Dear Alice,

How can I reduce stress at work?

— Losing it

Answer

Dear Losing it,

Work, school, relationships, and daily hassles can often serve as sources of stress, known as stressors. Before you think about stress reduction, it’s good to first identify what exactly is causing the stress so you can be more intentional about how you address it. What, specifically, is it about your work situation that makes you feel stressed, anxious, angry, frustrated, burned out, moody, and so on? When you come up with your list of answers, it’s best to work on them one at a time to avoid getting stressed about stress management! It can be helpful to be patient with yourself and remember that addressing all of your stressors doesn’t have to be done at once; after all, it may take some time to see the effects of incorporating stress management strategies into your life. It can involve engaging in different behaviors and practices or changing your thought processes. Read on for more specific strategies!

Stress commonly manifests itself as difficulty sleeping and concentrating, muscle tension, headaches, and irritability, among many other symptoms. Similarly, job-related stress may come from a number of sources, including (but not limited to) increased hours, lack of control, or increased expectations. If time management and communication skills haven’t worked, it might be time to try some other stress management strategies. Regardless of the causes of your tension on or off the job, engaging in activities such as physical activity, yoga, and meditation can help protect against the ill-effects of stress. Reaching out to and spending time with family, friends, and colleagues for support and to talk about what’s on your mind instead of holding them inside. Getting enough sleep and eating balanced and nutritious meals can also help protect against negative impacts of stress. If these strategies don’t seem to work, it may be time to reconsider your approach:

- Revisit the expectations that you and your supervisor have for yourself at work. Are they...
realistic?
- You could come up with some creative ideas to address the work stressors and propose them to your supervisor. Could priorities be shifted from you to another person, or provide other opportunities to free up some of your time?
- Try involving a friend in your attempts to generate positive options for thinking and behaving differently in your work environment.

It’s also worth noting that the stress response is often initiated based on perceptions of a situation. That being said, it may be more beneficial (and stress reducing!) to think about your stressors in a new way. For example, if your stress is caused by increased expectations, it may be helpful to think of it as an opportunity to learn more and take on new responsibilities. However, sometimes even utilizing stress management techniques may not be enough in a really difficult situation. You may find that if you’re able, taking some vacation time, switching to a different department, or looking for a new role may alleviate some stress.

You might also want to check with your school or workplace to see what they offer for support. Reaching out to mental health and conflict resolution resources, either at your school, workplace, or in the community, may also offer additional tips and support. For more information on stress in general, check out the Go Ask Alice! Stress and Anxiety category in the Emotional Health archives. Although it may seem difficult to ask for help, stress is quite common and it’s better to address workplace woes, and other sources of stress, sooner rather than later.

Best of luck,

Alice!
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