



BY SACHA COHEN

De-Stress for Success

*Stress in the workplace is fueled by budgets cuts, a heavy workload,
and career pressure. If you're not careful, you could crack.*

Don't worry—here are some proven ways to help you unwind.

Headaches. High blood pressure. Insomnia. Those are just some of the warning signs of too much stress. If you don't learn to cope with it in the workplace (and elsewhere), stress can endanger your career and your health. Because if you're burdened with the physical and emotional symptoms of too much stress, your career probably *will* suffer.

Just look at a 1996 survey conducted by the Gallup Organization. Of 1,000 working adults surveyed, the poll found that 16.7 percent said that stress interferes with their ability to concentrate at work

either all of the time or quite a bit.

A *Training & Development* survey of readers showed that trainers are stressed out from lack of time, money, and help at work. We all know the causes of stress—too much work, not enough sleep, constant worrying, family crises, and clashes with co-workers, to name a few. What most people don't know are ways to cope with life's everyday hassles. So if you're ready to scream "Calgon take me away" in a meeting, then it's time for some remedial de-stress training.

Here's how you can refresh your spirit and simplify your life.

CALMING COLORS

Gary Ward, in his article "Colors and Employee Stress Reduction" (*Super-vision*, 1995), interviewed color experts, professor Stanley Coren from British Columbia and Michigan-based psychologist Carlton Wagner, to find out whether color can affect stress levels.

Ward discovered that violet is the most restful color. It causes a decrease in blood pressure and pulse and respiration rates. It is not, however, suggested as a solid color for walls. Violet is too strong, but it makes a good accessory color to provide "an island of bliss for the eye and help people to relax."

Blue is the best color for break areas. It also may help decrease blood pressure and pulse and respiration rates. It's also most people's favorite color. A blue environment can help treat headaches, hypertension, and insomnia. It may be too relaxing for an office.

Yellow is considered bright and cheerful, but too much yellow can reportedly cause an increase in people's overall frustration. Orange is viewed as a "cheap color" and should not be used to mark tools or other nonedibles. Orange also raises your heart rate.

Red stimulates the highest degree of emotions. Exposure to a red environment can cause a significant increase in a person's blood pressure and pulse and respiration rates. It can also increase one's appetite. Splashes of red are good in conference rooms, says Hall, because the color seems to spur creativity.

Shades of gray

A wide spectrum of shades is seen in the workplace. For example, earth tones are associated psychologically with safety. Using light earth tones in training rooms may slightly increase learning rates.

White, not surprisingly, is considered clean. It is also neutral and non-intimidating. Too much white or too bright a shade of white, however, can create a harsh glare under artificial light.

Black and other dark colors tend to signal danger. Black also attracts heat and may put some people in a gloomy mood. Yet, black is a good accent color and adds mystery.

When combining colors, it's best if one color dominates a greater area than the other. Combining a light variation of a color found on a lighter part of the color spectrum with a dark variation of a color from the darker part is pleasing to the eye.

Last, keep color combinations simple. Too many shades of too many colors can overwhelm people's minds, create a less-serious atmosphere, and increase stress.

Tame information overload

Information on the Net, in the media, and in print can overwhelm even the most seasoned information junkie. According to John Dvorak (*PC Magazine*, December 1996), here are some suggestions for handling the data tsunami.

Block email. Set up a private email box for associates and relatives. Send all other mail elsewhere. You can also set up various in-boxes to sort incoming mail automatically.

Keep track of time. Surfing on the Web can be a huge waste of time if

you're not careful. There are two ways to avoid the time trap. First, stay focused on what you're trying to find. Try not to follow random links. Second, limit your search to a set time period before you go online. For example, allow yourself 45 minutes to research a project.

Print, print, print. Use your printer as much as possible when researching on the Web. That way, you can gather information without chasing useless links. Printing also helps you keep track of where you've been.

In their book, *Indispensable You*

(Dartnell), Kim Anderson and Scott Pemberton offer these additional tips for reducing information overload:

- ▶ Let go of low-priority information.
- ▶ Don't try to be an expert in all areas. Sometimes you have to say, "I don't know."
- ▶ Develop retention schedules for documents. Retaining outdated material—sometimes for years—will keep you buried under a pile of useless paper.
- ▶ Reduce the information coming in. If possible, take yourself off other people's distribution lists.

Simplify daily routines

Small time-wasters and annoyances can contribute to increased stress levels. *Self* magazine recommends these tips for streamlining minutiae:

Handle paperwork. File memos, pass articles, and reply to faxes immediately.

File paperwork. Turn your daily planner into a vertical file. When you get bills, invitations, and tickets, put them into the page showing the day you need to pay or use them.

