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How to rise above workplace stress

By **Jessica Peralta**
SqueezeOC.com

Work is a big part of our lives. Our financial stability, and sometimes even sense of self, depend on it.

Unfortunately, the day-to-day tedium of paperwork, deadline stress, and office drama can take its toll on health and happiness.

"If you work eight hours a day, that equates to a third of your total life," said Pedram Shojai, a licensed acupuncturist and president of Vitality Health & Wellness in Irvine, Calif., which offers a corporate-wellness program to employers. "That's too much time to blunder away by being unhealthy, unhappy and unfit."

There are several aspects of a typical work environment that can be adjusted for an improved day and job life. Here is a compilation of expert advice in four areas related to work life: ergonomics, employee nutrition and fitness, work station organization and design, and relaxation amid stress.

Hopefully, these tips can help your work hours come a bit closer to what your free time is like.

GET ALIGNED AND HARMONIZED

Lower your keyboard. Raise your computer screen. Get a footrest.

Setting up an ergonomically-correct workstation can sometimes seem complicated and can require some trial-and-error. But in the end, it's worth it.

"[Ergonomics] really relates to the relationship between people and their environment," said Gena Kadar, a licensed chiropractor and corporate-wellness director for Orange County Heart Institute and Research Center in Orange, Calif. (ocheart.org). "You want to create a more harmonized environment, so there isn't any sort of conflict, physically. ... At the most basic level ... if you're not comfortable, and you're sitting at your desk eight hours a day, you're not going to be happy."

Here are Kadar's tips:

- Set up your work area so that your hips, knees, and elbows are each bent at least 90 degrees.
- Adjust the height of armrests on your work chair so your elbows can rest on them and your shoulders remain in a relaxed position. Otherwise your shoulders will raise up toward your ears, causing neck and shoulder pain.



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OK, so you can't just levitate to a better place from your desk. But there are steps you can take to relieve stress, including getting organized and eating healthful snacks.

- Use a wrist rest below your keyboard to keep your wrists in a neutral position. Otherwise, you'll have the tendency of lifting your wrists up, which causes pain over time.
- Kadar recommends a gel or memory-foam wrist rest for added comfort.
- Use a yoga ball to sit on instead of an office chair. This will require you to keep your body moving, engage your core muscles and sit upright, which helps keep your spine in its natural S-shape.
- Look for a ball that is the right size for your workstation setup and that says it's "anti-burst."
- Take breaks and change up your movements to prevent repetitive motion strain and pain in the body. Break the routine every 20-30 minutes, even if it's just for 20-30 seconds. Try standing up and stretching whenever you're on the phone.

FIGHT UNHEALTHFUL WORK HABITS

It's 4 p.m., and you've hardly moved except to reach for the in-basket on your desk. Your stomach aches from "sampling" the cheesecake someone left on the snack table, and your legs feel cramped.

"Today many employees are expected to work at a computer most of the day and are under a lot of pressure to produce under stress and deadlines," said local registered dietitian Sharon Hardy, who runs a nutrition-based corporate-wellness business, Focus Wellness Group.

"Often there is not enough time for workers to eat balanced lunches and snacks, as well as no time to get the physical exercise needed to stave off chronic disease such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease."

While it may not always be easy to eat well and be fit, here are some tips and information about classes and meal-delivery services that can help.

- Find a buddy at your workplace to join you in eating healthfully and keeping fit, Hardy said. It's easier to stick to a fitness routine with a like-minded friend.
- Avoid eating the entire meal when having lunch at a restaurant, where most meals are two to three times larger than what you need, Hardy said. If you have to eat at restaurants frequently for your job, educate yourself on ordering healthful meals.
- Eat every three to four hours to keep your blood sugar stable and prevent energy-level fluctuations, Kadar said.
- Keep healthful snacks such as protein bars, almonds and low-fat string cheese around your desk. Bring snacks that don't spoil easily and that contain protein and healthful carbs to help with blood-sugar stability and energy.
- If you have a sweet tooth, swap out the Snickers and cupcakes for sweet fruits such as cherries, grapes and strawberries, said San Clemente, Calif., personal fitness trainer Elaine Reeves Gjonovich.
- Use smaller bowls to reduce the amount of snacks you eat, Gjonovich said. And keep unhealthy snacks far away from your desk.
- Bring comfortable walking shoes to work so you can take short walks during breaks, Gjonovich said.
- Choose exercise over convenience as much as possible. Instead of sending an e-mail to a colleague upstairs, walk up the stairs and talk to her in person, Kadar said. Park in a distant spot in the garage rather than one closer to the door. Walking a little here and there adds up.

