essential that you acknowledge and accept the magnitude of your stress symptoms and commit to developing an active and practical wellness plan. That wellness plan should be constructed to allow you to recover from any existing stress effects, to then maintain a level of self-care that matches the level of demands placed on you, and to engage in proactive practices to increase your resilience. Ultimately, to succeed in enhancing your individual wellness and, in turn, your **organization's health, you must build a comprehensive** lifestyle that supports and sustains you through work and personal stresses. Sustainability rests on the principle that you have to replace that which has been depleted. If you are going to be a productive, active, effective person and teammate, you need to be well-nourished at all levels. To make durable changes in your professional and personal life, you and your key stakeholders must partner in (1) making a serious commitment to address the impact of stress in your lives, (2) taking responsibility for what you choose to do about your stress-management, and (3) taking action from an attitude of care, concern and respect. We need to clearly understand that for both individuals and organizations to flourish, we must treat our individual and collective wellness as a central operational imperative.