

Work-related stress: it's all about balance

The advice of psychologist Louise Hildebrand

Balance – that's a great word and an easy word to use when we speak of stress management. Nearly everyone has some ideas about how you should stay in balance. However, this is easier said than done, especially when your job creates stress. Below are a few random stressful situations and thoughts expressed by workers in the Netherlands:

‘All ongoing projects must be completed as fast as possible.’

‘All patients must be given the right care, even if there are more patients than normally.’

‘These products have to be put on the shelves today.’

‘Two colleagues are absent, so extra work must be done to make up for them.’

Occasional stress at work is not a problem. It does become a problem if it develops into prolonged stress, if it keeps you awake at night, if you feel strained at work or if you are very agitated when you go to work.

5 tips for staying in balance:

1 The more pressure you have, the more rest you need to take. In practice, I often see the opposite behaviour. Precisely when there is pressure, employees tend to skip breaks, to cram their schedule more than normal or to work longer hours. In short: you switch on the ‘machine’ mode and you switch off the ‘I need recovery’ mode. The result is work-related stress. Eliminate this unhealthy conviction; on the contrary, plan the pauses and recovery times when you have too much pressure in your job.

2 Be aware of the physical signs of prolonged stress. This seems like a no-brainer, but it certainly is not. If you're stressed, you often become tangled in momentary worries, the tasks that have to be done or the work that's still left to do. In short: your mind is elsewhere with no room to consciously notice the physical signals. Make a daily habit of stopping for a moment and listening to your body's signals. Are you tired? Do you feel restless? Are you irritated? Are you not sleeping well? Is your concentration level lower? Do you have problems relaxing? Then this is time for bringing more balance into your life.

3 Make a Balance Plan of Action. This point further elaborates the things discussed in point 2. It is often more difficult for people in a stress situation to make clear decisions. Clarify for yourself which physical signs of stress you have. In addition to the signs mentioned in point 2, perhaps there are also neck, shoulder and back complaints. Subsequently, figure out for yourself what helps you recover and relax (for example, a massage, a bath, shopping, engaging in sports, spending time by yourself). Also make a distinction between actions that require more time and planning (a meeting with a friend) and actions that you can do in 5 minutes (such as a conscious breathing exercise or taking a walk outdoors for a few minutes). The more options you have, the greater the chances that you will be giving your body moments of recovery.

5 Ask for support and help on time. There is still a bit of taboo about asking for help, because asking for help could be seen as a sign of weakness or it means that you can't do your job. Asking for help is actually smart and strong. It attests to your introspection and it is a sign that you respect your boundaries

before the bucket overflows. There are different ways to ask for help. You can tell your manager that your work causes a lot of stress. You can also ask colleagues how they deal with stressful work situations, so that you can learn from their approach. You can also look for support in your personal network, for example, if you get a babysitter for your children so that you can have a relaxed day. Figure out for yourself what kind of help you need to further help you maintain and restore your balance.

There is a big difference between knowing that you need to stay in balance and which actions you must undertake to ensure that you maintain that balance. Make sure that you switch to a do mode no matter how small this do step (or conscious step) might be.

Certainly don't let yourself be distracted by ‘it won't help’ thoughts, such as: I have no time for fitting in extra breaks, I simply have to persevere, everyone occasionally experiences pressure or everyone has work-related stress. My advice to you is: employees with such thoughts should definitely follow these 5 tips!

Do you have additional questions? I can be reached via email: L.hildebrand@humancapitalcare.nl.



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4 Ask someone in your social circle to act as a ‘stress reflector’ for you. This can be a colleague, your partner, a family member or a friend. People in your circle will often notice your stress signs before you do. Use this information to restore your balance on time. Involve these people in your balance plan of action. During busy periods for example, you can ask for their opinion about your stress level. Do you appear to be stressed? Do you have a rather short fuse? Are you somewhat snappy? If so, then take the appropriate actions.