Work during prime time. Discover your personal "prime time." Are you more productive in the morning, afternoon, or evening? Do priority tasks then, advises Ronni Eisenberg, author of *The Overwhelmed Person's Guide to Time Management* (Plume).

Cut clutter

As most of you know, it's difficult to concentrate on, let alone complete, projects when you can't see what's on your desktop. So, here are a few suggestions from *Indispensable You* that will help free some space.

Don't print unless you have to. Many documents can be kept in electronic files on your computer without a hard-copy duplicate. Keeping both traditional and electronic files is redundant.

Say it in person. When possible, meet in person, use the phone, or send email. That may help eliminate lengthy letters full of unnecessary information. Plus, a walk down the hall is a good way to take a break.

Be concise. Proper planning using outlines can lead to a two-page report rather than a 10-page one. Promise never to write a memo that's more than one page—and keep that promise.

Route fewer reports. Who *really* needs one? Check with recipients every six months or so. Do they want or need to be on the routing list?

According to Jeffrey Davidson, author of *Breathing Space*, the American habit of "packratism" is one of the biggest obstacles to getting control of your time and life.

Here's what he recommends:

- ▶ Collect everything on your desk and elsewhere that is competing for your attention. Stack it in front of you in a big pile.
- ▶ Separate every item into one of four piles: important, urgent, interesting, or recycling (trash).
- ▶ Rank the items in each of the three remaining piles. On this second pass, you may want to downgrade an item or toss it out.
- ▶ Then, prioritize each new incoming task or piece of information, and file it in the appropriate file. Important tasks take priority, but when you need a change of pace, flip to the urgent file.
- ▶ Always think, says Davidson, "What else can I chuck? What can be combined, ignored, delayed, delegated, done in multiples, farmed out, automated, or systematized?"

Flex and stretch

According to *Stress-Free Living*, just sitting at your desk can be hazardous to your health. In fact, the way you sit in your chair, work at your computer, or hold your phone can lead to repetitive-stress injuries.

Here are some tips from Christin Grant, a research associate at the University of Michigan's Center for Ergonomics.

- ▶ Don't use your chin to hold the receiver against your shoulder when you talk on the telephone. The strain on your neck muscles builds each time you do that.
- ▶ Every 10 minutes, take a 30-second break from tasks that require repetitive movements. Change your position, straighten your posture, stand up, and flex your neck and fingers.
- ▶ Sit up straight when working at your keyboard. Don't slouch or hunch over.
- ▶ Take a five-minute break every hour or two and walk around the office.

RELAXING RESOURCES AND TOOLS

It seems that everywhere you look, there are products designed to help lower your stress level. Here are a few unusual choices.

Online Health CD-ROM. There are four "rooms" of health and fitness information in the *Online Health* CD-ROM from Rodale Press.

The Newsstand offers six four-color online health, fitness, self-care, safety, and work-family newsletters; the Health Library has more than 400 articles on topics ranging from allergies to family fights; the Quick & Healthy Kitchen has more than 25 low-fat, easy-to-prepare recipes; and the Health Lab offers digests of more than 100 of the latest health and fitness research studies.

For more information, contact Rodale Press, Emmaus, Pennsylvania, 610.967.5171.

Mood music. The Relaxation Company (800.788.6670), a record label "dedicated to exploring the therapeutic benefits of music," offers a catalog of ambient music. The sound frequencies embedded in the songs reportedly manipulate listeners' brain waves.

Biofeedback device. The GSR2 Biofeedback Relaxation System from Montreal-based Thought Technology (800.361.3651) monitors electrical resistance to gauge the activity of your nervous system. All you have to do to get immediate feedback on your tension level is insert two fingers into the device and it will indicate your stress level by emitting a high-pitched squeal through a pair of earplugs.

Websites.

- ▶ The Stress Busters page, <http://www.stressrelease.com/stressbus.html>. Free your mind with techniques for reducing stress as well as information about anxiety-reduction workshops.
- ▶ Links to stress reduction resources, <http://imt.net/~randolfi/StressLinks.html>. Includes information about relaxation techniques, situational interventions, stress in the workplace, professional organizations, and performance psychology.
- ▶ Mind Tools, <http://www.mindtools.com/smpage.html>. Find out ways to recognize stress and ways to deal with all types of stressful situations.
- ▶ Stress Free Net, <http://www.stressfree.com>. The site offers stress related services and tools, including a directory of health and stress management professionals.

Massage. What better way to relax than with a professional massage? A new workplace perk, made popular by several firms in Silicon Valley, is to offer stress-reducing back rubs to employees.

