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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



Fostering Psychological Safety at Work for Innovation, Learning, and Inclusion

In an ideal world, people would speak up at work when they have a good idea or think a bad decision is being made. The best ideas would rise to the top and be acted on. Employees would feel comfortable raising well-meaning views that differ from those of their colleagues or managers. New information and ideas would be welcomed, even when they challenge the team's priorities or the organization's strategy. Varying thoughts and opinions would be discussed openly and civilly. People would feel safe at work being who they are rather than striving to act and appear more like the people around them. These are all characteristics of an organization or work team that embraces *psychological safety*.

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is the feeling among members of a team that it's safe to share thoughts, opinions, and ideas freely, with the expectation of being heard and without fear of being embarrassed, snubbed, or punished. Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, introduced the concept of psychological safety as an element in team and organizational dynamics. Her research, and the research of others, has shown how a lack of psychological safety in teams and organizations can stifle innovation and lead to poor decisions, sometimes with disastrous results. In an environment of psychological safety, on the other hand, open conversation and experimentation are encouraged. New challenges are faced as learning opportunities. People are appreciated for what's unique and special about them and for the diversity of their views and outlooks.

Why Psychological Safety Is Hard to Achieve

One of Edmondson's key insights is that a reluctance to speak up and share ideas is not a matter of character—the difference between extroverted and introverted people, for example. It has more to do with the way people interact in groups. As she explains in her 2019 book, *The Fearless Organization*, it's natural for people to "want to look smart, capable, or helpful in the eyes of others." People don't ask questions because they don't want to seem ignorant. They don't talk about their mistakes or failures because they don't want to

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



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appear incompetent. They don't bring up new ideas or raise objections to bad ones because they don't want to come across as disruptive.

Because of these human tendencies, it takes intentional management and a guided effort by all team members to build an environment of psychological safety—one where innovation, sound decision-making, and diversity of people and thought can flourish.

What Psychological Safety Is Not

Psychological safety is not the same as ease or comfort. It requires engagement and candor, which can be hard work and may at times be uncomfortable. It requires mutual respect among team members, which can take time to build. In the best of worlds, psychological safety will be accompanied by high performance standards and expectations, with appropriate training, coaching, and tools. For real success, managers will lead in ways that motivate employees to give their best while cultivating psychological safety so that all team members learn, grow, and contribute their ideas and unique viewpoints.

How to Foster Psychological Safety at Work

Psychological safety is grounded in the interpersonal dynamics of teams, so your role as a manager and team member is critical. Here are some ways to foster psychological safety in your work environment

As a Manager, Supervisor, or Leader of a Project Team

- **Reframe failures, errors, and setbacks as learning opportunities.** Encourage team members to notice, explore, and discuss examples of when things go wrong. Show how that examination can lead to process improvements, the identification of training needs, new ideas, and other benefits.
- **Let all voices be heard.** Pay attention to who speaks up or adds to online exchanges and who doesn't. Provide information before meetings, and set the expectation that people review it and come with their thoughts. Ask questions to draw out the thoughts and ideas of everyone on the team before weighing in with your own views. Manage discussions so that the people who tend to dominate the team's discussions don't always speak first or take up the most time.
- **Show your appreciation when people share different perspectives.** Thank them for bringing up new ideas or raising concerns that hadn't been considered, even when those slow down the decision-making process. Push yourself and the team to give serious consideration to views that differ from your own.
- **Demonstrate humility and curiosity.** Show that you don't have all the answers, especially in complex and changing situations, that you make mistakes at times, and that you are open to new information. Doing this honestly, as the situation demands, encourages engagement in problem solving and idea generation. It also helps your team members feel safer in discussing their own mistakes and admitting to what they don't know.
- **Communicate purpose and meaning.** Motivate team members by explaining the "why" of the work they're

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engaged in. Help them see how their work affects customers, contributes to the team's and organization's objectives, and connects to their own values. A bigger-picture understanding is not only motivating, it also opens the door for all employees to contribute more significant ideas and suggestions.

