

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The Purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

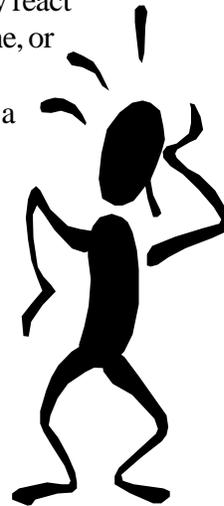
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Social Sciences Team

Stress Management

What is Stress?

Stress is the way we respond to change. Stress is what you experience when you believe you cannot cope effectively with a situation. For many people “tension” or “pressure” are other words for stress. Most people think of stressors as negative but stressors can also be positive experiences. Your body may react with tense muscles, headache, or stomach ache to making a public speech or completing a satisfying project as well as to the loss of a loved one. Stress has physical and emotional effects on us. It can create positive or negative feelings. It is the wear and tear our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. We cannot eliminate stress from our lives but we can learn how to manage stress and its effects.



Who Can Use This Information?

Anyone interested in understanding stress and how to recognize and minimize stress and its effects will find this information helpful.

You can assess if you are experiencing stress by answering these questions:

- Do you wake up exhausted?
- Do you get angry when you are stuck in traffic?
- Do you lose your temper with attendants?
- Do you dread holidays that should be enjoyable?
- Do you often forget things?
- Do you have little or no time for daily chores?
- Do you feel depressed at the end of the day?
- Do you have frequent headaches, fatigue, muscle aches, and/or digestive problems?

If you are experiencing stress related symptoms you will benefit from understanding and learning how to manage stress.

What is Job Stress?

Recent studies show that nearly half of American workers suffer symptoms of *burnout*, a disabling reaction to stress on the job. An estimated one million workers are absent on an average workday due to stress related complaints. Job stress costs United States industry an estimated \$300 billion annually in absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, and medical, legal, and insurance fees.

Some signs of feeling stressed in your work environment include: irritability, having trouble concentrating, fatigue, frustration, losing your sense of humor, getting into more arguments than usual, getting less done, feeling sick more often, and caring less about your work.

In 1995, a survey within NRCS entitled "Implementing Federal Soil Conservation and Wetlands Protection Policies at the Field Level" revealed that 51 percent of the 1,182 randomly selected NRCS district conservationists were classified as "high burnout" and 22 percent were in the "transitional burnout" phase. Stress management experts suggest these percentages are higher than the national average for organizations in the U.S.

The district conservationists' stressors included:

- living and working in the same county
- working in an enforcer role
- inadequate staff
- inadequate soil surveys to make wetland determinations
- lack of training.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health identifies the ten most stressful jobs as:

1. Laborer
2. Secretary
3. Inspector
4. Clinical-lab technician
5. Office manager
6. Foreman/Foreperson
7. Manager/Administrator
8. Waiter/Waitress
9. Machine operator
10. Farm owner

How Can You Manage Stress?

If you recognize signs of job related stress then the next step is to identify the stressor(s).

Could it be:

- Work overload/under load?
- Too much/too little responsibility?
- Dissatisfaction with current role or duties?
- Long hours?
- Lack of adequate resources?
- Excessive paperwork/reporting?
- Low participation of clients in programs?
- Hostile or unresponsive clients?
- Changing and new regulations/policies/personnel?
- Public speaking?

Pinpoint and address those stressors you can eliminate or reduce. For example, if public speaking causes you stress then you might join a local Toastmasters International chapter <www.toastmasters.org/> to strengthen your public speaking skills and confidence. Also, there are many books and other resources about managing stress and its effects, some of which are listed at the conclusion of this article.

Techniques for Relieving the Effects of Stress

Minor healthful changes to your daily routine can add to your body's ability to cope with stress.

- Physical activities such as aerobic exercise, deep breathing, stretching exercises that can be done at the office, and yoga can relieve the physical tension that often accompanies stress.
- Depending on whether you drive or ride, make the most of your commute time by listening to soothing music or self-help tapes, reading, writing, or daydreaming.
- Everyone can get a head start to diminish the effects of stress by starting the day with a good breakfast. To keep your body functioning well during your work day never skip lunch, but eat less at midday. Do not drink alcohol, avoid excessive caffeine (coffee, soft drinks), and try to skip dessert; consider low fat yogurt, fruit, water or juice, and salad.



Why Should You Use This Information?

As a positive influence, stress can help compel us to action; it can result in a new awareness and create exciting new perspectives. Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. In fact, insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Therefore, understanding stress and its effects can help you turn potential stressors into positive challenges. Our goal then is to find an optimal level of stress, that which will motivate us but not overwhelm us.



Twelve Stress Management Tips

1. Create a "to do" list for the next day
2. Leave work problems at work
3. Leave home problems at home
4. Take a relaxing walk
5. Listen to relaxing music
6. Read a chapter from a good book
7. Make and keep schedules
8. Get organized and clear out the clutter
9. Prioritize projects
10. Delegate when appropriate
11. Don't procrastinate
12. Motivate and be good to yourself

Source: *Stress Management for Dummies*

Ten Characteristics of Highly Effective Stress Managers

1. They know how to relax
2. They eat right and exercise often
3. They get enough sleep
4. They don't worry about the unimportant
5. They don't get angry often
6. They are organized
7. They manage their time efficiently
8. They have and make use of a strong social support system
9. They live according to their values
10. They have a good sense of humor

Source: *Stress Management for Dummies*



Where Can I Get More Information?

Elkin, Allen. *Stress Management for Dummies*. Foster City; IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 1999.

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Hittner, Patricia. "When Stress Makes You Sick." Better Homes and Gardens, March 1998.

Johnson, Spencer. *Who Moved My Cheese?* New York; G. P. Putnam's Sons Publishers, 1998.
Sapolsky, Robert. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. New York; W. H. Freeman and Company, 1998.
Social Sciences Institute. The Leader In You Training, *Stress Mastery*, June 2001

The American Institute of Stress' website:
<<http://www.stress.org>>

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