LESS MESS, MORE BLISS

Piles of paperwork litter your desk. Yesterday's lunch is stuck to the bottom of the report due to your boss in 10 minutes. You can't find your desk planner to reschedule an appointment you're already late for.

"Good organizational habits are extremely important in the work environment," said Nancy McGivney, professional organizing coach in Orange County.

"If you can't find what you need when you need it, your work suffers, your reputation as a professional suffers, and your stress level can increase. If you are organized, you will be efficient, have good self-esteem, be respected by your peers and managers and are more likely to be successful."

Organization and overall design of your work area should not be ignored in your quest for a happy job life. Here are some tips from an interior designer and a couple of organizing pros.

- Keep things on your desk that you use daily, said Cal State Fullerton instructor Manny Fernandez Jr., who teaches a class called "Using 5S to Organize the Workplace." Things you need occasionally (once a week, perhaps) should be off your desk but stored in an easy-access place. If you have things that are rarely or never used, get rid of them or store them where they're not taking up space.
- Get a notebook specifically for keeping a daily dated log of telephone notes, numbers, and other important information for future reference and to verify details, McGivney said.
- Take 15 minutes at the end of each day to clear your desk and prioritize your to-do list for the next day, McGivney said. Refill any office supplies, and if you're a Post-it Notes user, staple all of the notes to one piece of paper (in order of importance) and place the paper in your "hot file."
- Use color strategically in your work area to counteract stress and induce creativity, said Rachel Hulan, owner of Path Design in Santa Ana, an interior design firm with a focus on "green" design.

Light blue and pink can help relieve anxiety, and purple may help stimulate creativity.

Greens, particularly softer blue-greens such as moss and sage, can make time seem to pass more quickly, as well as remind you of the outdoors.

Avoid yellow and orange if you're trying to lose weight. They've been known to induce hunger.

- Add pictures to your work area, Hulan said, not just the standard photos of your spouse, kids and/or pets, but also large images of where you would most like to be: a favorite vacation spot or an exotic place you'd like to visit one day.

Hang the image where you can easily see it when you need some mental and physical relief from staring at a computer screen all day.

- Get a few air-purifying plants such as dracaena, bromeliad, orchids and gerbera daisies for your work area, Hulan said. These plants can help brighten up a work space and help remove common air pollutants such as formaldehyde, benzene and trichloroethylene.

BREATHE AND BOND

Your neck and shoulders are knotted and painful. You've been losing sleep over your latest project. And you're desperate for a vacation.

In about six seconds, you'll be bursting from all the stress.

"As we know from science and research, stress-related disorders account for about 60-to-90 percent of office visits to physicians," said Ryan Seay, clinical psychologist at The Center for Optimal Health in Irvine.

"Chronic stress activates the fight-or-flight response, which is known to reduce immune-system functioning and contributes to a majority of illnesses. Learning to increase the relaxation response balances the mind and body, resulting in a healthier, happier person."

So relax ... with these tips.

- Get chummy with co-workers through social activities outside work, Seay said. Recent research has shown that people with strong family and friendship ties are generally happier, he said.
- If you're having trouble with someone at work, try communicating with that person first, Kadar said. Tell that person your feelings and hear him or her out. If all else fails, limit interaction.
- Be positive, even if you don't know why you should, Seay said. Having a positive attitude about life and self is a great way to create luck and opportunity.
- When faced with structural challenges at work such as wage freezes and layoffs, get proactive instead of angry, Seay said. Know you did the best job you could, accept any changes, and quickly shift into finding new opportunities to change a situation you're unsatisfied with. Avoid catastrophic thinking, such as: "I'll never get another job."
- Breathe yourself into a meditative state. When feeling stressed, take five minutes to sit up straight and breathe down into your lower abdomen, Shojai said. When you catch your mind wandering, acknowledge it and return to the breathing.
- Quit worrying about things you can't control, Kadar said. Ask yourself, "Can I change the outcome of this situation?" If you can't, there's no point to stress over it. If you can, take steps to make the change.
- Let go of perfectionism, Kadar said. For many of us, everything has to be done flawlessly; sometimes that's not necessary.

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