- **Help demonstrate organizational transparency.** As top leaders share information about strategy, sustainability, current market conditions, and outlooks for the future, share that information with your team, to the extent you are allowed to. Allow time for discussion to answer any questions your team might have. If you don't know the answers to their questions, admit that you don't know and do your best to find out.
- **Ask good questions to spark productive conversation.** Asking a good question can get people thinking about things in new ways and discussing things that might otherwise be ignored. "Why are we doing this?" "What could we be doing better?" "What are we missing?" "Who has a different view?" and "What other information would help us?" are all examples of these kinds of open-ended but directed and productive questions. Follow-up questions are important, too, especially when new ideas and perspectives are raised—questions like, "What leads you to think that?" or "How might that help?"
- **Encourage ongoing learning.** Manage your team in ways that encourage collaboration and the sharing of skills. Give team members opportunities, with appropriate coaching and training, to stretch their abilities by taking on new tasks and learning new skills. Accept errors as part of the learning process, and structure work to minimize the risk of errors that could affect customers.
- **Encourage team members to get to know and appreciate each other as people.** There's always more to people than what they present in their work roles. Make time for and facilitate conversations and activities that enable people to get to know each other. To the extent that people are willing to share, encourage team members to learn what's unique about their colleagues, what's important to them, what their hopes are, and what their experiences and lives are like outside of work.
- **Encourage team members to seek help and support when they need it.** Another aspect of psychological safety is feeling safe in admitting to needs and asking for help. When team members need help understanding work processes, provide coaching and encourage team members to help each other. When a team member is facing a personal or emotional problem, encourage them to seek help from the employee support program. Send the message that it's not a sign of weakness to seek help, but a sign of courage and strength.

As a Team Member or Work Colleague

- **Ask questions.** When you don't understand something, push past your natural reluctance to appear uninformed and ask for a clearer explanation. "How is that to be done?" or "Why are we doing this?" Ask questions, too, to draw out the thoughts of quieter team members and those who may be hesitant to share different viewpoints.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



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- **Listen.** When others say things that surprise you or reveal a new perspective, listen to what they have to say. Ask questions to be sure you understand.
- **Learn and grow.** Stretch yourself. Volunteer for new assignments. Learn new skills. Find out what your colleagues can teach you and how you might help them in their work.
- **Be humble.** Admit when you don't know something or when you've made a mistake. Ask for help and guidance when you need it.
- **Help your colleagues.** When others admit to mistakes or ask for help in learning a new skill or dealing with a challenge, help them if you can. Model the help you'd like others to give you when you need it. Encourage colleagues to seek help from the employee support program for personal or emotional problems and challenges.
- **Get to know your work colleagues.** The diversity of backgrounds, perspectives, and personalities on your team might surprise you. Take time as you work together to get to know them as people. Share breaks with different members of your team to get to know them better. Find out, if they are willing to share, what's important to them, what their lives are like outside of work, and how they prefer to work and collaborate.

For More Information

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- Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). (2022, January 15). What is psychological safety at work? How leaders can build psychologically safe workplaces. Retrieved May 24, 2023, from https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-psychological-safety-at-work

Reviewed by Mary Ellen Gornick, Senior Strategy Advisor and Senior Vice President, Global Products, at Workplace Options

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Morgan, H. (2022, December 12). *Psychological safety: Foster psychological safety at work for innovation, learning, and inclusion* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).



DIGITAL WELLNESS

Using Technology to Enhance Your Wellbeing

Technology is amazing. It can instantly connect you with distant friends, put needed information at your fingertips, unleash your creativity, and help you improve your mental and physical health. It can also take up an unhealthy amount of your time, distract your focus, and lure you away from important "real-life" connections and activities. The fact that technology is always available is both wonderful and potentially harmful: You can use it for your benefit, but it can also mean that you're more available to distractions and interruptions.

