TOP 5 WORKPLACE STRESS SAFETY TALKS

Put Stress In Its Place
Stress doesn’t have to be a bad thing. A certain amount of stress is necessary to motivate us to do things for ourselves, our families and our jobs.

Managing Workplace Stress
It is important to reduce stress so that you can concentrate on doing your job well and safely. Accidents occur when people are distracted by stress.

Coping with Excessive Stress
Certain behaviors may also be symptoms of too much stress. Learn to recognize the behaviors and take preventative steps to maintain your health during stressful times.
Safety Talk 1
Living With Stress
Managing stress in the workplace

Safety Talk 2
Put Stress In Its Place

Safety Talk 3
Control Stress To Work Safely

Safety Talk 4
Coping With Excessive Stress

Safety Talk 5
Get a Handle on Stress
Introduction

Michael Topf believes people should start learning how to deal with stress in kindergarten, but the reality is many of us go to our graves without attending that course.

“We are a denial, minimizing society. Most people have been told since childhood: ‘Don’t worry about it, don’t let it bother you. It’s no big deal. You’ve got to be strong.’ People learn to stuff their feelings, emotions, issues and concerns,” says Topf. He’s the founder and president of the Topf Organization, a safety and leadership consulting firm based in King of Prussia, PA.

Those who bottle stress inside and don’t deal with it aren’t just at greater risk for developing heart disease, cancer, depression and many other illnesses, but also for getting hurt on and off the job, according to Topf.
Stress can cause all kinds of problems, both physical and emotional. When people are feeling stressed, their bodies become tense and tight. Even bending over to pick up a pencil from the floor can cause a muscle strain.

Pulling a muscle is one thing, but far more serious is the potential for stress to distract people from activities that demand full attention – such as driving or operating machinery.

If you’ve ever been immersed in a problem while driving and later can’t recall large parts of the trip, it’s easy to see how your inattention and sluggish reaction time could have caused a fatal crash.

Topf says up to 70 percent of workplace injury incidents are caused by similar inattention.

Why do some people seem to deal well with stress, while others don’t? Topf says studies have shown that those who view problems as challenges and do not feel threatened by them tend to have better health and feel more in control than those who feel powerless against change and uncertain times.

Choosing to stuff stress inside and avoid dealing with problems will only make things worse, and quite possibly lead to a physical or mental health crisis. Topf offers these tips for those wanting to gain the upper hand on stress:

- Understand that stress is a normal part of living, through all stages of life. Empowering yourself to ride out the bumps can make all the difference to your safety, overall health and happiness. Learning to deal with life's issues directly is the only way through them.
- Take a stress management or relaxation course.
- If you are experiencing marital, family, financial or other problems, seek counseling. Such services are often available through workplace EAPs (employee assistance programs), counseling centers and various religious organizations.
- Guard against drinking to excess or taking illegal or legal drugs to numb yourself against problems. When you awaken the next day, your problems will remain. Topf says many legal and illegal drugs slow people’s reaction time and awareness, putting them and others at greater risk for injury. He recommends that anyone taking prescription medications talk to a doctor about these side effects.
- Exercise is a stress burner, yet most of us don’t get nearly enough. If you are feeling down or uptight, a brisk half-hour walk or a session at the gym can make a big difference on your outlook.
- How’s your diet? Excessive sugar or caffeine consumption can magnify stress by making you hyperactive.

Read on to discover our top 5 stress safety talks you can use today to prevent problems down the road.
TOP 5 SAFETY TALKS

Managing Workplace Stress

Research shows that January is the most stressful month of the year when it comes to workplace stress (across all industries), primarily due to the hangover of the holidays, financial pressures and year-end reviews.

A stressed-out work environment isn’t a safe and healthy one. Luckily, there are some quick and simple ways you can help everyone learn to manage their stress better.
Living With Stress

Any kind of work can be stressful; working nights, changing to new job sites, working in areas which are either too isolated or crawling with people — all can put your nerves on edge. Besides work factors, many of us are also packing around a load of stress from our lives away from work.

Small amounts of stress can energize and alert you to what needs to be changed. Stress is the way you react to demands in your life. Excessive stress, however, can have a bad impact on your health, your ability to work safely and your enjoyment of life.

Maybe our ancestors had only two choices — “fight or flight.” In today’s world most situations don’t require swinging your fists or running away. But people still pump adrenaline when feeling threatened or disturbed, whether from traffic or a misunderstanding at work. Resulting high blood pressure and tight muscles are hard on health in the long-term.

There are other ways to deal with stress that put you more in control. Using those techniques can actually improve your health, family life, job performance and outlook on life.

