

How to help a distressed employee

Not all employees are comfortable talking to their managers, let alone telling them that they are feeling stressed. This is why it's important for you as a manager to create an atmosphere in which your staff will be at ease coming to you for help. You need to make it clear to them that their mental health is a top priority. Remember, what affects your employees will affect you. Burnout increases absenteeism, turnover, and work accidents, and lowers productivity as well as your organization's bottom line.

Make it a point to talk to your employees on a regular basis about how they are doing, and ask if there's anything they need from management. Conduct anonymous surveys to assess your staff's morale and stress level. It's much easier to deal with problems in their early stages than when an employee has reached total burnout.

If you notice signs that an employee is stressed, broach the subject diplomatically and with compassion. Here's how:

For work-related problems

In many cases, an employee's stress reaction is due to a work issue. It could be a tough workload, a recent change in responsibilities or position, project management issues, or a conflict with a colleague or supervisor.



- ❖ First, acknowledge your employee's complaint. Hear him or her out. Remember, you don't have to agree with the person, just validate his or her feelings. Praise your employee for raising the issue.
- ❖ Evaluate the employee's expectations. What is the extent of the problem? Is he or she just venting, or is action required?
- ❖ Identify the source or reason for the stress. Gather as much information as you can. If the issue is related to a conflict with other staff members, make sure to get all sides of the story. If it's a project management problem, get all the facts. Were the deadlines appropriate? Was the employee given all the necessary resources to complete the project? Is a client making last-minute changes to the original plan?



- ❖ Proceed with whatever intervention is required for the situation. For example, if it's a workload issue, reassign some of the work or adjust the deadlines. If the problem is related to work-life balance, try as much as you can to accommodate the employee's needs.
 - Accommodate family obligations, like time off when a child or dependent is ill
 - If it's financially feasible for the company, create a daycare on the premises; create an exercise room or offer gym memberships
 - Limit overtime unless it's an emergency
 - Offer shift-work arrangements or flex-time, telecommuting, work sharing, compressed work weeks, or part-time work
 - Assign and set reasonable goals and deadlines for all employees
 - Reduce the need to multitask
 - Reduce distractions like emails or instant messaging.

For personal problems

If the employee is dealing with a personal problem, a different, more tactful approach is required. You may learn more about the employee than you want to know or should know. Spillover (bringing work problems home and vice versa) is common in stressful jobs. The difficulty for managers when an employee is dealing with a personal problem, however, is the issue of confidentiality.

Here are some guidelines for personal issues:

- ❖ Spend more time listening than talking. Be an active listener; show the employee (through words and body language) that you care about what he or she has to say.
- ❖ Don't broach subjects where your attitudes or values will prevent you from being compassionate. When an employee is dealing with something that is beyond your expertise, suggest that they talk to a professional.
- ❖ Remember, your goal is not to solve the employee's problem, it's to let them vent and to be understanding. Delegate the issue to people who are trained to deal with these types of problems. Again, this is another reason why implementing an Employee Assistance Program will pay dividends.

For unavoidable Problems

Some stressors that employees face, like cut-backs, lay-offs, inflexible deadlines, irreversible changes, or a lack of company resources, cannot be changed. However, what you can do as a manager is buffer their impact on your staff.

- ❖ Acknowledge the problem. Validate your employees' feelings ("I know this is really frustrating for all of you.").
- ❖ Reiterate the need to find a solution, even though it may not be a perfect one.
- ❖ Brainstorm with employees to come with possible alternative solutions or ways to cope.



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