Digital wellness comes through the mindful use of technology—engaging with technology in ways that improve your wellbeing, keep you safe, and are in line with your goals and values; and avoiding digital activities that make you feel worse or put your health, relationships, safety, and prospects for success at risk.

How to Improve Your Digital Wellness

Pay attention to how your interactions with technology make you feel.

Engaging with social media, online games, direct messaging, and other digital tools can be fun and sometimes energizing. If you're creating content, solving problems, or connecting with supportive friends, it can feel fulfilling—an opportunity to learn new skills, express yourself in positive ways, make discoveries, maintain important connections, and share useful information. It can also make you feel overwhelmed, exhausted, anxious, frustrated, inadequate, and unhappy. Pay attention to which aspects of your technology use lift your spirits and help to enrich your life, and which make you feel worse or pull you away from activities that are more important, fulfilling, and enjoyable.

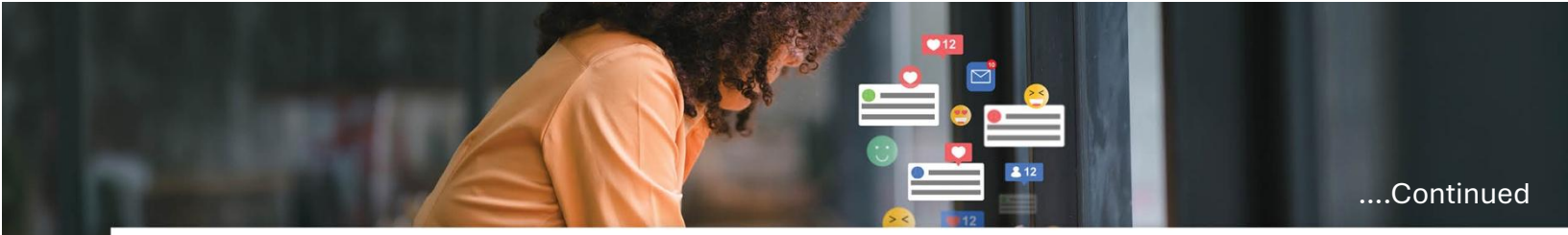
Be intentional about how you spend your time.

Your time is valuable. Websites, social media, and online games make more money the more time you spend on them, so they're designed to catch and hold your attention. But what's important to the owners of those sites probably isn't what's important to you. Take control of your time by being thoughtful about how you spend it. Work on changing your habits to spend more time on what's important to you and that will enhance your wellbeing. That might include spending more time outdoors, in person with friends, exercising, or engaging in other "real-life" activities.

Build a positive online persona.

When was the last time you searched for yourself online? What comes up in the search results is what others will find, too—including employers when you apply for a job. Posts with provocative or inappropriate images, negative comments about your employer or work colleagues, racist or sexist statements, or evidence of drinking and drug use will all count

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DIGITAL WELLNESS

against you—and they're almost impossible to remove. For your own sake and the sake of others, be a good digital citizen. Engage in civil discourse. Share your insights, knowledge, and creativity in positive ways. Be aware of how your online communication can affect other people, and work at being a positive influence.

Leverage technology to improve your health.

Health data can be a motivating tool for some people. Weighing yourself every day, for example, can be effective in helping to lose or maintain weight. Knowing you'll record your daily weight can help you stick to healthy eating and exercise habits. In a similar way, keeping a record of your exercise activity can motivate you to exercise regularly. If you find this kind of health data motivating as you strive to improve your health habits, use available technology, such as app-connected step counters and weight scales, to make it easy to record of your progress. You might also take advantage of online health appointments with your doctor, physical therapist, or other health professionals. Some fitness apps also come with online support communities and rewards for hitting certain milestones; this can keep you motivated and accountable when you might otherwise be tempted to skip a workout, abandon a new healthy eating plan, or let a wellness routine lapse.