First find your causes of stress. If you feel upset on the job, it’s more helpful to identify what situations trigger stomachaches or headaches than to take medication. If you can’t avoid such situations, neutralize their effect on you. Replace the stress response with a relaxation response. That can be progressively relaxing every muscle, or deep breathing, slowing down and clearing your mind, muscle stretches and exercise.

HERE ARE OTHER STRATEGIES:

- In a stressful situation, take time to experience your feelings. Acknowledging sorrow or anger is a step toward getting past it.
- Get enough sleep.
- Call your doctor if you are turning to drugs or alcohol.
- Talk things over with a trusted friend, your spouse or a counselor.
- Get a hobby.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Avoid mood-altering drugs and tobacco, and if you drink alcohol keep it in moderation.

There are healthy ways to deal with tensions from ordinary hassles and life-changing events. Turn to them when you are feeling uptight or overwhelmed.
Stress doesn’t have to be a bad thing. A certain amount of stress is necessary to motivate us to do things for ourselves, our families and our jobs.

We all handle stress differently. One person may thrive on pressure that another person would find too much. Each needs to find the optimum level of stress for himself and try to maintain that balance.
The physical symptoms of stress are actually body changes to help you deal with immediate physical danger by fighting or running away. These include:

- Increased heart rate which increases blood flow to the brain and major muscles.
- Eyesight improves as the pupils of the eye become dilated and hearing also becomes more acute.
- The liver releases sugar for energy.
- Perspiration increases to cool the body.

When the danger is over, the body quickly returns to normal. In modern life, however, stress is usually related to long-term situations. The continuing tension from a chronic sense of danger leads to health problems including headaches, upset stomach, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Just as uncomfortable as the physical results of stress are the mental and emotional effects: anxiety, depression and an inability to think clearly or even to enjoy life.

The first step in stress management is to take better care of yourself. Do not underestimate the value of a balanced, nutritious diet. Junk food might give you a quick lift but will make you feel worse in the long run. The same goes for excessive use of alcohol, tobacco and caffeine.

People with busy lives are usually operating on too little sleep. Getting seven to nine hours of sleep most nights will help you cope.

In modern life, stress is usually related to long-term situations. The continuing tension from a chronic sense of danger leads to headaches, upset stomach, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Regular exercise is one of the best tools for fighting stress. It gives an outlet for your body’s “fight or flight” stress reactions.

Say no to unnecessary and unwanted commitments. Save your energy for the things that really matter in your life. As the saying goes, too much yes can lead to stress.

While many stressful situations can’t be avoided, you can deal with them calmly. Practice on the little stressors and you will be ready to handle the big ones.
Control Stress to Work Safely

Stress - everyone has it. It is a natural part of life, but too much stress can cause health problems and can affect your ability to work safely.

Stress occurs when we are faced with situations that cause nervousness or even excitement. These situations can range from increased production demands at work to heavy traffic during your commute. Stress can be caused by unwelcome events - such as a large unexpected bill, or even by happy events - such as a promotion.

And stress isn’t necessarily a bad thing, either. Most of us work better under pressure, and we learn better too.

Physical symptoms of excessive stress can include headaches, digestive upsets, muscle tension, sweating, shaking, heart irregularities, fatigue and other discomforts.

Emotional and mental symptoms can include nervousness, depression, confusion, inability to concentrate, mood swings and anger.

Certain behaviors may also be symptoms of too much stress - excessive eating, drinking, smoking or drug use. Recklessness in driving and other activities may also be a sign of stress.

All of us have experienced excessive stress and at least some of these symptoms at various times in our lives.

Long-term stress has been linked to ailments such as heart disease, cancer and ulcers. In fact, research has indicated that the majority of human diseases may be related to stress.

Since stress can’t be avoided, it is important to know how to manage it to maintain health and safety.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS AND TO LESSEN THE EFFECT IT HAS ON US. HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

- Learn to manage your time better to avoid last-minute deadline pressures or work overload. Learn to delegate some responsibilities.

- Tackle first things first. Learn to complete your work in order of priority - doing the most important task first and saving the least important for last.

- Talk things over with somebody you trust. This helps you by letting off steam, and you may come up with some solutions.
• Learn to focus on solutions rather than problems. Instead of just complaining about what is wrong, try to find ways to fix it.

• Learn some specific stress reduction skills. Many people find relief from stress by practicing techniques such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation or even meditation. Instruction in these methods is available from many sources such as audio downloads, books and community programs.

• Get regular exercise. It will help you fight stress in two ways. First, exercise is relaxing and it gets your mind off your worries. Second, being physically fit can help you to handle stressful events better.

• Eat regular balanced meals. You’ll feel better and you’ll improve your health. Don’t overdo the caffeine because it can increase nervousness. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, many soft drinks and chocolate. Take it easy on sugar, as well as alcohol and other drugs.

• Get enough sleep, and take time to relax each day.

