

Don't stress, decompress

By Harvey Meyer

YOUR DESK IS overflowing with work. You're constantly interrupted with office chatter, phone calls, e-mails. You're frenetically multi-tasking. Deadlines are approaching.

Aaaaaagh!

Sound familiar? It should, since many of us operate in high-stress workplaces. Eight in 10 workers experience at least some stress, according to a 2003 survey conducted for the Connecticut-based employee communications firm the Marin Company.

Some stress is good for you. Certain workplace challenges are energizing confidence-boosters and motivate you to learn new skills and develop job mastery.

But workers are increasingly besieged with chronic, low-grade stress, an invisible but sometimes crippling disability, notes Shawn Talbott, a nutritional biochemist who has authored several books about stress.

"People are multi-tasking; they're coming to work early, bringing work home; they're always busy, always available, always on," says Talbott. "There's no downtime, and that constant, back-of-mind stress is biochemically detrimental to our health."

Overly stressed employees experience faltering memories and muddled thinking, and are less productive, says Talbott, a Costco member who lives in Draper, Utah. Moreover,

Too much pressure can rule your life and ruin your health

blood flow, he says, which will help reduce blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol, a primary stress hormone.

You are what you eat. Avoid cortisol- and blood-sugar-enhancing refined carbohydrates such as doughnuts, muffins and white bread, and junk food such as candy bars and, especially, full-sugar sodas, says Talbott. Instead, opt for food and beverages at work such as blueberries, green tea, soy products, milk and whole-grain breads, which block some of the detrimental effects of cortisol, he says. Talbott also suggests limiting caffeinated coffee to no more than 200 milligrams (about two to three cups) daily or risk boosting cortisol levels.

Musically inclined. When Lorna McLaren wants to quickly moderate her stress level, she thinks of or hums a favorite song. The Kelowna, British Columbia, training specialist, international stress-management

joke or vent with or share a fear—we are more satisfied with our jobs and more productive," says Zoglio, a Costco member from Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

Take a baby step. Ever been so inundated with work you're baffled about what to do next? That rumination just exacerbates your stress. "Research shows that multi-taskers not only are more stressed, but less productive," says Zoglio. "Better to finish one task, even an easy one, before moving on to the next. By taking action, you're taking control, introducing a sense of order amid the chaos." That, in turn, will often motivate you to complete another task and then another.

Tickle your funny bone. Laughter, a chuckle, even a bemused smile—all are quick ways to alleviate stress, says Lorna McLaren. Humoring yourself provides immediate disengagement from a stressful environment, she

says. "I once worked with a nightmare woman who constantly berated me," she reports. "I visualized a ferret head above her neck, which was not only funny but helped remove me from taking anything she said personally."

Put things in perspective. When you feel frazzled, stop and rate your stress level from 1 to 10, with 1 being you missed out on office doughnuts and 10 meaning you were just fired, says Zoglio. "Rating your stress puts things in perspective, which helps avoid over-reaction." Similarly, she suggests taking a "gratitude break" and listing three things—maybe your health, job and friendships—for which you're thankful. Your focus instantly shifts from what's wrong to what's right. Even in the midst of a pressure-filled situation, it's calming to remind yourself that the stressors will eventually pass.

Photo opportunity. Humans' brains are wired to instantly respond to visuals, says McLaren. By turning to a calming image on your computer screen or office wall, she says, you'll quickly "feel" yourself walking along that favorite beach or fishing from that boat, which will help you temporarily disengage from a stressful environment.

Do a good deed. Take a minute or two to help an employee who is confronting a personal crisis. Or compliment a co-worker on her presentation. "Positive psychology studies indicate that when we're helping or giving to someone," says Zoglio, "it [quickly] makes us feel fuller, more confident and uplifted."

Write it down. Writing down your feelings is a vehicle for quickly helping to transfer stress from your mind to the paper or computer, says McLaren. Writing helps qualify and quantify what you're stressed about, she says, providing a more objective—and calmer—understanding of the situation. [E]

Harvey Meyer is a St. Louis Park, Minnesota, freelancer.

member who lives in Draper, Utah. Moreover, stressed-out workers can experience a catalogue of health woes—increased blood pressure and heart rate, fatigue stemming in part from sleep deprivation, headaches and tensed muscles, upset stomach, suppressed immune system and even weight gain.

Certain workplace conditions—for example, constant deadlines and noisy interruptions—may mean stress can't be sidestepped. In fact, some individuals thrive in those environments. But for many, the less stress, the better. Fortunately, there are a number of helpful stress-reduction techniques you can follow.

Exercise stress through exercise. If you can't fit in 30 minutes of daily exercise, consider briefly, periodically but intensely contracting or stretching your arms, legs and facial muscles for a few minutes at your desk, says Talbott. Or try standing up and moving while on the phone, self-massaging tensed muscles, walking around the block or squeezing a stress ball. All of these activities increase

cialist, international stress-management speaker and Costco member says such tunes often put a smile on your face and induce toe-tapping rhythms that distract, and thus help relax, you.

Plan and prioritize. Not everything at work is an emergency, so take time to prioritize your tasks, says Dr. Gabriela Cora, a Miami wellness coach, author and Costco member. The president of Executive Health & Wealth Institute suggests dividing tasks into “must do,” “may do” and “want to do” piles. That action not only offers a sense of control but lessens the chances you'll constantly fret about, and lose sleep over, your workload.

The friendship factor. Befriending someone at work you can confide in is a “huge stress reducer,” says Suzanne Zoglio, a psychologist and author of *Recharge in Minutes* (Tower Hill Press, 2004), a “cook-book” of 101 ways to quickly de-stress. “Gallup surveys show that if we have at least one good friend at work—someone we can

Blowing off steam

TAKE A DEEP BREATH. It's minutes before—or even during—your important presentation or a strained meeting with your boss. What is a quick way to de-stress? Stress management experts urge taking a breath. Make that a deep breath. When people are stressed, they take shallower breaths and their thinking becomes less focused, says Dr. Gabriela Cora, author, wellness coach and Costco member. By taking as few as five deep breaths (three to five seconds breathing air down into your abdomen and three to five seconds exhaling) in a comfortable rhythm, you begin shifting into a more relaxed state. Taking deeper breaths is a com-



mon relaxing technique for starting meditation, Cora says, adding that deeper breaths help oxygenate your blood, reducing the chances you'll experience high blood pressure, headaches and fatigue, among other stress-related ailments.—HM