

Employee Wellness

There are several components to employee wellness, but stress management is the primary component. This Safety Talk provides tips to reduce stress whether on or off the clock.

What is Stress

Stress is a state of mental tension and is a natural human response prompting our bodies to release certain hormones (primarily cortisol but also adrenaline) boosting our physical and cognitive ability. From an evolutionary perspective, stress helps us respond to dangerous situations (think fight or flight).

In low sporadic doses, stress can be a positive motivating force encouraging us to push outside our comfort zone to solve a problem or quickly react to danger in the immediate environment. However, if stress continues over an extended period, it becomes chronic stress which negatively impacts your health and well-being.

The modern-day dilemma is that our body responds to life/death threats the same as perceived/imaginary threats.



Signs of Stress

Stress makes it hard for us to relax and can come with a range of emotions, including anxiety and irritability. When stressed, we may find it difficult to concentrate. We may experience headaches or other body pains, an upset stomach or trouble sleeping. We may find we lose our appetite or eat more than usual. Chronic stress can worsen pre-existing health problems and may increase our use of alcohol, tobacco and other substances.

Stressful situations can also cause or exacerbate mental health conditions, most commonly anxiety and depression. When we suffer from a mental health condition, it may be because our symptoms of stress have become persistent and have started affecting our daily functioning, including at work.

Stress Relief Strategies

Stress is a natural human response, but when you recognize elevated stress levels, start with a breathing technique to hopefully afford enough relief so you can address the cause.

Stress Management Techniques

Cyclic Sighing. Have you ever cried to the point where you are out of breath and then gasped and found yourself inhaling sharply followed by another deep inhale, then a slow exhale? Our bodies instinctively know how to relieve stress. Stanford researchers have studied this and coined it cyclic sighing. It is reported to be one of the best breathing techniques for both immediate and long-term stress management.

To perform this breathing exercise, take two sharp but deep inhales, followed by a slow long exhale. Researchers recommend doing for this up to five minutes to help with short term stress management. If performed daily, the effects are magnified over time and your body becomes more resilient.

Box Breathing. Other breathing techniques that are effective include box breathing. This technique uses equal amounts of inhale, exhale, and holding your breath. Then repeating the pattern of inhale-hold-exhale-hold. For example, a four second inhale, followed by a four second exhale, then hold your breath for four seconds. Repeat for up



Other Tips

Learn what triggers your stress and experiment with different stress management techniques. The below activities may help:

- Keep a journal.
- Download an app that provides relaxation exercises (such as deep breathing or visualization) or tips for practicing mindfulness, which is a psychological process of actively paying attention to the present moment.
- Exercise, and make sure you are eating healthy, regular meals.
- Stick to a sleep routine, and make sure you are getting enough sleep.
- Avoid drinking excess caffeine such as soft drinks or coffee.
- Identify and challenge your negative and unhelpful thoughts.
- Reach out to your friends or family members who help you cope in a positive way.

Seek Help

If you are struggling to cope or stress symptoms will not go away, talk to a professional. SDRMA agencies participating in SDRMA's Health Benefit Program may offer an Employee Assistance Plan. Talk to your employer. The EAP typically provides a few complimentary sessions with a licensed counselor.