



# **Growing as a Manager**

Manager Health and Wellbeing: Taking Care of Yourself When Managing Others

### The Author:

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## Executive summary

Most managers are, by definition, focused on factors outside of themselves. Managing a team of employees and running an organization requires a ton of outward attention, and an ability to prioritize others' needs before addressing ones' own. This perspective, however, can come at a high price: managers may neglect to notice or address their own stress and physical health concerns in a proactive way, leading to burnout or illness (Perrez & Reicherts, 1996; Lederer et al, 2017). This CQ Dossier reviews psychological and industrial research on maintaining manager health and wellbeing, using a combination of increase attentiveness to signs of stress, and proactive engagement in preventative self-care.

## Identifying health risks

People vary in their susceptibility to stress. As a manager, you have probably noticed that some employees can handle extreme deadlines or increased workloads, whereas others become agitated, emotional, or run-down. Similarly, individuals vary in how attentive they are to their body's own stress response (Perrez & Reicherts, 1996). Some people are very attuned to the needs of their body and mind, and know when to take a break, seek out medical care, or express that they are at their limit. This kind of behavior predicts healthy coping and reduces a person's odds of severe illness and [burnout](#) (Sutherland & Davidson, 1993).

Unfortunately, a number of people who appear to be unflappable in the face of stress are actually very stress reactive, but are not good at listening to their body's distress signals. As a manager, you may be in that camp. If you generally think of yourself as low-stress, consider asking yourself: how does my body respond when I am stressed? Where in my body do I hold tension? When do I know that I am 'at my limit'? If you do not have immediate, clear answers to this question, you may not be paying attention to your own physical and emotional needs (Boysen et al, 2018). Learning to refocus on your needs may help you develop greater health and [resiliency](#) (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994).

**Finding stress cues.** To identify your signs of stress, keep a regular log of your physical ailments, sleep and eating habits, and the demands you are currently facing at work. Try rating each day of the work week in terms of how many demands were placed on you. At the end of the month, review the data you have collected and try to find patterns (Boysen et al, 2018). Do you get less sleep the night before a big meeting or presentation? Do you tend to overeat when you work long hours, or under-eat? Which kinds of tasks are the most challenging for you to handle, and how does your body respond to that stress? Once you have clear information on your stressors, you can begin to plan around it (Heng, 2016).

**Conduct a body scan.** Body scanning is a procedure for identifying stress and tension held in the body (Ussher et al, 2009). For most people, physical tension is an early sign of stress, and one that can be easily ignored. However, identifying stress early is vital to addressing it and limiting its impact. To scan your body for tension, lay down on a flat surface, turn out the lights, and play some calming music. Begin by tensing every muscle in your foot and holding the tension for a count of thirty. Then, release the tension and shake it out. Do the same with your legs, then your lower trunk, then your upper body, then your shoulders and head.

As you pass your attention through various parts of your body, take note of what feels amiss. Do you find it difficult to relax your shoulders? Is your jaw always tight? Are your palms sweaty? Does your stomach feel queasy? Every person reacts to stress slightly differently; the more closely you examine your own physical reactions, the better prepared you will be to seek out relevant relaxation and self-care activities (Heng, 2016). For example, if you carry your stress in your shoulders, yoga or a massage may be beneficial. If stress gives you stomach pains, changing your diet may be a better solution. You may need to seek out preventative health measures relevant to how your stress manifests; for instance, if stress gives you an increased desire for tobacco or alcohol, enlisting a doctor's help in reducing these habits can improve your health and extend your productivity, as well as your lifespan (Ussher et al, 2009; Alkema et al, 2008).

## Reducing stress

While “self-care” has become a buzzword lately, the average person’s understanding of what it entails is limited. This is true of managers as well; self-care is often described in terms of making sure employees take breaks or vacations, whereas the overall wellbeing of individuals and managers can be overlooked. However, there is a wealth of self-care research available that can be productively harnessed by employees and managers alike. Understanding and utilizing self-care tools on a regular basis can help you extend your resiliency and respond to workplace stress in a more effective way (Shapiro et al, 2007; Alkema et al, 2008).

**Types of self-care.** Engaging in relaxing activities (such as yoga or getting a massage) is one route to reducing stress, but there are many, lesser-known others. Other options worth examining include sensory stimulation and challenge and mastery exercises (Shapiro et al, 2007). Each of these can be conducted in large and small-scale forms, and all have been associated with reduced physical stress, diminished risk of burnout, and improved health outcomes (Lederer et al, 2017).

Sensory stimulation involves identifying a pleasant experience related to one of the five senses (smell, touch, taste, sound, and sight; Denyes et al, 2001). This can be something as simple as smelling the pleasant fragrance of a scented candle or fresh-baked cookies, or wearing an incredibly soft, comfortable item of clothing. Many people are chronically deprived of stimulating sensory experiences – for example, many people crave tactile (touch-based) stimulation, and benefit from having fidget toys, stress balls, or other small, fun-to-play-with items on their desks. Other people crave sound-based sensory input, and are relaxed by repetitive beats or up-tempo metal music.

A benefit of this practice is that it provides a quick, circumspect de-stressing option that can be utilized at work or at home, at virtually any time. To add that this practice to your life, surround yourself with objects that provide stimulation and relaxation – something to smell, touch, look at, or listen to that is enjoyable and pleasantly distracting. Many of these objects (such as fidget toys) can help make long days in the office or exhausting meetings more tolerable by providing a physical outlet for stress.

Challenge and mastery exercises de-stress people by helping them to feel empowered and capable (Denyes et al, 2001). Unlike relaxing with a hot bath or a massage, this form of self-care requires putting oneself in a dynamic, exciting environment. Mountain climbing or exploring a new city are large-scale forms of challenge and mastery exercise; completing a difficult puzzle or learning a new language at home are smaller-scale examples. These kinds of self-care activities help people to build resilience, by expanding a person's skills and helping them to feel capable and competent in an area of their life besides work (Alkema et al, 2008).

### Key take-aways

- Managers tend to ignore their own stress responses to an excessive degree, and can benefit from improved self-awareness
- Keeping track of your own work demands, and how your body responds to those demands, is a great route for identifying your key stressors
- Stress can manifest in a variety of subtle symptoms, including jaw or shoulder pain, digestion problems, irritability, or trouble sleeping
- Self-care involves a variety of activities, including relaxation, stimulation, and exploration of new activities and skills

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