

STRESS

To Cope with Stress, Try Learning Something New

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Stressed. Anxious. Exhausted. Drained. This is how many employees feel at work due to stressors like longer work hours, more-frequent hassles, the need to do more with fewer resources, and so on. Such work stress has been shown to induce anxiety and anger, unethical behavior, poor decision making, and chronic exhaustion and burnout – all of which impair personal and organizational performance.

There are typically two ways people try to deal with this stress. One is to simply “buckle down and power through” – to focus on getting the stressful work done. Professional workers often have a “bias for action” and want to find a solution quickly; and they pride themselves on being tough people who can keep working despite feeling stressed and fatigued.

The other common tactic is to retreat – to temporarily disconnect from work and get away from the stressful environment. Research on workday breaks has grown rapidly in the past few years, finding that relaxing and engaging breaks can improve emotions and boost energy at work. This helps explain why “relaxation facilities,” such as nap rooms, workout equipment, and entertainment zones are becoming popular offerings at companies in knowledge-intensive industries.

Unfortunately, both “grinding through” and “getting away” have potential pitfalls. Research has long established that we humans have limits in handling heavy workloads, which restrict our ability to always grind through. Continuing to exert effort while stressed and fatigued will simply tax us and lead to depletion and impaired performance. And while a reprieve from work can provide temporary relief, it does not address the underlying problems that cause stress in the first place. When we return from a break, we are not only faced with the same issues, but we may also experience additional guilt and anxiety.

So what else can employees do to temper the ill effects of stress? Our research suggests a third option: *focusing on learning*. This can mean picking up a new skill, gathering new information, or seeking out intellectual challenges. In two recent research projects, one with employees from a variety of industries and organizations, and the other with medical residents, we found evidence that engaging in learning activities can buffer workers from detrimental effects of stress including negative emotions, unethical behavior, and burnout.

We investigated learning as a stress buffer because learning helps workers build valuable instrumental and psychological resources. Instrumentally, learning brings us new information and knowledge that can be useful for solving near-term stressful problems; it also equips us with new skills and capabilities to address or even prevent future stressors. Psychologically, taking time to reflect on what we know and learn new things helps us develop feelings of competence and self-efficacy (a sense of being capable of achieving goals and doing more). Learning also helps connect us to an underlying purpose of growth and development. This way, we can see ourselves as constantly improving and developing, rather than being stuck with fixed capabilities. These psychological resources enable us to build resilience in the face of stressors.

Evidence of Learning as a Tool to Ease Stress

In two complementary studies, two of us (Chen and Dave, with Eunbit Hwang) studied more than 300 U.S. employees from various organizations and industries regarding their job stressors and behavior at work. Prior research has established that in the face of stress people tend to engage in unethical behavior at work (e.g., stealing, falsifying time sheets, or being rude to co-workers), so we examined employees’ *learning new things* or *relaxing at work* as two potential remedies for this conundrum. The first study used daily surveys to track employees’ feelings and activities at work over two weeks; and the second study used paired survey responses to link employees’ activities and feelings with what their supervisors observed. In both studies, employees reported the extent to which they engaged in learning activities at work (e.g., doing things to broaden their horizons, seeking out intellectual challenges, or learning something new), as well as their relaxation activities at work (e.g., taking some time to kick back, take a walk, or surf the web).

The first study revealed that, in the face of stress, employees experienced fewer negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, distress) and engaged in less unethical behavior (e.g., taking company property, being mean to coworkers) on days when they engaged in more learning activities at work compared to other days. Similarly, in the second study, these benefits were more common among employees who reported taking on more learning activities at work than other people.

In contrast, relaxing activities did not buffer the detrimental consequences of stress – employees experienced the same levels of negative emotions and engaged in just as much unethical behavior on days when they took on more relaxing activities at work, compared to other days (study 1), and when they generally focused on relaxation more than others (study 2). Relaxation thus did not appear to be as useful a stress buffer as learning was.

The buffering effects of learning were further illustrated in a study one of us (Chris, with Heather Sateia and Sanjay Desai) conducted with medical residents, whose jobs involve the stressful task of caring for patients with critical conditions while working long hours with little rest or reprieve. In response to the growing issue of physician burnout, we surveyed approximately 80 internal medicine residents at Johns Hopkins University to better understand the relationships between their work behaviors and burnout. Our analysis revealed that residents who thought their team engaged in more learning behavior (such as seeking out new information or reflecting on the team’s work process) reported significantly lower levels of burnout. This correlation between team learning and reduced burnout was especially pronounced for residents who reported lower levels of *learning goal orientation*—meaning these residents were not already approaching their work with an eye towards learning. This suggests that being part of a team where *others* are learning may also help buffer the detrimental effects of stressful, challenging work, even (or perhaps especially) for those who may not be as inclined to focus on learning themselves.

Strategically Using Learning at Work

What specifically can you do to increase learning when faced with stress at work?

First, start internally. Practice re-reframing stressful work challenges in your mind. When stress emerges, change the message you tell yourself from “this is a stressful work assignment/situation” to “this is a challenging but rewarding opportunity to learn.” Reframing stressful tasks as learning possibilities shifts your mindset and better prepares you to approach the task with an orientation toward growth and longer-term gains.

Second, work and learn with others. Instead of wrestling with a stressful challenge solely in your own head, try to get input from others. Getting out and discussing a stressor with your peers and colleagues might reveal hidden insights, either from their experience or from the questions and perspectives they raise.

Third, craft learning activities as a new form of “work break.” Alongside purely relaxing breaks – either short ones like meditating or longer ones like taking days off – consider recasting learning itself as a break from your routine tasks at work. This might seem like a mere mental rebranding, but if a learning activity allows you to divert from the type of effort you use in regular work activities (e.g., numeric thinking, interacting with clients), and if the activity also fits your

intrinsic interests, it *can* replenish you psychologically. Viewing learning as “more work” will make it less attractive in an already stressful situation, but approaching it as a form of respite can make it more appealing and more likely to create positive, enjoyable experiences.

Embracing learning can be a more active way to buffer yourself from negative effects of stress at work. At the same time, there is no need to wait for stress to arise before seeking learning opportunities. Even without pressing problems, engaging in learning as a central feature of your work life will help you build personal resources and equip you to be resilient and prepared in navigating future stress at work.



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