

FootHOLD

AN ENGINEER'S APPROACH TO WELLBEING



BLOG 15 – REDUCING WORKPLACE STRESS (PART 3 OF 4)

My last blog unpacked the components of an effective stress management strategy, and included three types of intervention approaches that I've tried, tested and found to make a real and consistent difference to engineers like you and I. In part three of my four-part special on reducing workplace stress, I'll suggest solutions that can help reduce short-term stress.

SOLUTIONS FOR SHORT-TERM STRESS

If you've read Blogs 13 & 14, you will already know that a certain amount of workplace pressure is inevitable. You'll also recognise that helpful levels of pressure can keep us focused and motivated for the day, week and tasks ahead, without compromising our health & wellbeing. However, on occasion our pressure levels can spike and our threat response system may activate. This is particularly likely if we're involved in a heated conflict or challenging meeting. Stress hormones, such as adrenaline, can be released by your body and you'll likely experience a range of sensations such as sweating, nausea, shaking (see Blog 13 for further symptoms) or an inability to concentrate or to use fine motor skills.

INTERVENTION APPROACH 1 - MANAGE THE SITUATION

Knowing how to avoid and minimise stress can make a real difference in your life. And whilst it's not sensible to avoid every situation & task that causes stress, you may be surprised at the number of stressful situations & tasks you can alter, minimise or remove completely. Here's a few actions you can consider taking:

EXPRESS YOUR VIEWS: If something or someone is bothering you at work, be assertive and communicate your concerns in a respectful way. When we don't voice our feelings, resentment can build and our stress levels may increase. By taking action, we increase the chances of making positive change happen. Sometimes, people are simply unaware that they're actions are causing you stress until you actually speak with them directly.



AVOID BIOLOGICAL STRESS: Reduce your caffeine intake to prevent activating stress hormones. Lower your intake of refined sugar products, such as chocolate bars, sugary drinks etc, to prevent energy slumps associated with insulin spikes. Lastly, remove or reduce your intake of added salt, nicotine and anything else that can contribute to biological stress during the working day.

ALTER YOUR ENVIRONMENT: Avoid clutter by clearing your immediate workspace. Avoid unnecessary distractions by limiting sources of noise, relocating your workspace or by using earbuds where needed. Always avoid irritants, sources of dust, solvents and use PPE where needed.

ALTER LARGE TASKS: Break big tasks and projects into smaller chunks of work and focus on completing one step at a time to prevent feeling overwhelmed.

DELEGATE TASKS: If you're feeling under pressure and there are colleagues who could take care of certain tasks, let them. Let go of any need to control everything, all of the time.



MINIMISE CONTACT: If someone or a group of people consistently cause your stress levels to rise at work, try to limit the amount of time you spend in their company until your overall pressure levels drop to a more manageable level.

INTERVENTION APPROACH 2 - MANAGE PERCEPTION

When we're unable to change a situation that causes stress, we can still change our relationship to it. By shifting perception, expectations and attitude, we can adapt to stressful situations and regain our sense of control. We can also develop new skills that make the same task easier to complete in the future. Here are some suggestions;



FIND A BENEFIT: You've no doubt heard the phrase 'there's a silver lining to every cloud'. Whilst this is simplistic and little absolute, we can normally discover a benefit in every situation. So, the next time you're in a stressful situation, try asking yourself what you can develop or learn whilst getting through it. When you discover personal benefits, you'll feel different about the situation and feel less stressed.

DEVELOP REFRAMING SKILLS: Most situations can be viewed from either a negative or positive perspective. The perspective we hold doesn't change a situation, but it does change how we feel and that can instantly reduce our stress levels. So instead of getting angry about a broken laptop, see it as an opportunity to organise your files, clear your workspace or even carryout site inspection whilst waiting for that new laptop to arrive.

CONSIDER COMPROMISING: If you're in the middle of a heated workplace debate, consider compromising and attempting to reach middle ground. This sounds incredibly basic but you would be surprised at how many times this option goes unnoticed. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Doing so will allow you to let go of anger, frustration and resentment that can develop into stressful situations.



UTILISE THE CIA METHOD: Sometimes we accidentally waste time and energy worrying about situations we simply can't control. Instead, use the CIA Method (see Foothold Blog 4) to maintain perspective and quickly recognise what you are able to control, influence or what you need to accept.

INTERVENTION APPROACH 3 - MANAGE YOUR SYMPTOMS

Unfortunately, we can't avoid, minimise or adapt to every situation that causes stress. Some sources of stress are simply unavoidable; the current Coronavirus pandemic being the most pertinent example. When it comes to dealing with the symptoms associated with short-term stress, what we really need are instant or fast coping techniques. After all, you can't press a pause button, enter the lotus position and meditate your stress away in the midst of a heated meeting. Here's what you can do to relieve stress fast;

CYCLE YOUR SENSES: You can quickly relax your body and focus your mind by grounding yourself in your senses. If you internally name eight things you can see, six things you can hear, four things you can feel, two things you can smell and the taste in your mouth, you'll quickly return to the present moment and find your stress levels dropping.

SQUARE AWAY STRESS: Envisage drawing a square in either a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. As you imagine drawing a vertical line upwards, breath in for a count of four seconds, then hold your breath for the next four seconds as you draw a horizontal line. As you draw a vertical line downwards, exhale fully to the count of four seconds, then hold your breath again as you complete the square by drawing a final horizontal line. Repeat this breathing and visualisation exercise at least four times but aim for ten complete squares where possible.

If you're in a busy environment, simply draw the square in your imagination whilst regulating your breath. Alternatively, if you're at your work desk, you could use a pencil to draw a square on a piece of paper without attracting too much attention. If you want to deepen the experience, try adding a colour to the lines you're tracing in your mind's eye, whilst using your index finger to trace the shape in front of where you stand or sit (see associated blog for a demonstration). By doing this quick exercise, you'll synchronise your mind, breath and body, which will release tension and stress fast.

PHOTO POWER: Viewing a picture of happy memory or future destination is a very quick way temporarily release pressure, tension and stress. So, why not consider carrying a cherished picture in your wallet/purse, your phone or even placing a picture on your desk if you're an office-based engineer. Similar to the previous exercise, engage as many senses as you can whilst gazing at the picture, and feel your tension naturally dissolve.

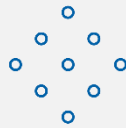
RELEASE MUSCLE TENSION: Clench both fists and curl your toes as tightly as possible. Really try to focus all your energy and tension into those body parts and hold for the count of five seconds. Then gently release both fists, your curled toes and let that experience of muscular relaxation spread throughout your entire body. Repeat if needed, then take a large sigh and simultaneously drop your shoulders.



SUMMARY

Helpful levels of pressure will keep you focused and motivated for the day ahead, without compromising your health & wellbeing. Peak short-term pressure can release stress hormones and cause you to sweat, shake, get irritated, feel sick or negatively affect your ability to concentrate or to use fine motor skills. Knowing how to avoid and minimise peak, short-term stress will make a real difference in the workplace and your life in general. Within the three intervention approaches mentioned, there are quick ways to alter, adapt or cope with stressful situations. Regardless of how much stress you're experiencing at work, always try to deal with challenges head on before using a coping technique.

If you've found this blog interesting and would like to discuss it further, please contact us on hello@myfoothold.org or call on +44 (0)20 7344 5498



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