



Let's Talk

IMPROVING THE HEALTH, SAFETY, AND PRODUCTIVITY OF OUR FEDERAL EMPLOYEES.

Holidays Left You Frazzled?

Don't Stress Next Season

While the holidays can be a magical time of year filled with warmth, joy, and excitement, the pressure of having to do too much in too little time, unrealistic expectations, and the tendency to overeat and overspend can bring more stress than bliss.

Any demanding situation - even situations we think of as pleasant, such as holiday planning or a vacation - can bring about stress. While a certain amount of daily stress is normal, ongoing or excessive stress can result in fatigue, burnout, and even depression.

Symptoms of Stress

The first step in effectively managing stress is identifying its symptoms. Signals that indicate you may be experiencing excessive stress include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability or moodiness
- Decreased satisfaction
- Persistent feeling of urgency
- Clammy and sweaty hands
- Cold hands and feet
- Tension headaches, backaches, stomachaches, or other physical discomforts

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Work/Life Balance: A Strategic Approach

These days, dual-career families, high work demands, and long working hours have become the norm for many. As a result, flexible workplace practices have become critical for employers seeking to retain a high-performing workforce. However, despite greater access to family-friendly programs, many employees still have work/life balance concerns. Like time management, finding the ideal work/life balance is a skill that may require training and practice to achieve.

Work/Life Balance Continuum

With only a finite amount of energy and time, people must choose how to allocate their mental, emotional, and physical resources. To do this, employees essentially "segment" family and work domains by creating boundaries to help them navigate between work and family roles.

Consider the work/life balance as existing on a continuum. At one end of the continuum there is complete separation between work and family. At the other end, there is complete integration (and blurring) of the work and non-work domains. It is possible, however that neither extreme strikes the ideal balance.

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Payback's a ... zzzzz

Lessen Your Sleep Debt

If you find it hard to wake up in the morning, or feel like falling asleep throughout the day, you may be racking up a high-interest debt. Sleep debt, that is.

Worse, getting too little sleep is not only tiring, it's fattening. Short sleep duration results in a 28 percent increase in ghrelin, a hormone that stimulates hunger, stores fat, and increases blood sugar. Try these tips to improve sleep:

- Go to bed at the same time every night, even on weekends.
- Avoid caffeine at least six hours before bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol two hours before bedtime.

Get tips and information about sleep and sleep disorders from the CDC at <http://www.cdc.gov/sleep>. □

Don't Sit Still – Spare Your Back

Many people spend the majority of the work day seated in front of a computer. Prolonged sitting can stress the back, shoulders, and neck, leading to poor posture, chronic pain syndromes, and lost productivity. In fact, 100 million workdays are lost each year as a result of occupational lower back pain, and it's the leading cause of disability for people younger than age 50.

Good posture is key to back health, but the chair you use is just as important. The next time you are in the office, note the following features about your chair:

- **Seat height is very important.** While seated, you should be able to place your feet flat on the floor. If your feet dangle, it may compress the nerves and blood vessels in your legs.
- **The seat pan should fit your size.** While seated, there should be a two- or three-finger wide space between the back of your knees and the front of the seat.
- **The backrest should support the small of your back.** If your chair does not offer this adjustment, use a rolled towel or cushion.
- **Armrests should be at least two inches wide, adjustable, and cushioned.**

To minimize the likelihood of musculoskeletal aches and pains, you should change positions frequently. Movement improves circulation to the muscles in your lower back and legs.

FOH's Ergonomics professionals help Federal agencies identify issues that affect employee comfort and performance. Contact FOH today to learn more. □

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How one manages the boundaries – and whether those boundaries encourage or discourage “flow” between work and family domains – is unique to each person based on how they perceive their work and family responsibilities.

Work and Life Management

Most of us generally use one of three basic approaches to manage the “traffic flow” between our work and home lives. These are:

- **The One-way Road:** You take work home but don't welcome family disruptions at work.
- **The Two-way Highway:** Work comes home with you, but you also entertain family interruptions on an equal status.
- **No Entry:** You rarely bring work home, and family rarely interferes during work hours.

Each of these approaches has benefits and costs. The “two-way highway” can lead to excessive integration, where family life can feel like an extension of work, or family causes continual distractions on the job, while a “one-way road” approach can create conflict when emergent or family issues arise.

The “no entry” approach, which minimizes the flow between domains, also has benefits and drawbacks. This approach might result in better focus at work, yet it may make it difficult for some to disengage from work to deal with pressing family issues.

Making a Change

If you would like to change how you balance work/life issues, first, take a good look at how your work/life boundaries measure up. You can assess your work/life management style by answering two questions:

- Can you adjust the normal boundaries and responsibilities of one domain to meet the demands of the other domain?
- How much does one domain spill over into the other? For example, do you bring too much work home or do you find you have many family-related distractions at work?

Are your boundaries clearly defined, yet flexible enough so you can deal with emergent issues? Or are they so flexible that you are not only working at home but distracted at work as well?

Getting Balance: Boost Your Work/Life IQ

Like time management, work/life management can be learned. The FOH EAP can help with strategies to reduce stress, improve time management, and enrich both work and non-work life. Enhanced work/life services are available to employees of participating agencies.

For more information, visit the OPM Web site at www.opm.gov/employment_and_benefits/worklife. □

Increase Your Emotional Intelligence

In today's increasingly collaborative, team-based work environments, employees must not only be skilled communicators, they must be able to contribute productively in teams, deal with stress, and manage conflict constructively. In other words, they need a high level of "emotional intelligence" (EI).