The Great American Backrub (800.222.5782) offers group rates. The company charges an hourly bulk rate of \$50 to \$75 per office, which usually includes three massage therapists handling up to six clients each per hour. Another company, The Healthy Back Store (202.393.2225), caters to large companies and law firms around Washington, D.C. and Raleigh, North Carolina.

Expert tips

Nearly every health care professional has a few tips to offer when it comes to deflating stress.

Here's a sampling.

- ▶ Alan Miller, who designs programs for social workers at Florida International University's Professional Development Center, says that you should schedule small moments of relief throughout the day to keep stress

from accumulating. He also says that you should keep fruit at your desk. While you're enjoying an apple or banana, take five minutes and do nothing but focus on how good it tastes.

- ▶ John Wakeman, a New Orleans-based psychologist, recommends that you skip that second cup of coffee. The caffeine in two cups of coffee can add 16 beats a minute to your heart rate and make you more

You Know The Big Five

is the most valid and
reliable personality
measurement tool available

Because..

you read about it in *Training & Development*, talked with us at Lakewood Training Conferences and ASTD International Conferences, attended a Big Five certification program and became a certified consultant, currently use Costa and McCrae's *NEO* tests, apply the Five-Factor Model of Personality, or contacted us for more information.

But If You Don't...

and are still tied to the old paradigm, you should contact us immediately for upcoming Big Five certification dates, a catalog of materials, and more useful information.

CentACS
Center for Applied Cognitive Studies

401 East Boulevard, Suite 100
Charlotte, NC 28203-5135 USA
800/BIG-5555
704/331-0926
704/331-9408 Fax

centacs@vnet.net (E-mail)
www.centacs.com (Web site)

Circle No. 135 on Reader Service Card

HOW TO HELP EMPLOYEES MANAGE WORKPLACE STRESS

In their paper, "Reducing Occupational Stress: An Introductory Guide for Managers, Supervisors, and Union Members," coauthors Janet Cahill, Paul Landsbergis, and Peter Schnall offer some useful information that may help you improve the health and productivity of employees.

Here are a few of their recommendations.

- ▶ Increase the level of social support from co-workers and supervisors. Approaches can include proactive supervisory training, conflict resolution training, and staff retreats.

- ▶ Improve physical working conditions. Approaches include improving indoor air quality, reducing hazards such as noise, toxins, and chemicals, and redesigning jobs to reduce the incidence of repetitive-strain injuries.

- ▶ Suggest healthy ways to use computers. Good ergonomics are a key to healthy computer use. State health departments may be able to help your organization choose the proper equipment and lighting. Also, involve staff in choosing new equipment. The users should be able to make informed choices.

- ▶ Maintain job demands at healthy levels. Possible approaches include less overtime and reduced workload.

- ▶ Provide healthy work schedules. Rotate shifts, use flextime or other alternative schedules, and reduce forced overtime.

- ▶ Offer relaxation training. Stress management consultants are available to train employees in relaxation techniques.

For example, the New York Open Center (212.219.2527) offers stress management and corporate programs. One course, "Stress Relief for the Office Worker," includes yoga, aromatherapy, and other self-help techniques.

irritable and anxious.

- ▶ "When you feel tense, take time to stretch or exercise," says Edward Colt, an endocrinologist in New York City. A mere 30 to 60 minutes of exercise a day will help keep you calmer for up to 24 hours.

- ▶ David Posen, a psychotherapist based in Oakville, Ontario, says that getting enough sleep is a simple, yet important, way to reduce stress. In fact, chronically stressed people almost always suffer from fatigue, he says. People need from five to 10 hours of sleep per night. Posen also notes that a short nap (five to 20 minutes) can be rejuvenating, but a nap lasting longer than 30 minutes can have the opposite effect.

- ▶ Richard Freedman, director of research at Boston's Mind-Body Medical Institute, says that teaching people relaxation techniques results in "enormous dividends," including less absenteeism, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence.

In addition to the obvious stress inducers, a lack of autonomy is one of the biggest contributors to workplace stress, says Marlene Caroselli, director at the Center for Professional Development in Rochester, New York.

Caroselli cites results from a 14-year Swedish study (*Journal of Public Health*, March 1996) of 12,500 employees. It found that when employees were given more control over such work environment factors as lighting, heat, and noise, quality, service, and productivity increased by as much as 50 percent.

Caroselli recommends giving employees choices about their training, work environment, and career options. For example, trainers can give trainees a choice between taking multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests. Or, employees can be asked whether they want to work from 9 to 5 or from 9:30 to 4:30. Those seemingly simple choices can make employees feel more in control of their own destiny and have a surprising impact on stress. ■

Sacha Cohen is technology editor of *Training & Development*, scohen@astd.org.