Protect yourself and your information.

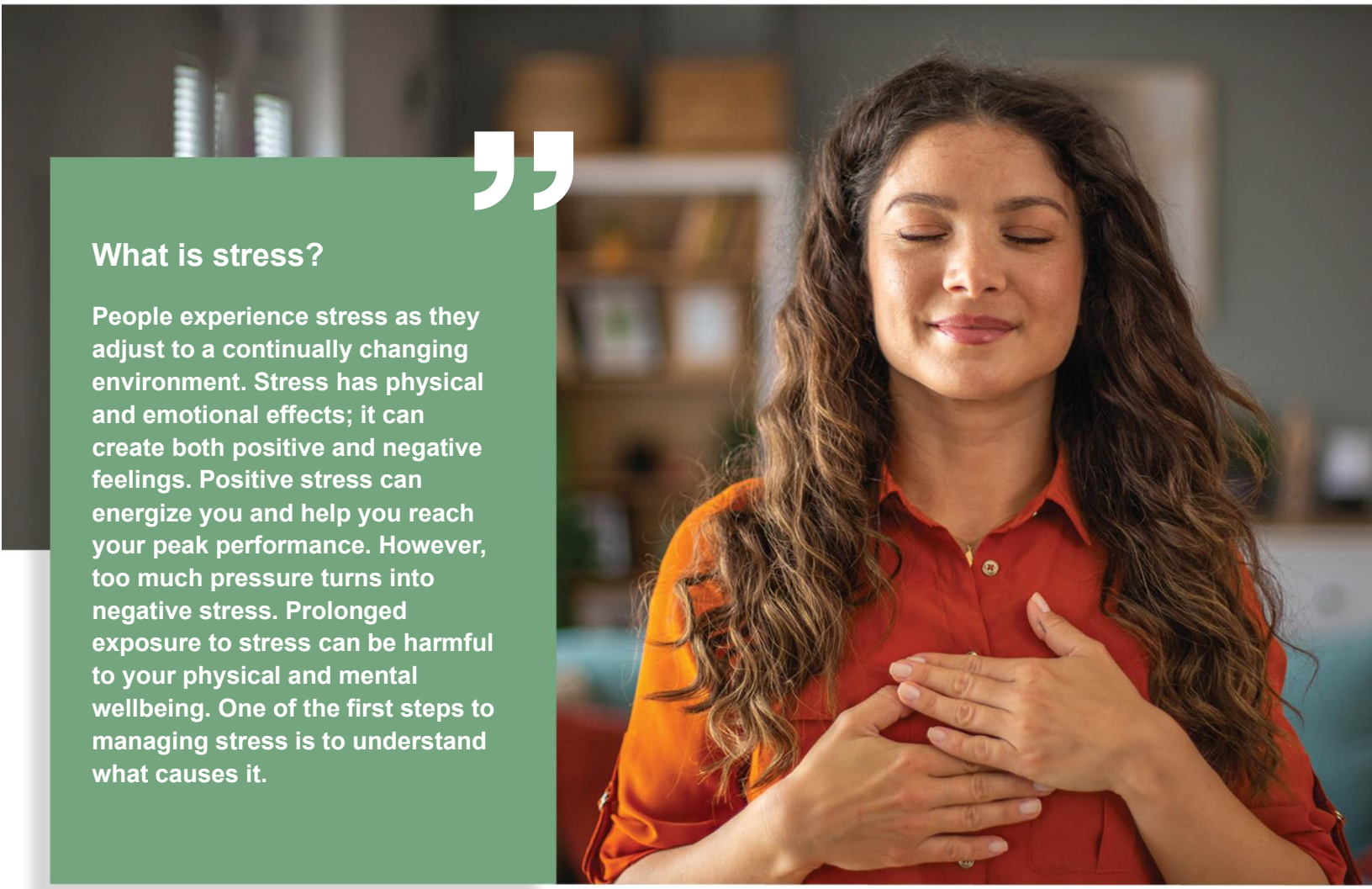
Your digital footprint: How you present yourself online is the most visible part of your digital footprint, but you also leave a trail with everything you search for, look at, submit as part of an online form, or buy. Some apps also track your location. Advertisers use this information to customize what they try to sell you. Search engines use it to tailor results to your interests. Others could use the information to target you in harmful ways, such as hacking to access your online profile or bank account. Here are some ways to clean up your digital footprint and protect your information:

