

Features

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Changing your perception of workplace stress

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

The workplace can often be a stressful place in today's world. Multiple stressors exist related to expectations, staffing, scheduling, interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, role conflict and use of technology. Additionally, all of these stressors occur within a culture that already has unrealistic expectations of speed, convenience and instant gratification.

Studies have shown that women's stress in the workplace is related primarily to trying to meet the demands of home and work, while men's workplace stress is related more to the job. Also, research has found that work has a more detrimental effect upon our nonwork lives (family and friends) than our family has on our work life; the demands placed upon us by work are often met at the expense of time spent with family or for ourselves.

Workplace stress is an issue whether you work for someone else or for yourself because the problem of multitasking and gaining balance exists regardless of whom you work for. However, people who work for themselves often experience less stress because they are pursuing a passion and have a greater sense of being able to control their lives.

Can you, as an individual, do anything about workplace stress? Yes, but as someone once said: "If you want to change your life, you must first change the way you perceive life." You must learn a totally new way of seeing yourself, others, events, obstacles and opportunities.

To begin, consider how you feel about being your true self at work. Some individuals believe that work has no place for the personal self because work is professional and public, while our authentic selves are personal and private. The consequence of this type of thinking may be that you never get what you need or want because you don't say how you really feel. Instead, you become a "yes" person who simply follows what everyone else thinks and does. When you make the decision to leave a very important part of yourself at home (i.e., your true self), you often end up losing the joy and peace that you deserve.

Next, consider your expectations and beliefs about your role in the workplace and in life. Indeed, we all have stresses in our lives, but these stressors do not affect everyone in the same way. If you live with a lot of "shoulds," "oughts" and "have tos," you may end up struggling every day to become what you think you "should" be. And, if other people do not behave, think, feel or act as you think they "ought to," it can create a lot of stress and anger.

What can you do to help reduce the stress you feel at work and to change the way you react to stress in general? Here are some tips:

1. If you are living with a lot of "shoulds," "oughts" and "have tos," consider talking to a counselor, minister or friend to learn how to gain a more balanced perspective of life.
2. If you can't express what you need, want, think and feel in a positive and assertive manner, find a class, seek help or get some books to learn assertiveness skills.
3. If you get lunch and coffee breaks at work, take them. Studies show that small breaks actually increase our efficiency.

4. Become a participant in creating the kind of work environment that nurtures and truly respects the mind, body and spirit. Encourage your workplace to:

Provide vending machines and meals that include healthy food;

Incorporate stress reduction opportunities into the health plan and facility (e.g., classes for meditation, exercise, yoga or tai chi; group therapy; calming music);

Create committees that can help find solutions for workplace stress related to mandatory overtime, floating and unexpected shift rotation;

Involve employees in creating a healing and nurturing environment through improved communication, collaboration, empowerment, accountability and debriefing and support groups.

5. Learn ways to relax that are meaningful to you and practice them each and every day (writing, drawing, dancing, painting, cooking, reading, yoga, etc.).

6. Keep yourself healthy: Cut your intake of caffeine and increase your intake of water, eat a good breakfast, get adequate sleep, exercise and increase your intake of fruits and vegetables.

After all is said and done, the fact is that some of us are in a work situation that is simply overwhelming and stressful, and our health shows it! We look around and, although we have tried as hard as we could to take a different outlook and be our authentic selves, our efforts didn't work. The "real us" somehow does not fit into the situation we are in. If this describes your world, then it might be time to consider your path. Talk with a counselor, minister, career coach or someone else who can help you define what it is that you need in order to achieve the life you desire. Maybe there are still ways to look at the situation differently that you haven't explored, or you just might need to make some new choices. You don't have to remain stuck. There are people who can help you move forward to find a life that allows you to achieve more peace, happiness and health.