

What Causes All of This Stress?

Stress Is a Response

Most experts define stress as a response to life situations like the following:

1. Having too many responsibilities
2. Vague or confusing expectations
3. Having to do unpleasant tasks
4. Facing too many distractions
5. Having to do tasks for which one is unprepared
6. Working with difficult people
7. Being bored
8. Being sick
9. Experiencing too many changes
10. Being in physical danger
11. Living or working in a crowded space
12. Not getting enough exercise
13. Poor nutrition
14. Not getting enough sleep
15. Not enough time to relax
16. Being dissatisfied with your physical appearance
17. Abusing drugs or alcohol, or being close to someone who abuses them

Social and Cultural Causes of Stress

Stress has become a factor in our culture in the last 20 years because of things that were originally designed to make life less stressful. Conveniences such as ATM machines, microwave ovens, and fax machines have made life easier in many ways, but they also have woven an expectation of instant gratification into our culture. And this causes stress.

Here are a few other examples of products and services that were invented to make life more efficient and productive, but which sometimes seem instead to add to stress:

- 24-hour stores and restaurants
- One-hour photo developing
- Drive-thru fast food
- 10-minute oil change
- Web sites, with their instant access to unlimited information
- Catalog and Internet shopping
- Personal computers

- E-mail
- CNN Headline News
- 30-minute pizza delivery

Stress at Work

Almost everyone complains of stress at work these days. It often results from one of the following:

1. Having too much or too little work to do
2. Having to do work that is very complicated and demanding
3. Having to do work that is boring and repetitive
4. Having unclear goals and expectations
5. Having to follow changing or confusing procedures
6. Being at a career dead end
7. Working in a company with an impersonal management philosophy

How Work Stress Affects Most

Stress affects people in every type of work setting.

People at the top of organizations suffer from stress because of excessive workloads, unrealistic expectations, and isolation. The phrase “it’s lonely at the top” has some truth to it.

Middle managers often experience stress because they have responsibility for the people who report to them, but lack the control to execute what is expected. With the recent epidemic of corporate downsizing, middle managers have also been given greater and greater workloads. Managers who manage to keep their jobs often feel like they are living in the shadow of termination.

Professionals suffer from their own brand of stress caused by monotony. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals often perform the same kind of work for many years, resulting in boredom and desperation.

Workers at the lower levels of today’s organizations often feel stress caused by boredom and the frustration of dealing with the public. They also may feel less successful than their coworkers in higher-level jobs and may feel stressed by their lack of status.

Why Workplace Stress Has Increased

1. The nature of work has changed. The fight-or-flight responses to stress are ineffective in response to the stresses of today’s life.
2. The workplace has become decentralized. In many places, people no longer work together in one place, but may be scattered around the world or work from home, connected by technology.

3. People change with each generation. Baby Boomers differ from Generation Xers in terms of their values, work ethic, and their definitions of success. These generational differences contribute to stress at work.

How Stress Affects Women

Both genders experience stress. It affects women in some unique ways, however. Here are a few of them:

1. Overall, women are still paid less than men for the same work.
2. Women still face a glass ceiling as they climb the corporate ladder. A recent report stated that only 2% of the members of top management of North American corporations are women.
3. Women who choose to have children are usually responsible for the logistics of child care.
4. Women with children often do more housework when they get home than their husbands do.
5. Compared with men, women with children also tend to experience more guilt feelings about leaving their children to go to work.

Suggested Reading

Jeff Davidson, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress*. New York, NY:Alpha Books, 1997.

J. Barton Cunningham, *The Stress Management Sourcebook*. Los Angeles, CA: Lowell House, 1997.

Peter G. Hanson, *Stress For Success*. New York, NY:Doubleday, 1989.

Peter G. Hanson, *The Joy of Stress*. Kansas City, MO:Andrews &McMeel, 1985.