- Regularly review your privacy settings.
- Update operating systems, browsers, and apps as soon as updates become available.
- Never share sensitive or personally identifying information on social media.
- Use a different password for each account.
- Use a password manager to generate stronger passwords, and keep track of them.
- Set up two-factor authentication (requiring a response to a text or email message) for key financial and medical accounts.
- Close unused email accounts.

Scams: Be aware of how cyber criminals can impersonate people, organizations, or businesses you trust in order to trick you into sharing personal information (a practice known as *phishing*). Be wary of messages from unknown sources, and even from ones that seem legitimate, especially if they ask for personal data or financial information. A common trick is to mimic the appearance of a message from a well-known organization, but with a URL or email address that is slightly different from the real one. Pop-ups and other ads, even on legitimate sites, can also be scams. Never click on a link in a message unless you're absolutely sure of the sender. If you have any doubts, contact the organization directly by searching for it online in a new tab or window.

Morgan, H. (2024, December 3). *Digital wellness: Using technology to enhance your wellbeing* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE



What is stress?

People experience stress as they adjust to a continually changing environment. Stress has physical and emotional effects; it can create both positive and negative feelings. Positive stress can energize you and help you reach your peak performance. However, too much pressure turns into negative stress. Prolonged exposure to stress can be harmful to your physical and mental wellbeing. One of the first steps to managing stress is to understand what causes it.

Sources of Stress

There is a wide range of sources of stress. These include daily hassles, major life events, home, and work. What are the things in your life that cause you stress?

Home

Stress factors can include

- Relationships
- Money problems
- Children
- Sickness
- Housework

Work

- Work stress factors include
- Overload
- Relationships
- Pace of change
- Deadlines
- Unrealistic workloads or demands

Stress Management and Prevention

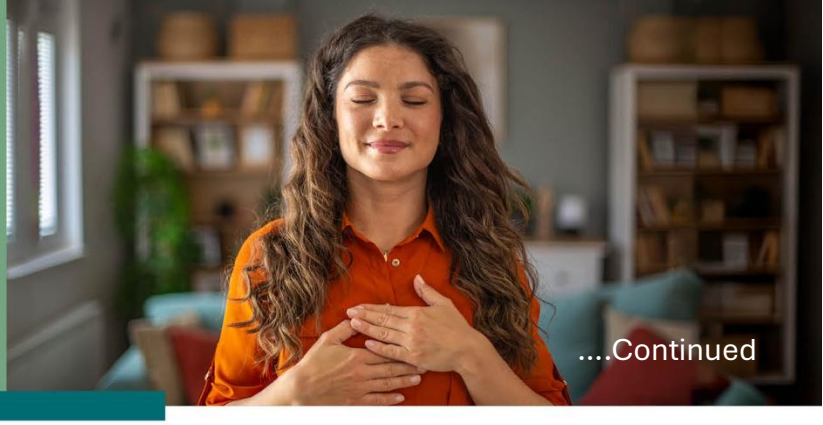
In addition to managing your response to stress, it is helpful to identify ways to prevent harmful levels of stress and build stress resilience.

Prevention

- Look at root causes of stress.
- Focus on building resilience to stress.

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UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE



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Prevention Ideas

- Keep a stress log—identify the sources of stress in your life.
- Identify your signs of stress—be aware of your stress level before it is unmanageable.

