

How To Reduce Your Stress At Work

Imagine working only four hours a day, nine months a year and earning all the money you need to do exactly what you want with all your free time. Does that sound like your life?

That's the life a futurist of the early 20th Century predicted the average worker would be living by the 21st century.

Despite the introduction of many labor-saving devices, Harvard University Economist Juliet Schor found by the 1990s people were working the equivalent of one month a year more than they did at the end of World War II.

It seems that whenever a significant new "labor saving" product or service is developed we use it so much our workload actually increases. After all, wasn't our work supposed to be made easier by voice mail, faxes, cell phones and email?

Instead, many of us find we are constantly on-call, frequently interrupted, and overwhelmed with communications that people expect to receive immediate responses to. That's on top of the already heavy workload existing in most organizations. For some workers, the best way to deal with the overload is to take an extended stress leave.

If switching from double lattes to decaf isn't enough to reduce your stress at work, here are some steps you can take to get your workload under control:

Work on things that are important. This may sound obvious, but many of us are tempted to work on easy tasks first so we can have a sense of accomplishment. Time spent on those "easy" tasks can quickly add up, creating even more stress when there does not appear to be enough time left for the important work.

Keep an "activity log". This will help you figure out what your time is being spent on. Every time you start and end a new activity, including taking a break, make note of the time. Most workers who charge by the hour have learned to do this automatically. If you are not used to tracking your time it may be a bit of an adjustment, but within a few days you should be able to notice any time-wasters you might not have been aware of.

Set daily goals. When scheduling your time, assume that something unexpected will come up and build in a cushion of time to deal with it. To minimize the stress of meeting self-imposed deadlines, avoid making promises about when tasks will be completed. If you must commit to a date, be conservative. If you consistently underpromise and overdeliver you could earn a great reputation while reducing your stress.

Be gentle with yourself. Aim to meet or even exceed expectations, but don't try to achieve perfection. Wherever possible, delegate routine tasks even if you think you can do them better than someone else.

Avoid interruptions. Unless you are expected to be on call, select a time of day when you will return phone calls and emails. During other times, let your voice mail take messages for you. You can also create an autoreply for your email to let people know their message has been received. If your email says you will respond within 24 hours if a reply is required, it may deter someone from repeatedly trying to contact you in the meantime.

Don't let other people's problems become yours. As Richard Carlson, author of *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work*, says "If someone throws you the ball you don't have to catch it." Some managers find themselves solving their employees' problems instead of empowering employees to find solutions themselves. When someone comes to you with a problem that isn't yours, try limiting your contribution to advice instead of taking on the task yourself.

When you are feeling overwhelmed, say so. Companies want to keep good employees so most bosses will want to know when you are having difficulty. However, instead of saying "I can't do it," offer some possible solutions. For example, if you won't be able to get a major report completed by a particular deadline, perhaps you could tell the boss you can either complete a condensed version of the report by the deadline, complete the entire report by a later date, or meet the deadline if you get some help from co-workers or temporary staff.

These techniques probably won't help you enjoy the life of leisure envisioned by those early futurists. But they can make your work more manageable, and might even reduce your stress enough to let you go back to drinking double lattes.

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