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How to Treat Workplace Stress

By Lauren Weber



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As the new year approaches – and with it the inevitable wave of self-improvement plans—we’ve identified 10 strategies for advancing your career in 2013. From recovering from an office blunder to learning why it doesn’t pay to be Mr. (or Ms.) Nice Guy, this ten-point plan will offer daily tips on what to do and how to do it.

Dr. David Posen, an author and former family doctor in Oakville, Ontario, started noticing a pattern almost 20 years ago: Patients were coming into his office with symptoms like high blood pressure, heart problems, panic attacks and depression. When he pressed for a sense of what was happening in their lives, the patients shared tales of burnout, overwork and abusive managers. These stories “made me want to call their employers and say, ‘Stop doing this! You’re killing your employees!’” he said.

Instead of calling all those bosses, Dr. Posen wrote the forthcoming book, “Is Work Killing You? A Doctor’s Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress.” In it, he offers suggestions for what workers, managers and companies can do to lower stress levels all around. He condensed some of his suggestions during a talk with At Work.

WSJ: What are the main causes of workplace stress?

Posen: The big three are volume, velocity and abuse. In terms of volume, people are working longer hours, which then affects their health, their sleep patterns, and their personal lives. By

velocity, I mean the pace of the workplace has gotten faster because of technology, increased expectations, overlapping deadlines, unrealistic deadlines.

Abuse is bullying, harassment, and all the politics people play. It's amazing how one abusive person can create stress for dozens of people. It's become a bigger problem because people have less freedom to say 'I don't want this job' and go somewhere else. So people aren't quitting and they're not even complaining because they don't want to seem like troublemakers.

WSJ: What would you say to a mid-level corporate employee who's suffering from stress-related illnesses?

Posen: Identify where the stress is coming from. Is it about deadlines? A difficult boss? The fact that you don't have resources you need? A fear that you don't have the skill set to do what you're being asked to do? Zero in on what aspect of work is the problem and then deal with that. Take breaks – whether that means 5 or 10 minutes, lunch, a mental health day here and there, or going on vacation. In 2010, Americans left 424 million paid vacation days on the table.

WSJ: What are some simple ways people can reduce stress without making huge changes in their work situations?

Posen: I recommend people take regular time-outs, even just 15 minutes walking in the sunshine on your lunch break. Time-outs are built into sports, and they should be a part of a regular workday too. We all need opportunities to relax and catch our breath. Another pretty easy fix: drink less caffeine. Energy drinks, coffee – these stimulate a stress reaction and block the natural relaxants in the brain. I call coffee "stress in a cup."

WSJ: Many people can't afford to leave their jobs. What are their options?

Posen: Some of my patients go on disability, or they take a medical leave of absence. You do need a doctor's diagnosis – diagnoses might list depression, burnout, hypertension – but when done properly, that shouldn't be shared with the employer, only the insurance company. Depression is by far the most common stress-related diagnosis.

WSJ: Does one have to give up their professional ambition in order to restore a sense of well-being to their work lives?

Posen: For the vast majority of people, when you take better care of yourself, you function better and perform better. One of my mottos is, it's better to work 40-50 productive hours a week than 50-60 semi-productive hours. After 60 hours, you're getting diminishing returns for your efforts.

WSJ: If a manager had to come up with a New Year's resolution around helping employees deal with stress, what should it be?

Posen: As a manager, you need to know who's wilting under the pace or workload. Start talking to people and ask them simple questions like, 'How are you managing here? Is it too much work? Is the pace too fast?' Ask people what they need, what resources would be helpful. And be a good role model. If the manager is working long hours, people feel they have to work long hours. If the manager is sending emails on Sunday, they feel they have to respond on Sunday. Give people permission to slow down. When the boss says to someone at 4:30, 'You look pretty fried. Why don't you just knock off, go home early, and I'll see you tomorrow?' It's like handing an employee the biggest gift.

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