Building Stress Resilience

- Exercise three to four times a week to reduce muscle tension.
- Minimize intake of sugar, caffeine, and other artificial stimulants.
- Get enough rest.
- Practice at least one relaxation exercise

Stress Signs

Know your stress signs. A second step to managing stress is to understand how you react to it. Which of the following signs of stress do you experience?

Common stress signs include

- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Dry mouth
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Anxiety or excessive worry
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Depression
- Boredom
- Apathy
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Withdrawal
- Accident proneness
- Reduced sex drive
- Increase in use of drugs, tobacco, or alcohol

Some of these signs may have causes other than stress. Check with your doctor if symptoms persist.

Stress Relievers

- Get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning (making morning mishaps less stressful).
- Listen to music.
- Make time for fun.
- Unplug your phone.

Stress Strategies

Step 1: Awareness

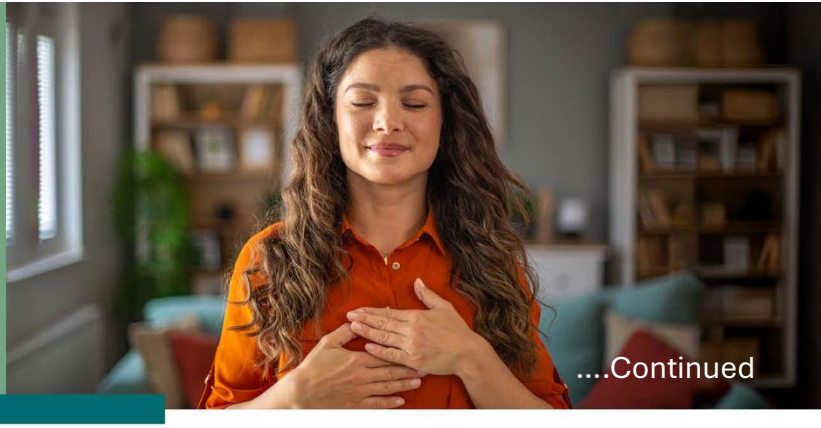
In order to manage stress, it is helpful to understand what causes your stress and how you react to stress. Ask yourself these questions:

- What are the sources of stress in my life?
- What are my emotional and physical reactions to them?
- What are my strengths in dealing with stress? (e.g. "I delegate well.")

What are my limitations in dealing with stress? (e.g. "I sometimes have difficulty *saying no* to work requests.")

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UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE



Step 2: Plan

Develop a plan of action by asking yourself these questions:

- What sources of stress can I eliminate or avoid?
- What sources of stress are changeable?
- What one change could I start with that would make the most difference in my life?
- Whom can I enlist in helping or supporting me with this change?
- How can I include taking care of myself in my plan?

Step 3: Action

- Put your plan into action:
- Choose one new strategy to add to or change about your current strategies for dealing with stress.
- Practice a relaxation technique (breathing is one of the most effective ways of reducing tension).
- Identify what you do well in managing your stress (use your past experience as a resource).

Stress Tips

- Share your concerns—talk to someone.
- Do something you enjoy.
- Take a brisk walk.
- Exercise.
- Take a break.
- Get a change of scenery.
- Set aside time for yourself.

Relaxation Technique

- Find a comfortable place to sit, close your eyes, and begin to pay attention to your breathing.
- Take a deep breath in, and exhale slowly.
- Continue breathing deeply, and imagine a relaxing vacation spot.
- As you continue to breathe slowly, look around at the sights; imagine the sounds, the smells, and the like.
- See yourself relaxed in this place.
- As you bring your attention back to the room you are in, remember that you can visit this place again anytime.

Other Ideas

Additional ideas to reduce or combat stress include

- Counseling
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Hypnosis
- Biofeedback
- Relaxation playlists
- Massage
- Complementary medicine

Action Planning

- Set short and long-term goals.
- Plan to make one change at a time.
- Check that your goal is specific and measurable.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2025). *Understanding stress and building resilience*. Raleigh, NC: Author.



ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

Think about the people in your life you consider to be good listeners. They probably pay attention to what you have to say and show interest by the ways they respond. Sometimes they may help you solve problems. Chances are, they make you feel good when you talk to them. Are you a good listener? Ask yourself these questions.

Do you create a safe and welcoming environment for listening?

When somebody wants to tell you something, do you put away distractions like phones and other devices? Do you clear your mind of other thoughts so you can pay attention to what the other person has to say? If it's not a good time or the place isn't right, do you suggest a better time and place, then follow through to make sure the conversation happens?

A good listener signals their attention by eliminating distractions, including distracting thoughts, and focusing on the other person. These signals let the other person know that it's safe to talk and that you are ready to listen. A good listener also recognizes when a moment or place isn't right for attentive listening and arranges to talk at another time or in a different place.

Do you show that you're listening?

As another person talks to you, do you show that you're listening by turning your body toward them and making eye contact? Do you give signs that you're paying attention, such as smiles, concerned expressions, nods, or leaning in? Do you say words or make sounds of encouragement, such as "I see," "Really?" "Ooh," or "Mm hum"? Do you adopt an open body posture (without crossing your arms in front of you, for example)?

A good listener shows that they are listening by their body movements, facial expressions, and verbal responses. These need to be authentic indications of interest, not forced or faked, or they send the opposite message: that you don't really care.

Do you respond in ways that show you're listening and trying to understand?

Do you ask questions to clarify what the other person is saying and encourage them to tell you more? Do you repeat back or summarize key parts of what the other person has told you, in your own words, to make sure you've understood?

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ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

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Listening isn't a passive act. It's an interaction with another person. A good listener does some talking, not with the intent to dominate the conversation but instead to draw the other person out, understand what they are saying, and learn what they have to share.

Do you listen without interrupting or changing the focus of the conversation?

Do you let the other person complete their thoughts, even when there are stretches of silence as they weigh what they want to say next? Do you hold back from jumping in or interrupting while the other person is talking? Do you help keep the focus of the conversation on what the other person has brought up?

A good listener is patient and gives the other person time to complete their thoughts. A good listener doesn't interrupt, finish the other person's sentences for them, or take the conversation in another direction by steering it toward their own concerns.

Do you respond with empathy and support?

When someone shares a difficult or emotional experience, do you show empathy for their feelings and offer appropriate support? When a person shares heated emotions, do you help them calm down and consider responses that might be helpful and productive? When you listen, do you help the other person feel better about themself?

A good listener tries to understand how the other person is feeling and shows empathy for their emotions, both positive and negative. A good listener helps a person who is upset or angry look at their experience from different perspectives and consider thoughtful ways to respond. A good listener offers support and encouragement to help the other person take appropriate next steps and feel better about themself.

Do you listen with an open mind?

Do you react with genuine interest and curiosity when someone shares an opinion or experience that challenges your beliefs? As you listen, do you challenge assumptions—your own and the other person's—in an effort to gain a better understanding of the situation? Are you open to new views and perspectives, rather than reacting defensively or with judgment? A good listener keeps an open mind, welcoming different perspectives and new ideas, even when they challenge the listener's beliefs or suggest that the listener has been wrong about something.

Good listening takes engagement.

Good listening goes far beyond making eye contact and nodding (both of which can be overdone by someone trying to appear that they are listening when their mind is somewhere else). Good listening requires focus and patience. It requires thoughtful and empathetic responses. Far from being a passive activity, it requires real engagement.

No one is a good listener in all ways and all situations. However, you can become a better listener—more often and when it really matters—by considering and practicing these elements of the skill of listening.

Morgan, H. (Reviewed 2025 [Ed.]). *Are you a good listener?* (B. Schuette & E. Morton, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options (WPO).