• Develop some interests outside of work. Spend some time on a recreational activity each day - even if you have only 15 minutes to spare.

• Maintain your sense of humor. Today’s crisis often becomes tomorrow’s funny story - so why not laugh about it today?

• If possible, arrange your work station to reduce stress. Comfortable seating, good lighting, fresh air and a comfortable temperature all make it easier to fight stress.

What does all this have to do with safety? It is important to reduce stress so that you can concentrate on doing your job well and safely. Accidents occur when people are distracted by stress.
Coping with Excessive Stress

After dropping the children at daycare and checking on your senior parents, you finish an hour’s freeway commute and start your workday.

You feel pressure to do too much work in too little time. You worry about being the next to be downsized out of a job. You try to concentrate on your tasks but you keep remembering a big bill you have to pay and a small but persistent health worry.

Any of this sound familiar? These are the kinds of things that contribute to stress at work – stress that can cause illness and injury unless it is handled well.

A reasonable amount of stress can motivate us to work better and faster. But excessive stress can cause many problems such as health difficulties. It can also keep us from concentrating on working safely.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE SYMPTOMS OF TOO MUCH STRESS:

- Sleeping difficulties.
- Feelings of anxiety and of being overwhelmed.
- Being short-tempered and uptight.
- Physical sensations such as tense muscles, headache or upset stomach.
- Abuse of substances such as food, cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.

THESE SUGGESTIONS MIGHT GIVE YOU SOME IDEAS OF HOW TO COPE WITH STRESS:

- **Maintain general good health.** Eat nutritious meals regularly each day. Your diet should consist largely of healthy food such as whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables. Foods high in fat, salt and sugar should be kept to a minimum. It is important to get adequate sleep and rest. Exercising daily or at least several times a week will also help you to stay strong enough to cope.

- **Avoid drugs.** When we are under stress, it is tempting to turn to this kind of relief. However, the abuse of drugs such as alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, prescription drugs, over-the-counter remedies and street drugs will eventually just add to your problems.
• **Special relaxation techniques might prove helpful.** You can obtain more information about these methods from books and tapes that are widely available, as well as community programs, self-help groups and some therapists. One of the simplest of these techniques is taking a number of deep, slow breaths and exhaling completely. Another involves deliberate progressive relaxation of different muscle groups.

• **Find someone to talk to.** Problems become more manageable when you discuss them with a friend, a member of your family, a clergy person or a counselor. Your company might have an employee assistance officer who can point you in the right direction.

• **Learn to relax on your time off from work and other responsibilities, even if it is very short.** Every day do something you enjoy.

• **Learn to set realistic goals.** If you are working toward specific goals, day-to-day difficulties are easier to handle.

You are bound to experience stress – everyone does. But you don’t have to let it take over your life. Learn some coping strategies for your work and your home life.
Safety is unavoidable. It's your natural response to the challenges and changes of life.

You do have a choice in how you deal with stress, though. You can learn to relax physically and mentally. You can let off steam through physical exercise. You can reduce the causes of stress in your life.

**HERE ARE SOME HEALTHY WAYS TO DEAL WITH STRESS:**

- **Keep your sense of humor.** There's usually something to laugh about no matter how bad things are.

- **Get regular exercise.** This will improve your fitness for dealing with all of life's physical and mental challenges. It is also a good way to shift your focus away from things which upset you or make you angry. A simple and effective response to an unhealthy stress problem is to rid yourself of the excess energy by doing something physical like, running or walking.

- **Eat right to maintain your health.** Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables, the fresher the better. Fill up on complex carbohydrates such as whole grain bread, rice, pasta and potatoes. Skip the foods filled with fat and sugar.

- **Get enough sleep.** Individual sleep needs vary, but you should sleep long enough to wake up feeling rested and refreshed. Sleep patterns are often disrupted when a person is stressed.

- **Cigarettes, alcohol and caffeine kick your body into high gear and can add to your stress level over the long run, so cut back or quit.** If you need help in staying off alcohol or drugs, get help from a treatment program or self-help group.

- **Manage your time wisely.** Do the most important things first.

- **Talk about your problems.** The listener may not be able to offer solutions, but talking them out helps put your problems in perspective.

- **Learn some relaxation techniques.** Here’s a simple one: Close your eyes for a few moments and breath in and out deeply and slowly. Concentrate on the sensation of breathing. Obviously, you can’t do this while you are doing something like driving or operating a drill press, but you can do it while you are taking a break.

- **Look on the bright side.** Optimism is a good antidote for stress.
Most people are well into unhealthy stress situations before they realize it. People around them can help by noting their symptoms and letting them know.

*When you are feeling worried, remember that most of the things we fear never actually happen. Save the heavy stress reactions for genuinely threatening situations. In the meantime, relax and try to enjoy your life today!*