

Coping with Mental Stress at Work: Individual Stress Management and Building Harmonious Workplace Relationships



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According to the National Population Health Survey 2022, the prevalence of poor mental health among Singapore residents has risen from 13.4 percent in 2020 to 17 percent in 2022. Recently, we have noted increasing public awareness of mental health issues.

However mental health issues do not just affect the general population; doctors and healthcare professionals also experience high levels of stress due to work which may affect their mental well-being.

Identifying Causes of Stress

There are two forms of stress: external and internal. External stress may be due to various reasons such as studies, work, family, relationships, grief, retirement and financial issues. This is often exacerbated by a lack of or poor communication and guidance. For junior doctors, this can be particularly challenging, especially if it is related to work and organisational changes such as promotion, departmental restructuring, transfer and dismissal. Sometimes, unreasonable demands and verbal/physical abuse from patients and their caregivers can also add to workplace stress.

On the other hand, causes of internal stress include hereditary factors, personality traits and subjective thinking. For example, one may be impatient and want to do many things at once, while another could be overly cautious and slow to act; one may appear calm and composed but is actually feeling anxious, while another may express their anxiety outwardly.

The Stress-Vulnerability Theory informs us that an individual will only develop a mental health condition if the stress he faces exceeds his biological vulnerability level.



We can look out for the following symptoms of stress:



Physical: fatigue, palpitations, body aches



Psychological: poor concentration, irritability, tearfulness, worry, anxiety



Behavioural: poor appetite, increased alcohol consumption and smoking, insomnia, restlessness, lack of sexual libido, and even violent tendencies



Cognitive: indecisiveness, inattentiveness, negative thinking, and self-blame



Coping with Stress

Since stress is prevalent and we face challenges in our everyday life, my advice would be to learn how to cope with stress in a positive manner.



Recognise the symptoms and causes of stress, and understand one's own limits. Know yourself well and do not make too many changes at the same time.



Adopt a healthy lifestyle—exercise regularly, have ample sleep, decrease your intake of caffeine and sugary food, quit smoking and avoid excessive alcohol consumption. Breathing and muscle relaxation techniques can also help.



Manage time effectively. Remember, not all tasks are both important and urgent; nonetheless, we should avoid procrastination as cutting close to deadlines may cause further stress.



Build a strong and wide social network. I would suggest speaking to a loved one (a family member or trusted friend/colleague) and your superiors for help.



Seek professional mental health assistance when necessary.



Building harmonious workplace relationships

Let us now focus on work-related stress and how we can manage it.

In a healthcare setting, a doctor does not work alone. Doctors collaborate with a multidisciplinary team of colleagues with different backgrounds, work experiences and personalities. We dedicate an average of 50 hours per week to work. Hence, having good and close working relationships with colleagues and supervisors is important and essential for teamwork and productivity.

Let me elaborate further. Workplace relationships directly affect one's ability and performance and these relationships can be positive or negative. A positive workplace relationship leads to a more cohesive working environment and increased productivity as you feel positive, satisfied and committed to your work, while a negative workplace relationship leads to disengagement, dissatisfaction and hence poor work productivity.

Therefore, beyond the individual stress management, the following tips can help build positive relationships at work for doctors at all levels. Although this takes time and patience, it is worthwhile to invest energy in building these relationships:



Communication: All good relationships depend on open and honest communication involving active listening and attention to non-verbal cues such as body language. It is advisable to use clear and precise (but not too brief or curt) language to avoid misunderstanding, especially when we are sending text messages or replying to emails.



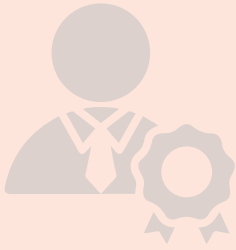
Respect: Allow a colleague to express their opinion before responding. A difference of opinion can often be useful as it might offer insight into something one had not thought of.



Consistency: Set clear expectations and consistent directions and messages—advice given must be thoughtful and practical.



Trust: Trust is reciprocal. We must always honour our promises and deliver our commitments. If we are unable to fulfil a promise, apologise and take responsibility instead of pushing the blame to others.



Professionalism: Always engage in professional behaviour and avoid gossip. If an individual has an issue with a colleague, he can approach the colleague to have a polite and honest conversation, and address the issue objectively. If necessary, seek the assistance of a superior to resolve the issue.



Teamwork: Work is interconnected, and if a staff member fails to meet deadlines and commitments, the work of other colleagues is also affected. Therefore, providing support to colleagues who are feeling stressed will help them stay positive and complete the task. This will also foster team spirit and cohesiveness.



Praise: Acknowledge staff contributions, give more praise and credit for their work, and offer valuable suggestions. This would boost staff morale in the department.

The last point to note is that when we implement organisational changes, it should be paced accordingly, and we should prepare affected staff so that they are ready for the new work and challenges.

I am sure all will agree that everyone has their own talents, skills and experience. Respect and cherish one another so as to foster harmonious working relationships which will bring joy and success to ourselves and the organisation.