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence is not the same as IQ, nor is it tied to formal education. Broadly, EI is the ability to perceive, monitor, and control one's own emotions; be sensitive to the emotional responses of others; and to use reasoning rather than impulse to guide thoughtful, constructive action. There are four core EI competencies, according to Daniel Goleman, *author of Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. The competencies he cites are:

- **Self-Awareness:** The ability to recognize and control distressing feelings in the moment
- **Self-Management:** The ability to manage emotions and keep disruptive impulses in check, and connect/disconnect from such emotions appropriately based on situational requirements
- **Social Awareness:** Sensitivity to others' feelings, needs, and concerns; organizational awareness, and service orientation
- **Relationship Management:** The ability to collaborate, defuse conflict, and motivate others

Can You Increase Your Emotional Intelligence?

Biological impulses drive our emotions. While we can't do away with them, we need not be governed by them. Emotional intelligence is about achieving mastery over emotions by examining them, controlling the urge to act on impulses, and choosing to take thoughtful action.

The good news is that you can enhance your EI by breaking old habits and establishing new ones. Like changing any habit, it requires time and practice. If you wish to change how you respond to a situation, you must first change the way you think about it, and then alter your course of action. To do this, the techniques below might come in handy.

- **Cognitive Restructuring or "Reframing:"**
To change the way you perceive an emotionally charged situation, "frame" it differently in your mind and your emotions will follow.
- **Behavioral Restructuring:** Decide, in advance, on at least one alternative way to respond to stressful situations. When such a situation arises, choose the new response until it becomes a habit.

To start, concentrate on building skills in the four core competencies and it will greatly contribute to your professional and interpersonal success.

Emotions are Contagious

Both positive and negative emotions perpetuate themselves. At the workplace, the emotional state of one or two individuals can influence the emotional climate and productivity of an entire team. When negative emotions are present, it can effectively hijack attention away from productive tasks. On the other hand, upbeat moods enhance mental efficiency, creativity, and satisfaction levels.

Emotions and Health

Emotions impact not only performance, but health as well. Just as positive emotions fuel high performance, negative emotions drain energy. Over time, such emotions can become physiologically destructive – elevating heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Applying the skills associated with EI – reframing and restructuring – gives you control over your emotions, environment, and health.

The FOH EAP is a resource for employees of participating agencies. Contact the EAP for consultation and support to help develop strategies to improve personal and professional performance. □





Quick Links:

Influenza Information from CDC
www.CDC.gov/flu

CDC Disaster Preparedness
www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters

Weight-Control Information Network
<http://win.niddk.nih.gov>

U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
www.hhs.gov

Observances:

JANUARY 1 - 31

Thyroid Awareness Month
www.aace.com

FEBRUARY

AMD/Low Vision Awareness Month
<http://www.preventblindness.org>

MARCH 1 - 31

National Colorectal Cancer
Awareness Month
www.preventcancer.org/colorectal

FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH (FOH)

The Occupational Health Provider of
Choice for the Federal Government

FOH's mission, improving the health,
safety, and productivity of our Federal
employees, is our priority. Created by
Congress in 1946, FOH is a non-
appropriated service agency within
the U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services (HHS).

FOH offers a full range of
occupational health services—
including Clinical, Wellness/Fitness,
Employee Assistance Program (EAP),
Work/Life, Organizational
Development, and Environmental
Health and Safety programs—
exclusively to Federal employees.

Visit FOH on the Web at
www.FOH.hhs.gov.

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Managing Stress

The following suggestions will help you enjoy future holiday seasons to their fullest with a minimum of stress. Review these ideas and use those that work best for you:

- Take care of yourself. Eating healthy foods and getting plenty of rest will help you maintain your body's resistance to the physical symptoms of stress.
- Manage your time. Schedule your time and focus on your goals. Create a list of tasks to accomplish. Be sure to cross items off your list as they are completed – it will help you achieve a sense of accomplishment.
- Try deep muscle relaxation. Start by tensing your shoulders for about 10 seconds. Slowly release the tension and you will begin to feel your muscles relax. Try this exercise for all major muscle areas from your shoulders to your feet.
- Make time for fun. Take a break from your normal routine to ease tension. Physical exercise or just a change of scenery, like going to the movies, can help you relax.

The FOH EAP can help you identify and resolve personal concerns that increase stress, including issues relating to work, family relationships, financial concerns, or legal issues. Call today to learn more. □

Beware of (Hot) Dog

Eating processed meats* carries a 42% higher risk of heart disease and a 19% higher risk of type 2 diabetes than does eating unprocessed red meat, according to a recent Harvard School of Public Health study.

But don't stock up on steak yet. With nearly the same amounts of saturated fat and cholesterol as processed meat, unprocessed red meat is not exactly risk-free.

Watch a video review at <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/multimedia/video/2010/processedmeat>. □

*Processed meats are preserved by smoking, curing, salting, or adding chemical preservatives.

The FOH Federal Consortium EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training, and consultation to Federal employees and agencies throughout the United States. For administrative details about the program, contact Chiquita Cooper at 404.562.7950, ext. 125, or e-mail at Chiquita.Cooper@foh.hhs.gov. To visit us on the Web, please go to www.FOH4You.com.

Help is available all day, all week, all year. 800.222.0364, TTY: 888.262.7848.

This newsletter is brought to you by Federal Occupational Health (FOH), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Let's Talk is available electronically at www.foh.hhs.gov/eapnews.

For questions regarding this newsletter, please contact FOH at 800.457.9808, or visit us on the Web at www.FOH.hhs.gov/LT.