

An excerpt from



Chicken Soup for the Soul[®]

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Say Goodbye to Stress



**Manage Your Problems,
Big and Small, Every Day**

Fantastic advice on how to reduce stress and restore serenity to your life. Who knew it could be so easy?
~ Dr. Amy Gagliardi

Killer Jobs— Stress and the Workplace

Introduction

A stressful workplace may seem like the plague of the warp speed Information Age, but work and stress have walked hand in hand for eons. No doubt the workers who built the Egyptian pyramids grumbled about the long hours, unreasonable supervisors and nonexistent retirement plan.

By the twentieth century, employees began taking legal action to fight against all sorts of untenable working conditions. In 1934, a farm laborer sued his employer (and won) over the trauma he experienced when he happened upon a cow giving birth in a haystack. In 1960, a Michigan court awarded compensation to an auto assembly line worker who suffered a mental breakdown because he couldn't handle the speed and monotony of the assembly line.

It's unlikely you'll be stunned by an animal giving birth on your desk or driven to madness by someone standing over you with a stopwatch timing your every move. Even so, today's workforce seems to be a frazzled, stressed out bunch. Blame it on poor management, bad bosses, crazy-making co-workers or the relentless invasion of new technology—many of us view

the workplace as a nerve-wracking minefield. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one in every four of us sees our job as the main thing causing stress in our lives—even more so than money or family problems. Job pressures account for nearly seven in ten insurance stress claims. Stress can truly be considered a job hazard!

If your job is causing you to lose sleep or grind your teeth or any of the symptoms I've listed for you in "Signs of Workplace Stress" at the end of this chapter, get proactive about making changes. There are ways to effectively manage on-the-job stress. Read on and you'll see what I mean.

Communicate Well

A lot of workplace tension results from poor communication. Part of the problem is a disconnect between how well people think they communicate and how well they actually do. In a recent jobperformance.com analysis, 93 percent of managers said they answered employees' tough questions honestly. Some of them must be whispering—only 42 percent of employees believe the boss tells them the whole truth.

Another problem is the proliferation of communication choices. How many times have you e-mailed back and forth with a co-worker sitting three feet away from you? Facebook is replacing face-to-face interactions, often complicating matters and adding an impersonal layer of confusion into the mix, at least for those of us who favor actual conversations.

You can do your part to improve communication with

individual superiors and co-workers. Start by getting to know each person's communication style and preferences and then adjust accordingly. That doesn't mean becoming a therapist or twisting yourself into knots. It means learning to be a good listener and respecting individual differences.

You also have to develop thick skin. Don't take it personally if someone is abrupt and direct in their feedback style, but is then hypersensitive to those who return feedback in kind; it has nothing to do with you. Likewise, there are some people, especially those youthful digital natives, who truly prefer to get their information via e-mail or instant message rather than speaking words with their mouths; it may be helpful to learn their habits and their lingo, too.

Be consistent and attempt to address difficulties in communication before they fester into full-blown dramas that create tension for you and everyone else. My advice is to tackle tricky matters head on rather than circling around them. Be assertive yet compassionate. State your issues clearly, use specific examples, and do your best to keep it from getting too personal. It's a good idea to mentally rehearse conversations beforehand with the goal of eliminating unpleasant emotions and avoiding arguments. Situations may not always go the way you practiced, but at least you will have thought through some of the possibilities.

Many of the usual communication pitfalls can be eliminated by maintaining relationships that are polite and friendly, yet not too intimate, and that fit within the boundaries of your office's "corporate culture." Be mindful of this, whether you sit in the

corner office, a cubicle, or telecommute, and when it comes to scenarios like work outings and holiday parties.

At all costs, avoid being lumped in with the whiners and gossips. If you've got a co-worker who frequently plops down next to your desk and proceeds to complain about everyone else in the office, smile, avoid commenting, and get back to work as soon as they take a breath. Don't go there with them or you risk guilt by association, which can lead to isolation from the mainstream office. Instead, cultivate support from as many sources as possible so there's always a lifeline when the seas get rough. (And you can be sure that if they're talking smack about the guy in accounting, they're probably trash talking you too.)

Instead, set an example like Nina Miller did when she worked at Borders during their bankruptcy liquidation. She posted inspirational notes near the time clock and supported her fellow employees in other ways. That's the way to face up to work adversity with dignity and class.

Are YOU the Problem?

You've probably come to realize there are all sorts of office personality clichés. There are the Whiners and the Gossips, who I've already mentioned. Then there are the Machiavellians, always scheming and plotting, as well as the Responsibility Dodgers, the Credit Hounds and the Micromanagers. The list goes on. The important question for you to ask yourself is, "Which type am I?" And then, "Am I the one who is creating stress in the office?"

This is a tough but important self-assessment. If you conclude

you have unwittingly become the ground zero for office tension, it could be good news. Changing other people is hard. You have control over your own actions and words, so change is within *your* reach.

I've mentioned how helpful it is to understand the styles and preferences of others. It's just as useful to understand your own. For example, you may prefer to work independently rather than in a group, or you may wish to get your instructions up front and check in occasionally rather than continually. You might be able to mold your work environment to synch with your working style—if not, perhaps it's time to start thinking about finding a more suitable situation. But before you push the delete button, it's worth trying to express your wishes to your co-workers and bosses in a clear, nonjudgmental manner to see what can be done.

In any work scenario, your objective should be to cultivate a reputation as a team builder whether or not you are technically in charge. Team building is the art and science of allowing everyone to contribute their best skills and ideas without allowing anyone to overpower, micromanage or slack off.

Being a team-builder means developing the strong communication and listening skills we've already covered and by showing your commitment and excitement for the work. These traits are contagious and when there's a positive buzz in the air there's less room for negativity and dissension. It helps to make a point of recognizing the unique contributions each team member brings to the table and praising them in a sincere, meaningful manner.

Master this technique and not only will work be a happier place, you'll likely fast track your career.

Imagine Your Exit

Congratulations. You've been hired. Now it's time to plan your exit. Of course I'm not recommending immediately quitting as soon as you start a new job. I'm simply suggesting you define under what circumstances you *would* leave if you needed to. Do some thinking about the absolute values, morals and beliefs you'd never compromise no matter what. Know your personal line in the sand.

What would you do, for instance, if your boss asked you to lie about an earnings report to an investor? Or if she swore at you, using some pretty strong and explicit language in front of a group of co-workers? How about if someone you're sure does inferior work to your own is promoted ahead of you? What if you don't receive a raise within two years?

Deciding ahead of time what you won't tolerate helps you recognize "it" when "it" happens. Because your limits are clear it's less likely you'll be blindsided by circumstances that trip the wire on stress emotions such as anger, anxiety and fear. If a situation occurs that crosses your line, you won't experience that churn in your stomach for very long because you've already determined your course of action.

I recommend committing your exit plan to paper and re-viewing it from time to time. So that you're always able to leave on your own terms, stay focused on cultivating professional

relationships, keeping your résumé updated and staying sharp on technical skills—those should be givens anyway.

Also, draw a clear picture of what leaving will look like. We all know someone who told off the boss, threw his keys on the floor and stormed out. Satisfying in the moment, yes. But when you allow the flames of rage and resentment to flare up, you risk getting burned by the fumes, creating negative and stressful situations for yourself down the road. Remember: The boss you diss probably knows other potential bosses and can make your life miserable far beyond your tenure. So even if you've come to loathe your work situation, envision an exit that's polite and respectful, then stick with that vision should the time come.