

WORKPLACE STRESS

COURSE OUTLINE

- **Stress is something that we all face.**
 - It can show up when it's time to pay the bills, or we can't find the right tool for the job that we're doing.
 - It can come in the form of a memo from the boss, a bad set of spark plugs, or a call from our children's school.
 - Even good things can lead to stress (new parents find that out in a hurry when they discover the "joy" of three a.m. feedings and diaper duty).

- **Having some stress in our lives is natural.**
 - But too much stress can be detrimental to both our physical and emotional well-being.
 - Fortunately there are ways that we can combat and reduce the stress that inevitably occurs.

- **We all know the feeling.**
 - Your muscles tense up.
 - You get an adrenalin rush.
 - You start to sweat.
 - Your heart's pounding.
 - Your stomach tightens.
 - Your blood pressure rises.

- **"Getting excited" under pressure is an old survival instinct, and a successful one.**

- **These changes can be alarming at times, but in what are called "positive stress" situations they're only temporary.**
 - Once the crisis is over, our body relaxes and "resets" itself to "normal", getting ready for the next challenge that comes down the pike.

- **In fact "positive stress" is necessary to daily living.**
 - It can help us to buckle down and see things through.

- **But "negative stress" is not so healthy.**
 - With "negative stress" we feel a lot of the same things that we feel with "positive stress", but with a big difference, with negative stress they are not temporary.
- **"Negative stress" never lets you relax, even after the incident that triggered it goes away.**
 - So it feels like things just keep "piling up", and you're unable to catch your breath and "recharge your batteries".
- **Unpleasant? Absolutely. But worse, it's unhealthy.**
 - Over the long haul, negative stress can mean migraines, high blood pressure, ulcers... even a heart attack.
- **But all is not lost, and we are not powerless!**
 - We can combat negative stress, and we can do it through a three-step approach.
- **The first step is to determine what causes your stress. That's how you know where you need to begin making changes.**
 - Step two is to use relaxation techniques to help drain away the physical and mental manifestations of stress.
 - The third step is to develop a positive attitude about life, which will make all of this easier!
- **You probably don't have much difficulty identifying situations at home and on the job that cause you a lot of stress.**
- **But if you want some reliable physical indicators, achy muscles, headaches and indigestion are good ones.**
 - When you're hit with these, stress may be the culprit, and how you're reacting to things may be the cause.
- **Let's say traffic gets you crazy because it makes you late for work.**
 - When you're stuck in gridlock, you feel like your neck's in a vise and you've got jets of steam coming out of your ears.
 - What can you do? Try "erasing" the problem.

- **Make a change!**
 - Leave for work a little earlier.
 - Carpooling or taking public transportation could be solutions.
 - Or you might benefit from taking a time management course, so you're not always arriving at work at the "last minute".

- **Then there are the big things, major changes in your life that force you to confront new situations. These can be very stressful.**
 - Perhaps you've been transferred to a new facility in another state.
 - Starting over can be a real challenge.

- **There's finding a place to live, learning your way around town, getting to know an entirely new set of coworkers, and making new friends.**

- **But you can lessen the impact of these changes.**
 - Simply focus on the little, familiar things that have always brought you pleasure.
 - This can help to keep stress to manageable levels.

- **If you enjoy cooking, prepare some of your favorite recipes.**
 - If you're a runner or you enjoy walking, start doing a circuit around your new neighborhood.
 - If you're a movie buff, treat yourself to some of your old favorites at home, or find out what's playing nearby.

- **It's not so important what you do, but that you enjoy it, which will relieve your stress at the same time.**

- **But even with these techniques, problems can sometimes grow to what feel like unmanageable levels, a condition called "stress overload".**

- **In these situations, you may have so many things to think about that you lose sight of what you should deal with first, and even how to handle it.**

- **At times like this you need to remember that there are some things in life you simply can't control.**
 - So be realistic.
 - Eliminate them from your "must fix" list.

- **Don't put unreasonable pressure on yourself, and don't try to do more than you're capable of.**
 - That's just setting yourself up for failure, and even greater stress.
 - You can't do better than your best!
- **Don't punish yourself for mistakes either, learn from them instead.**
 - And don't take criticism personally.
 - It's usually meant to help you do a better job.
- **One thing that can help you handle stress is learning to relax when it appears.**
 - Stress can not only tie your muscles up in knots, it can also affect the very way you breathe.
 - Your breaths can become shallow and rapid, almost panicky.
- **You can control this type of reaction to stress by doing simple deep breathing exercises.**
 - Fold your hands in your lap and sit up straight.
 - Slowly take a deep breath through your nose, relaxing your abdominal muscles so that your lungs can fill freely.
 - Then, tighten your lips and blow the breath gradually back out between them.
- **Make a habit of doing deep breathing three or four times throughout the day, or whenever you feel stress.**
 - You'll find that it really can help!
- **Another way "negative stress" can wear you down is by making it hard for you to think.**
 - You can fight this effectively by learning to clear your mind.
- **Here's how. First, loosen your collar and take off your shoes. Then do some deep breathing.**
 - Once you find your natural rhythm, think about something that is soothing, like a day in the mountains, or a nice warm bath.
- **Ignore distractions and maintain your concentration. Be patient with yourself.**
 - This technique takes a little practice.
 - But as you get better at it you'll feel better physically too.
- **Doing this for just five minutes a day can give you more clarity and energy all day long, and free up your mind to meet that next challenge.**

