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## Try to relax

*How to help employees cope with stress*

### Question:

**I saw your April 3 column, “Keep their heads up.” I agree that managers have to help their employees stay positive. I wish you would have gone further and addressed the core issue—what to do with employees who are stressed out. A number of my employees are very worried right now—they’re scared for their jobs, their health insurance, paying bills, paying to put their kids through college, retirement, etc. What am I supposed to do?**

### Answer:

In the column the reader references, I discussed the concept of self-esteem. I discussed the need for managers to have individual discussions with their employees so they can better understand their needs and concerns.

To encourage employees to feel more positive, I suggested that managers should focus on changing the work conditions and/or the consequences that employees experience. I also offered some specific prescriptions that manag-

ers might consider in their interactions with their employees.

In this column, in response to this reader’s inquiry, I’ll tackle the issue of work-related stress. This is a very relevant issue in these uncertain times. Many people are reeling due to the many and varied stressors with which they have been forced to contend.

Let’s start with a quick definition of stress which might be as follows: “The behavioral adjustment to change that affects you physically and psychologically—the process by which you mobilize energy for coping with change and challenges.”

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But, while the current scope and intensity of stressors might be unusual, over the years researchers have documented that the American workplace is a hotbed for stress. About one out of every three American workers indicates that they have considered quitting their jobs because of stress. About three out of every four American workers indicate that stress at work reduces their productivity and adversely affects their physical and mental health.

Statistics like these and stories like the one the reader shares tell us that work-related stress is a very real problem with very real consequences. To get a better handle on the issue, we have to under-

stand what causes stress. There are some general categories that are helpful in organizing work-related stressors. They include the following:

#### Workload

Too much work can push people beyond their ability to cope. By the same token, too little work or too little challenge can also lead to feelings of frustration and stress.

#### Change

Change can be unsettling, especially when

it is unexpected and uncontrollable.

#### Role ambiguity

Uncertainty regarding roles and responsibilities is a common source of work-related stress.

#### Conflict

In-fighting and arguing can lead to hard feelings, grudges, and stress.

#### Career development

Uncertainty with one’s career path can be stressful.

#### Performance appraisal

Performance appraisal, especially when

it is highly subjective, is a very common source of work-related stress.

## Supervision

It's been said that employees don't leave jobs – they leave bosses. I use the term “carriers” to describe managers who are incompetent or insensitive because, like disease agents, they make the people around them “sick” (i.e., stressed).

## Colleagues

This is a corollary to the previous item. Teammates who under-perform or irritate can create stress in their colleagues. I call these people “crazymakers” because they make the people around them crazy.

## Work conditions

Working in uncomfortable or unpleasant conditions (e.g., hot, cold, cramped, smelly, noisy, etc.) can create stress.

## Technology

Related to the previous item, merely working at a computer workstation can be stressful. Then, there is the anxiety associated with attending/monitoring and keeping up with messages, upgrades, etc. Information overload and associated anxiety are common artifacts among people who are tethered to their computers.

Emotional hardiness is a variable that accounts for much of the difference in individual vulnerability to these and other stressors. People who are emotionally hardy seem to be more resistant to stress. They have come to see themselves as capable and resilient. They feel that they can control, or at least influence or affect, the events in their lives. In simple terms, they tend to define stressful events more positively than their less hardy counterparts.

So, what can a manager do to help their employees (hardy and non-hardy) cope with their stressors? At the macro or organizational-level, I offer

the following suggestions:

## Providing control

Managers can help employees by seeking their input when change is pursued. Involvement of this kind helps employees feel like they are engaged and included. The change is not something that is being done to them—it is something of which they are a part.

## Defining roles

Clearing up ambiguity associated with performance expectations, communication channels, and reporting relationships can be very freeing. Most people respond favorably to clear messages regarding performance expectations. Playing guessing games, on the other hand, can fuel uncertainty and stress.

## Eliminating work overload/underload

People perform best and feel best when their workloads are commensurate with their capabilities and when the goals are achievable. Expecting too little or too much from employees can lead to stress.

## Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

EAPs are fairly common these days. These are comprehensive programs that employees can access for confidential counsel of varying kinds. It is an employer-provided benefit that says very clearly, “We care about you and we're here to help.”

## Social support

Promoting a climate of inclusion, cohesion, and togetherness might be the most powerful approach a manager can take to promote healthy coping with stress. Feelings of camaraderie can help people persevere through the tough times (i.e., “I'm not alone in this ... my colleagues are supportive and I can lean on them a bit ...”).

At the micro or individual-level, managers can encourage their employees to use adaptive rather than maladaptive coping (e.g., alcohol, drugs, etc.), reflected in the following techniques:

## Relaxation training

Progressive relaxation training is a proven stress buster. Deep muscle relaxation combined with meditation is a particularly efficacious approach.

## Exercise

We all know that regular exercise is associated with better general health. Regular exercise is also an effective stress management technique. During exercise, the brain releases endorphins that lead to feelings of euphoria and well being (i.e., the “runner's high”).

## Nutrition

One way to combat stress is to reflect on the fuel that you are putting in your body. Feeling stressed? Maybe it's time to seek out a “comfort food” like a bowl of chicken noodle soup. Over the longer term, maybe you will want to seek out foods (e.g., complex carbohydrates from whole-grain breakfast cereals, breads, and pastas) that have been shown to reduce cortisol and adrenaline levels, stress hormones that take a toll on the body, over time.

In the final analysis, we need to recognize that stress is part of being alive. To lead a life devoid of stress would be to crawl into a shell and hide from the world. In the end, it all depends on how we choose to deal with stress. After all, as one of my mentors once explained to me, “Life is 10 percent what you make it, 90 percent how you take it.” ■

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