Four Steps to Reducing Stress and Staying Healthy At Work

By Richard Weinstein

Regardless of which cycle the economy is in, stress is a professional fact of life. During the go-go economic boom of the late '90s, employees worked fast and furious to keep up with the competition. In the current economic scene, workers are being asked to take on more tasks to compensate for the downsizing of the labor force. It always seems that there is simply too much to do with too little time to get it done.

Research shows that nearly 35 percent of workers reported an increase in anxiety and stress-related physical ailments in their workplace in the last year. A study on depression in the workplace states that employers lost $44 billion a year in productivity due to stress-related depression. Since stress has been scientifically linked to most major health problems, including heart disease, obesity, diabetes and immune disorders, we clearly need a strategy for reducing it in our professional lives.

Here are four things you can do right now to help reduce stress.
Take Control

Studies on stress reveal that the two greatest stressors for human beings are the lack of control and the lack of predictability over the events in our lives. While we may not always be able to control clients cancelling at the last minute or an unwieldy number of clients, we can manage our reactions to these situations. One of the best ways to prepare for the unexpected and gain a sense of control is to wake up 10 minutes earlier than usual. This way you can create a plan for the day rather than just rush off to your practice and see what happens. Studies on stress prove that the more you believe you are in command of your life, even for unexpected events, the lower your stress levels will be.

Understand Your Triggers

We all have our own reactions to certain types of stress and often they become just a knee-jerk response without much thought. Take a little time to think about why you allow yourself to respond to these stress triggers the way you do and realize that you ultimately have control over them. This is not the time to rationalize your response and defend your reaction as being “right.” It’s time to regain control by understanding that you choose your response and can choose to change it at any time. No event or situation has any meaning until you put a label on it, and you can immediately reduce your stress if you choose better labels and reactions.

Live Better Through Balanced Chemistry

Stress is a hormonal event that has a vast effect on all of our bodily functions. Not surprisingly, many diseases trace back to hormonal imbalances. The hormone the body uses during periods of stress is called cortisol. It is produced by the adrenal glands and is also the hormone used to reduce inflammation. Processed foods, fast foods, and grains dump inflammatory chemicals into our bloodstream. Because the average American diet is so loaded with these foods, most people have chronic internal inflammation that results in high levels of cortisol. This elevated level of cortisol makes us feel stressed out even if our circumstances aren’t all that stressful. Cortisol can also cause mood swings, fatigue, and cravings for sugar and salt. This is where diet becomes extremely important in managing our stress levels and staying healthy.

First and foremost, a breakfast that consists of protein is essential for starting the day off with your blood sugar in balance. This is not the time for two cups of coffee, a glass of orange juice, and a pastry. The brain’s primary fuel is glucose (sugar), and if your blood sugar levels are bouncing up and down because of a poor diet, you will not be able to think clearly and be emotionally stable and productive. Something as easy as a protein smoothie is all you need for breakfast. Try bringing a protein bar or an apple for a snack at work instead of having donuts and coffee.

Because so many people bring their own lunch or get take-out food, it is important that we choose the right foods and eat them in the right environment. If you bring your own lunch to work, make sure you have protein and maybe leave the bread behind. A container of tuna, egg, or chicken salad on top of salad greens works great, or even a chicken breast left over from a previous dinner is fine. If you are ordering out, opt for a salad with protein, or at least choose from one of the healthier sandwich shops as opposed to the fried-food burger places.

If at all possible, do not eat at your work space. Proper digestion occurs when we are in a non-stress mode, which means we should try to be in a relaxed, peaceful environment. If there is an office lounge, or weather permitting, a nearby park, leave your workplace for a short time and eat your lunch there. The amount of work you might get done by eating at your desk will not make up for the indigestion and blood sugar imbalances that come from eating in a stressful environment. By having lunch in a place of your own choosing, you will gain a great sense of control and benefit from that secure feeling.
Get Your Blood Moving

In 2000, a Nobel Prize was given to a researcher who proved that the brain gets most of its energy from movement of the body's joints, especially the vertebrae in the neck. The last thing you want to do is sit for extended periods of time without getting up and stimulating your nerves and the blood supply to your brain and muscles. You should get up and move around at least every 30 minutes; this should be an easy task for an active practitioner. It will make you think more clearly and take the stiffness out of your muscles, which will ease stress and tension. Walk around, get a drink of water, shrug your shoulders up and down five times in a row. All of these things will reduce your stress levels and make you work more efficiently, which also relieves work stress. If you do a lot of computer work, make sure you also stretch your arms and gently shake out your arms and hands.

Practice what you preach and remember to partake in the beneficial bodywork you offer your clients. Make sure that you nurture yourself as well as your clients.

The Benefits

Gaining a greater sense of control, understanding and managing your stress triggers, reducing your body's inflammation and stress hormone levels, keeping your blood sugar stable, and increasing your brain's energy and blood flow will all work together to make your workday much more productive and less stressful. You won't come home too exhausted to enjoy your family and friends, you will improve your immune system and be less prone to getting sick, and the quality of your life will dramatically improve.

Richard Weinstein is a chiropractor with more than 25 years of experience in reducing stress. He is one of the nation's leading experts on stress, intestinal tract disorders and chronic fatigue. Weinstein is the author of the Spring 2004 Penguin Putnam book, The Stress Effect: Discover the Connection Between Stress and Illness and Reclaim Your Health. In this text he takes an advanced look at the long-term causes and effects of stress and how to address and relieve them. For more information on his services and book, please visit www.richardweinsteinmd.com.
Copyright of Massage & Bodywork is the property of Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.