- **But relaxing mentally is sometimes only half the battle. Fortunately, there are techniques that you can use to relax yourself physically, as well.**
 - First, do your deep breathing and mind clearing.
 - Then focus on some part of your body... your arm, for example.
 - By imagining that your arm is growing warmer, heavier, and looser, you will gradually relax it.
 - Then move on to the other parts of your body and relax each of them in turn.
 - If you can unite your mind and your body in overcoming "negative stress", you will feel better inside and out.

- **Feeling strained and achy is a classic early sign of stress.**
 - Relieving these aches and pains can do a great deal to help reduce the stress that you're feeling.
 - You can combat this muscle tension by doing some stretching exercises.

- **First, let's look at one for the neck and shoulders.**
 - Carefully turn your head to one side.
 - Hold this for a three count, then turn the other way for another count of three.
 - Then, slowly dip your chin down to your chest and pull your head back.
 - Repeat this exercise five to ten times.

- **Here's one for the upper back.**
 - Pull the wrist of one of your arms across to the opposite shoulder.
 - Hold it for a count of five, then repeat it with the other arm.

- **Incorporating these techniques into "mini-breaks" that you take throughout the day will go a long way toward fighting off "stress overload".**

- **"Attitude" also has a lot to do with how much we feel stressed.**
 - You need to beware of developing negative attitudes about anything that you're involved with.
 - They just magnify any stress that might exist.
 - Instead, strive to adopt a positive attitude and be optimistic about your life.

- **Start empowering yourself by thinking, "I can do it."**
 - Decide to believe it, and you can often make it true (it can even help to say it out loud!).

- **Tell yourself this before dealing with any challenging situation.**
 - Rehearse in your mind how you'll handle the problem.
 - Preparation can definitely help to build your confidence.

- **You need to be organized about how you approach your tasks as well.**
 - Trying to do everything at once is not only impossible, it's a powerful stress-builder.

- **So draw up a checklist, establish priorities, and take care of them one task at a time.**
 - Include alternatives for parts of the plan that you think might change.
 - Create options, so something that you didn't anticipate doesn't derail you.

- **Check off each item on your list as you accomplish it, and give yourself credit when credit is due.**
 - Congratulate yourself on the progress that you make!

- **You may also know other people who have triumphed over stress themselves, and not even be aware of it.**
 - Don't be afraid to ask your coworkers, friends and family about how they have learned to handle stress.
 - They may surprise you with how helpful their suggestions can be.

- **Your lifestyle can have a lot to do with how much stress you feel.**
 - Moving toward a more positive lifestyle can definitely help to keep your stress levels down.
 - Staying healthy and "in shape" improves your ability to manage all types of challenges.

- **An aerobic workout strengthens your heart and lungs.**
 - Exercises like jogging, biking, or basketball is what you're looking for.
 - Anything where you'll work up a sweat and increase your heart rate for at least half an hour at a time, three or four times a week.

- **When your workout is done, reward yourself by shifting out of high gear.**
 - You will have earned the right to slow down and relax.
 - Make sure you do it.

- **Getting enough sleep is important too!**
 - If your body doesn't get the rest it needs, your energy level will take a nosedive, and so will your ability to handle stress.

- **Physical problems are something else that can magnify stress.**
 - Good health relieves it.
 - Make a habit of getting regular check-ups from your doctor, and pay attention to what they say!

- **One thing the doctor may suggest is to work on improving your eating habits.**
 - Good nutrition and a low salt diet will both help to strengthen your defenses against "negative stress".

- **Finally, remember that simply talking about your problems can be one of the most effective tools for combating stress.**
 - If using a friend or coworker as a "sounding-board" isn't enough, get some counseling.

- **There are probably resources available right in your community.**
 - You can find them by doing an online search for "counseling services" in your ZIP code.
 - Or talk to your doctor.

- **Your company may offer confidential counseling services, as well.**
 - Sometimes simply asking for help is the best course of action.

- **Stress is not something you have to live with, not when there are so many practical and effective ways to combat it.**

*** * * SUMMARY * * ***

- **Identify the situations that cause you stress, then work to eliminate them by making positive changes in your life.**
- **Practice relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, clearing your mind, and "positive imaging".**
- **Do stretching exercises to loosen tense muscles.**
- **Maintain a positive attitude about life.**
- **Work toward adopting a healthier lifestyle.**
- **And finally, learn to talk about your problems.**
- **Stress happens. That's life... and that's work. But you don't have to let it take over! Put your "stress-fighting" skills to work today. The sooner you begin, the sooner you'll be happier, healthier... and stress-free!**