

Take it easy--Tips for managing stress at work



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Crabby Office Lady

Not everyone gets to have "Crabby" written into their job description. So let's take a moment to examine some of the mental pitfalls you could stumble into when you allow events and coworkers to sabotage your mood (and possibly your work).

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We all have days at work when we wonder what the heck we're doing, whether we're doing it marginally well, and what it's all for, anyway.

But whether you're *actually* having a day like that or you just *feel* like it doesn't really matter. Your mood has soured and it's coloring everything.

I had a day like this not long ago. Only at the end of it, tucked safe and sound in bed with my book and my 1200-count Egyptian cotton sheets, was I able to get some perspective. I think I went through it so that you, loyal, stressed-out readers, could benefit.

"Healthy" doesn't just mean firm abs

By now we all know that we should get 30 minutes of cardio several times a week; that breakfast is the most important meal of the day; and that a good night's sleep is necessary in order to get up and cheerfully make that bowl of oatmeal, drag yourself to the gym and remain upright on the stair climber.

As well, everyone who has a job — desk jockeys, poultry processors, forklift operators, dentists — should know good and well that their work area is as safe and comfortable as possible for healthy worker bees.

But there is more to it than a strong "core" and perfect eyes-to-screen distance and angle. Consider that roundish thing that sits on your neck that sees, hears, smells, tastes, and chatters on all day: Your head. Its health is important, too. (And I'm not talking about wearing a hat so that all your body heat doesn't escape — which I recently found out was a [myth](#), anyway.)

Feed your head

That's right: feed it. (And I'm not referring to the government's [5 A Day](#) fruits and vegetables serving recommendation). I'm talking about staying mentally healthy at work by learning to manage your stress, get perspective, make good choices, and last but not least, remain calm. (Everyone! Remain calm!)

I know what you're thinking: What does a woman who poses as an online caricature have to tell ME about keeping my sanity at work? That's a good — and fair — question, and the answer is: nothing. I'm not here to *tell* you anything. I found this topic fascinating, did a little research, and am here to share my findings with you.

First... a story that (I think) perfectly captures the essence of why it's important to manage your stress on the job.

Stress and the air traffic controller

As recently as 25 years ago, discussing one's emotional and mental well being in the workplace was just not done. In fact, it could get you escorted out of the building...and fast. Case in point: Remember the [air traffic controllers' strike of 1981](#)? Nearly 13,000 of the 17,500 members of the union walked off the job. These folks were hoping to disrupt the nation's air transportation system so the government would take a good, hard look at the growing demands of that job and the dangerous levels stress it caused.

(Unfortunately this story did not have a happy ending for the workers: President Ronnie Reagan fired them all and declared a lifetime FAA ban on them.)

We've come a long way since then. If your company is worth its salt (and its stock price — which is probably pretty generous these days), this topic should be dealt with proactively. But since I know for a fact that there are folks who wear their workplace stress like a badge of honor (as if a pounding heart, bulging eyes, and a short fuse prove company loyalty and commitment), here are some guidelines.

Deal with your stress and keep your job

When I told my friends and coworkers that I was writing about keeping workplace stress in check, they sent me some of their solutions (many of which I don't advise):

- Kelley from Denver: "I learned from our IT guy that banging on your desk with your fists helps."
- Sandy of Bothell, WA: "Don't forget the tried and true: Scream at the top of your lungs whilst driving your car."
- Michael from Denver: "Try killer ping pong: You only score points by hitting your opponent with the ball. Works like a charm!"
- Steve from Durango, CO: "I just like to intubate, paralyze, and sedate my patients. It almost always makes me feel better. Then I go for Thai food." (No, Steve is not a spider; he's a nurse... and Crabby's brother.)

Now that it's very clear that so many people are *still* stressed at work, let's take a look at what some experts advise:

Acknowledge that you're stressed I know; it's a cliché: Accepting something is the first step in dealing with it. But if you continue to believe that you aren't stressed, that you're just extra busy and being a baby about it, or that it's the people around you who cause all your problems, you won't have the wherewithal to change things.

Let's get physical Anything that gets you moving can help. Even if you have a career that demands that you be on your feet and running around all day (such as a restaurant worker, a grade school teacher, a door-to-door vacuum salesman), getting heart-pounding exercise is still key to avoiding depression, poor memory, and overall crabbiness. So whether it's a brisk walk round the park during your lunch hour, or a game of squash after work, hard exercise encourages your pituitary gland to release endorphins, chemicals which can block pain sensations and produce a feeling of euphoria. A good work out and true happiness? How much better can it get?

Talk to your manager <PLOT SPOILER!> Managers are people, too. Mine even has a young family, like me! If you're having trouble completing your work due to stress (or any other issue), your first point of contact should be your manager. He or she can advise you on your options. Maybe you need a few days off. Maybe you need to take a leave of absence. Good employers (those in touch with the real world, anyway) know that providing support and investing in current employees is less expensive than recruiting and training new staff. But even if your company doesn't or can't offer that benefit, letting your manager know that you're having some issues is much better than just letting them watch you slide into a period of total overwhelm. He or she may be able to offer some other solutions, such as getting you some help with that big project, or simply delaying its deadline..

Get to know your HR person If you work for a large company like I do, there are probably several human resources people on staff, and I'm guessing that they've heard it all. If you're having trouble at work, particularly with another coworker (or even your manager), make use of this resource; it's what it's here for. Again, talking to someone is always better than keeping things bottled-up.

Plan for stress When we're in school, teachers, administrators, and even our parents don't tend to talk about the fact that we're all going to go through some sort of workplace stress at one point or another. Crabby prepares for it; I know that it's coming (because it is). So I say, if you've got some vacation time saved up, don't squander it; save it for a truly rainy day.

Take a frickin' break Some companies provide game rooms where you can play ping pong or chess or just sit and do the New York Times crossword puzzle. Does this encourage people to slack off? I don't think so. It lets employees know that the company understands that we're not robots; that we do better work when we have breaks. If your company doesn't provide such a thing, maybe you can plan to spend some time — even a half hour — doing some knitting, calling your mom, or solving a Sudoku puzzle. (I'd like to have a word with the person who invented that evil game.) Try meditating or even just sitting quietly; anything to get you out of the world you're in...if just for a little while.

Now I lay me down to sleep...

At the start of this column, I mentioned the bad day I'd had. As I closed my book and prepared to check out for the night, I searched my mind for other columns I'd written that *sort of* addressed health in the workplace issues, including [ergonomics](#) (again, health and safety at your workplace), [accessibility](#) (in the case of Office programs, technology for everyone, including those who experience physical difficulties or disabilities), and even [e-mail etiquette](#) (to keep your reputation healthy).

Hopefully this column helps round out that series. And if it doesn't, well, you know how to get in touch with me. Let me know, through your feedback below or via [my blog](#), what you do to manage stress at work.

"Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop." — Ovid

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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