



Management Assistance Program

REDUCING STRESS AND BURNOUT:

Harnessing the Power of Stress to Produce Positive Results

GOALS:

To help organizations, managers and employees:

- deal with stress proactively in the workplace on an individual, departmental and divisional level
- create procedures and techniques to reduce stress once it has been identified
- provide tools to assess and manage stressors in the workplace
- develop strategies to resolve the issues and problems creating stress

OVERVIEW:

Everyone has heard about stress, the word is overused. Most employees indicate that the biggest problem they have at home and work is dealing with such high levels of stress. Primary Care Physicians across the nation indicate that stress accounts for a large portion (75%) of the primary symptoms their patients experience. Many individuals can identify the causes of their stress, when it occurs most often in their lives, and what situations (or people) trigger their stress reactions. But the large majority of suffers do not know how to harness stress for its original intended purpose – to produce rapid results. Instead many employees and managers let stress reactions cripple their ability to think, be creative and problem solve. They end up in the vicious cycle of emotions, overwhelming thoughts, symptoms, and burnout. If a person could take that stress reaction and use it in positive ways to get productive results they would solve two problems – alleviating the causes (putting the energy into resolving the situation) and reducing the affects of the stress (pouring the energy out into the solution). To accomplish this, four factors must occur:

- Identifying it – early, not waiting for the symptoms to occur before recognizing it
- Reacting to it – work through the stressful situation immediately, do not let it build up incrementally

- Resolving it – moving past the emotions, thoughts and symptoms to some concrete resolutions
- Preventing it – working to build systems and structures that predict and eliminate potential stressful situations before they occur

OBJECTIVES:

1. Unify the workplace against stress.

- Making it an issue which everyone is responsible for addressing and resolving
- Looking in the past to identify and understand its sources and causes
- Dealing with the present stressful situations and dynamics - eliminating those that are unnecessary or can be easily resolved
- Facing future issues and challenges with strategies to reduce the potential stresses and frustrations involved as a part of the planning strategy.
- Educating the workplace regarding the early signs and symptoms of workplace stress from different perspectives such as: structural (where is it most prevalent in the organization), interpersonal (what are its effects on communication and morale), behavioral (how is it impacting each individual) and functional (when is it affecting the department's ability to perform)
- Providing clarity as to the quantity (how pervasive) and quality (how impacting) of the workplace stress issues that exist
- Prioritize the stress events (their importance) in coordination with the overall organizational goals and objectives
- Setting up strategies and timelines to approach the issues and begin to resolve them.

2. Determine which stressors are inherent to the work environment itself versus those that are created by personality or style differences.

Sorting out the difference between stress events which are created as a result of scheduling, timeframes, workload and production expectations (structural issues) versus those that are caused by conflict, aggressive styles, unreasonable demands, unclear roles and responsibilities and individual problems (personnel issues).

Issues that are structural can be approached from a systems analysis:

- Where do these stresses occur?
- Why do these stressful conditions exist?
- When do they most often occur?
- How can we create short and long terms solutions to reduce the stress?
- How can we build structure or processes to eliminate or alleviate stress?
- What is the cost of these structures and the cost of not building them?
- What are the time frames for initiation and resolution?

Issues that are interpersonal can be approached from a behavioral analysis:

- What stress is being created? (Symptoms)
- When and how often does it occur (Frequency and Intensity)
- Who is creating the stress? (Causes)
- Why are they creating it? (Root Causes)
- Who is responsible for the behaviors? (Who manages or directs?)
- What needs to occur to stop the behaviors?
- What are the plans to get the behaviors stopped?
- What are the time frames for initiation and resolution?

3. Set up ongoing systems of stress assessment, intervention, and reduction/resolution to deal effectively with stress issues as they arise to:

- Diminish the amount of stress experienced at all levels of the organization.
- Prevent employee and management burnout resulting from unresolved stress issues).
- Reduce toxic work environments and relationships.
- Enhance employee morale and teamwork.
- Limit disability and workplace stress related incidents.

4. Encourage all employees to practice stress management techniques which include:

- Distributing a daily log of stress management strategies for Managers
- Creating effective perceptions of controllable and non-controllable workplace dynamics
- Providing appropriate nutrition and exercise options for employees at work
- Enabling staff to recognize individual stress triggers and provide coping skills
- Promoting the use of enhanced communication tools to reduce confusion and conflict
- Establishing clear behavioral guidelines for workplace conduct and interactions

SUMMARY: Tips for Reducing Stress and Burnout

- Identify stress levels before the symptoms occur.
- Quantify the amount of stress and qualify its current impact.
- Understand the reasons *why* the person, situation, or event causes stress reactions.
- Realize vulnerability issues related to stress symptoms (physical, emotional, and social) and build up resistance to the affects.
- Recognize the trigger events that create and escalate stress reactions and avoid or reduce your exposure to them.
- Develop coping skills to handle multiple levels and types of stress at work.
- Take ownership of personality traits which produce and extend stress.
- Set realistic expectations of time, energy and resources needed to resolve work-related stress problems.
- Let go of uncontrollable issues or events and resolve those that are controllable as quickly as possible.
- Remove unnecessary stress-related behaviors and habits from your work routine (such as: obsessing over problems, reacting emotionally to every situation, or letting the stress symptoms overwhelm your ability to cope – leading to burnout)