

Managing Workplace Stress and Best Wellness Practices: Preventing Burnout and Having a Healthier Approach to Life!

By Michael Lewis

The last couple of years have been amongst the most stressful times in our lives. With the ongoing uncertainty and unpredictability of the road ahead, stress seems destined to remain a bigger part and “partner” in our lives.

Canadians of all walks of life and of all ages, from the youngest children to our seniors, have reported that their mental health has suffered through the course of the pandemic. And those who have continued to work, either in our traditional workplaces or from home are feeling burned out, exhausted, worried, frustrated, overworked, perhaps in some cases, somewhat unappreciated. Additionally, our personal lives and time away from the rigors of work are also filled with various family commitments and obligations. Weekends seem too busy, and precious vacation time, if we can get it, too short.

Also, our careers often become for some prioritized over many other aspects of our lives such as our relationships, time with friends and family, our rest and recreation, and even our mental, physical, and emotional health. Effectively managing stress and seeking the right balance between all the demands of your career and the desire to have a happy, healthy, and fulfilling personal life remains the biggest challenge that many people face. In reality, we’ve all languished through the past two years, and we are stressed and we know it.

Managing Stress in Your Workplace

So, when we turn our attention to how to manage stress in the workplace, the solutions must begin where the first and most important changes can be implemented. Simply put, managers and supervisors are best positioned to address and make significant improvements in mitigating workplace stress. By leading meetings with their teams and departments and openly discussing stress in the workplace they can and with their team's solutions, look at realistic ways to reduce and address stress. By implementing stress reduction strategies, it soon becomes clear to everyone that the world of work can become a better work environment for all...but it takes a cooperative and collaborative approach to make that happen.

It is critically important for people in a workplace setting to be able to communicate what they need in terms of stress supports such as addressing and reducing workplace noise and minimizing interruptions and distractions. Everyone is a stakeholder in workplace stress management and mitigation.

By reducing stress, not only are you able to create a better and more inviting working environment but numerous studies show that both individual and team productivity improves, often quite significantly. The bottom line often is the main beneficiary of managing and reducing stress. Companies all over the world are investing more and more in creating a more peaceful and respectful workplace, one that is more sensitive and responsive to the needs of the people who work there. Another benefit is managing stress is the increased levels of manager and employee retention. People who feel treasured are far more likely to stay where they feel appreciated and efforts to keep stress managed send a positive and welcome message.

Most importantly there must be boundaries that are mutually agreed upon by all. Established boundaries ensure that all the stress-inducing elements of toxic behaviours such as workplace gossip, conflict, disputes, and bullying are not tolerated and are quickly and firmly addressed. Workplaces need to be a place based on well-defined core values such as respect, kindness, tolerance, inclusion, acceptance, and that of everyone’s space...is a safe, positive space. Respected values, boundaries and defined company policies are important tools to achieve just that.

Managing Stress When Working from Home

With many of us working from home or in a hybrid model of splitting time at work and home, we have discovered the benefits and pitfalls of each including the stressful juggling act of trying to have a work/life balance. During the heart of the pandemic, work at home parents discovered the challenge of being educators and helping their children learn from home when schools were closed, all the while trying to keep up with the demands and daily requirements of their careers. Fortunately, with the reopening of schools, employees working from home can reset and refocus on their daily work demands but there are other stressors too.

Just like in traditional workplaces, working from home too requires us to have established boundaries. Boundaries begin in conversations with partners/ spouses and families so start by talking to your family members about your current needs and expectations and how they might be going forward so they know what space and time you need to do your work and how best to support and respect your wishes.

To really be productive and minimize distractions, it is important to create a comfortable and private home office space. Working from a kitchen table or on the couch might sound like a convenient way to work but simply put, over time it really isn't practical. If you are working from home and plan to for quite a while, and surveys during the pandemic show, that the majority of homebound employees prefer it to working in the old office environment...for a wide range of reasons, then you need to set up a modest home office, a room with a door and one that looks and feels like a proper office. A home office will also compartmentalize your working from home experience so that you can "leave" your office and rejoin your personal life without the commute home.

People working from home for the first time because of the pandemic report that they often find themselves working differently than in the regulated environment of the office. They discover that they work slightly longer days but can take more breaks, they work different hours, sometimes returning to "work" later in the evening to check and respond to email or get some work done. Furthermore, they work through mealtimes and even on weekends. This all said it should become clear why we need to have clear boundaries in place so the lines that divide our home and work lives don't become blurred.

