

Resilience under pressure: six methods for managing stressful work experiences

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Work can be a stressful place. For example, stress can be a regular part of life for employees who have to deal with unhappy customers or work in physically dangerous conditions. Stress can also come from organizational change. Change creates uncertainty, uncertainty creates risk of failure or loss, and this sense of risk generates stress. This stress creates anxiety and tensions which [negatively impacts employee health, performance, and creativity](#). This in turn creates more stress, resulting in a downward spiral that may ultimately lead to employee burnout, turnover, or job failure.

Companies are often unable to shield employees from potentially stressful work experiences. But they can help employees respond and manage these experiences in a way that limits the debilitating effects of stress. This comes from doing things to enhance employee resilience. [Resilience](#) reflects a person's ability to respond to difficult or uncertain situations in a way that reduces the harmful effects of stress. The following are six things companies can do to develop and support employee resilience.

Encourage effective coping behaviors. People often respond to stressful situations with behaviors that over time make stress even worse. For example, working long hours and failing to get adequate sleep or exercise. Or using caffeine or sugary food as a source of energy to cope with work demands. Companies should encourage employees to engage in effective coping behaviors such as maintaining good sleep patterns, providing healthy food options in the workplace, and giving employees time and access to resources enabling regular physical exercise.

Teach employees to use cognitive behavioral therapy techniques. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) refers to a range of empirically validated psychological techniques that increase resilience to stressful situations. It includes reframing problems to make them more manageable, putting issues in perspective, identifying and addressing root causes of stress, and providing self-coaching to increase self-confidence. CBT methods are learned through practice and repetition, much in the same way you might learn to swing a tennis racquet or perform a dance step. Once these techniques are mastered, they have been shown to have [significant positive results](#) on people's management of stressful work experiences. CBT is particularly valuable helping employees who work in high pressure or emotionally challenging job settings.

Encourage strong social networks. People are better able to cope with stress when they feel that they are part of group or team. [Strong social networks](#) help protect against the harmful effects of stress. Companies should support team development and encourage employees to think of themselves as not having to face challenges alone. It is worth noting that organizational restructurings often create significant stress because they introduce change and disrupt social networks at the same time.

Show employee appreciation. People are better able to deal with stress when they feel the company [values their contributions](#) and has confidence in their abilities. Recognition is particularly important when people are under pressure. When we are stressed we tend to be hyper sensitive to what is going wrong. Leaders need to call out what is also going right. This does not mean ignoring or downplaying challenges. It means giving employees a sense that what they are doing is taking them in the right direction, and that efforts they are making to overcome challenges are being noticed.

Demonstrate supportive leadership behavior. Empathy from leaders helps employees deal with stressful situations. This is particularly important when employees are struggling with stress caused by conflict between work and non-work demands. Leaders should acknowledge challenges employees face when trying to balance work with other life obligations. Ideally leaders will role model effective work-life balance behaviors, sharing examples where they gave priority to non-work obligations or health needs. For example, intentionally unplugging from email on weekends, scheduling time during the workday to walk or exercise, or leaving work early to participate in a family activity.

Protect employee self-esteem. Stressed individuals, especially people in positions of power, sometimes lash out in frustration with criticisms about employee commitment, intelligence, or competence. [Abusive or demeaning leadership behavior rarely inspires employees to perform better](#), and increases stress levels within the organization. Companies should have a “zero tolerance” philosophy toward individuals who intentionally attack or undermine the self-worth of others. Criticizing people’s behavior or ideas is okay, although there are definitely right and wrong ways to do it. But calling people lazy, stupid or incompetent or coercing them with threats about their employment status should be grounds for dismissal regardless of a person’s leadership level.

We cannot avoid encountering stress at work. But we can avoid many of the negative outcomes of stress. The key lies in taking steps to build work cultures that enable and support employee resilience.