Keep your working from home experience stress minimized by taking breaks, eating meals with family, resisting the temptation to "just check on something" or get caught up. The convenience of a home office is great but when you think about it, you'd never drive to the office in the evening to get work done or respond to emails.

When working from home, you will soon discover that it is more about working smart and focused rather than hard and distracted. For example, you might reduce the stress of working from home by being a little more flexible and creative with your work schedule. When possible, try working when there are fewer family distractions, when your energy level is higher, when you feel generally more focused or when you feel most productive and inspired.

You might find that peak times of productivity will be different than when you worked in a company office environment. Some working from home can often discover that working an hour in the evening, when meetings and phone calls aren't a distraction, can be a very productive time. Conversely, there are those who prefer to work early in the morning before the household awakens. Whatever works for you and suits your productive energies will often be revealed through experimentation. Working from home and working alone is often a big adjustment so expect it to be a learning experience including learning to appreciate the positives and address the negatives.

Embracing Your Wellness, A Very Personal Obligation!

All too often it seems that many of us do not the value and importance of good personal health and the full spectrum of wellness until it is too late, or we have no other choice but to address it.

I've come to recognize that there are really ten essential elements of personal wellness, any of which are important to achieving a healthier and more fulfilling life, but when combined and interconnected harmoniously, they become the foundation for true personal wellness.

Physical Health / Nutrition

The first and perhaps most important step to personal wellness lies in a commitment (or a re-commitment) to investing in your personal health such as ensuring regular exercise (that you enjoy), and a thoughtful intelligent diet with a focus on eating with nutrition in mind. We would be wise to see ourselves as being worthy of self-maintenance so we can take on everything else in life.

Emotional Health

It's OK to not feel OK especially after all we've been through so taking time to practice self-care with particular attention to your emotional needs is vitally important. It is important to have people that you trust to talk to and that you have supportive resources, either through work or self-discovered in your community. If we are not happy and feeling like how we feel and deserve to feel, just remember that you are not alone, there are resources, and your wellness depends on you connecting and utilizing them.

Financial Wellbeing

So many Canadians struggle to make it from paycheque to paycheque. To achieve a better sense of financial wellbeing often begins in personally analyzing your spending habits, making better choices, looking to build your credit rating, and thinking about your future.

Social Connections, Healthy Relationships, and Sense of Belonging

The paradox of personal wellbeing is that to achieve it, we need other people in our lives and that means having healthy, mutually beneficial, and fulfilling relationships. Wellness is about feeling that we belong, that we are part of a community of friends and family, and that we feel valued.

Career Wellbeing

As our careers are a big part of our lives. It is a journey worthy of your time to find and seek satisfaction in what you do and in realizing that you can make a difference can bring with it a feeling of contentment that carries into every other aspect of your life. Those who are happy at work, are often happy at home and vice versa.

Adequate Sleep and Rest

To take on the challenges of our day-to-day lives we all require sufficient sleep so to wake rested and prepared. Without adequate sleep and mental and emotional rest, we will live a life battling stress.

Recreation and Rejuvenation

Wellness beyond ensuring physical exercise requires us to have recreational pursuits including sports, active hobbies, travel, and even creative arts. When we have an outlet for our competitive and creative side, we discover life's pleasures.

Connection To Nature

Oliver Wendall Holmes once remarked, "That the best thing for the inside, is the outside". The natural world has the power to connect us to a more grounded and sensible reality. Wellness is enhanced with the sun on your face and fresh air in your lungs.

Peace Of Mind and Mindfulness

A rested and peaceful mind provides us a quiet place to consider our thoughts and to plan and evaluate our road ahead. Meditation is one such way that can help calm our thoughts and allow us to connect with ourselves.

Passion and A Sense of Purpose

I have always thought that the purpose of life is to find and enjoy a life of purpose. Wellness can find a path into your life if especially when can embrace your passions, interests, hobbies, and shared life experiences with loved ones and friends.

At some point in your career, you'll decide your life and your personal and emotional health and wellness at and beyond work is important, has become a priority, and that you deserve, like so many others, a happier and healthier life. And once you learn to examine how stress affects you, your work, and your personal and family life then it becomes a matter of planning and acting on how you can best mitigate your daily stressors, at work, at home, and throughout your life.

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