

Stressed at work? How to move up or out

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More than a third of American workers suffer from chronic work stress, a recent survey says. Here's how to cope and make a plan to either move up the ranks or head for the exit.

By Stephenie Overman, contributor

FORTUNE -- If you are burnt out by your job and looking elsewhere, you've got plenty of company.

In fact, more than a third of U.S. employees (36%) say they're experiencing chronic work stress, according to this year's American Psychological Association survey. And 32% of the survey's 1,546 respondents say they plan to seek employment elsewhere within the next year.

Those who responded to the survey cited salary concerns, lack of opportunities for advancement, heavy workloads and long hours as sources of their stress, according to David W. Ballard, who is head of the APA's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program.

Some stress is positive, according to the APA, releasing adrenaline that can enhance a person's performance and problem-solving ability. But chronic stress, defined as constant and persisting over an extended period of time, can cause anxiety, insomnia,

muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. Such stress puts people at risk for developing illnesses like heart disease, diabetes and depression.

"It's easy to get isolated, trudging to work every day," Ballard says. He recommends building new skills and maintaining connections with friends and colleagues who can be sources of brighter career opportunities.

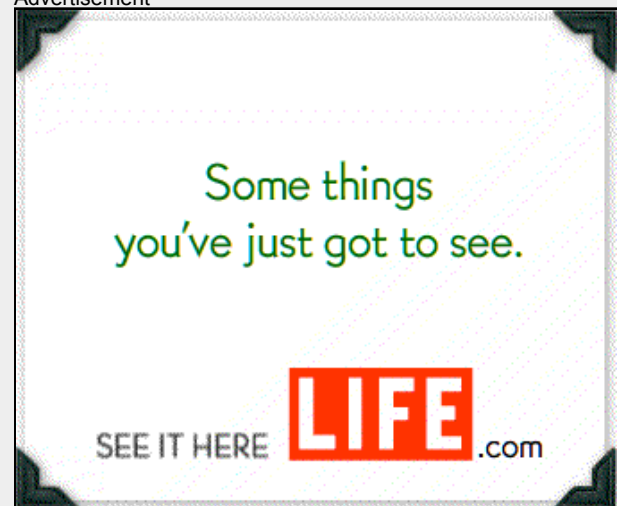
Take control of the situation

An advancement or exit strategy can counter chronic stress.

"Employees can boost their own morale because they realize that they are not helpless victims tied to a bad economy. They are preparing themselves to embrace future opportunities when they become available," says Cheryl E. Palmer, president of Call to Career in Silver Spring, Md.

If a heavy workload seems to preclude time for accumulating skills and connections, perhaps it's time to let go of some of the

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overwhelming details of the job.

"Most times, if something is 80% done, it's ready to go. The extra 20% really won't make much of a difference," says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, author of *Suddenly In Charge: Managing Up, Managing Down, Succeeding All Around*. "This philosophy will help you leave the office before 8 p.m. each evening," she says, and it will free up time to prepare a move up -- or out.

The key to moving up is demonstrating that you can perform at the next level, says Dorothy Tannahill-Moran, a career coach in Portland, Ore. "You should be clamoring to be given work from the levels above you. Ask for 'extra' work from someone who is overburdened or ask to fill in for them when they go on vacation."

Try to anticipate problems that you can solve without being asked to do it, she adds. "It shows you are responsible and committed."

Company-sponsored training is a good way to acquire new skills on company time, Palmer says. If you're thinking of switching companies, make sure the training will be useful outside your current organization.

Ask for help

You can even turn to your boss for help with work stress and with moving forward.

"It's one thing to do the work of two people while a position is being re-staffed. It's another to continue to take on two jobs for the rest of your working life," says Chinsky Matuson, who is president of Human Resource Solutions in Northampton, Mass.

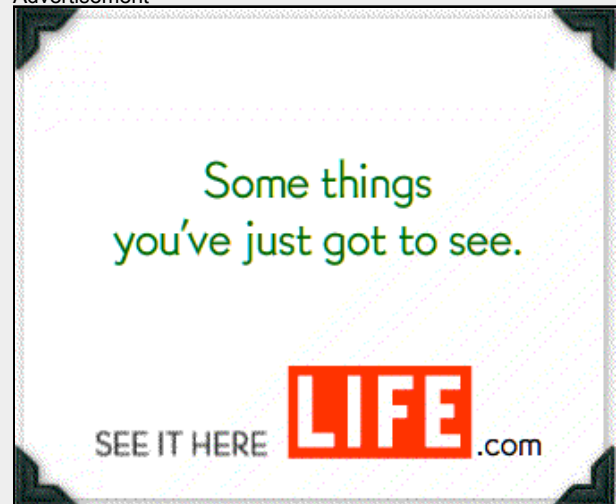
"Let your boss know that you are drowning and ask for a life preserver to keep you afloat."

But before you walk into the boss's office and announce that you're stressed, think about your long-term goals, recommends Kathy Kane, senior vice president of talent management for Adecco Group North America.

"Think about how your [current] role fits in. What is it I'm passionate about, how do I build a career here? That can help get the conversation going about what you're doing now to build your career," says Kane. "I think any boss would love to have somebody talk about the future instead of saying 'I have too much on my plate.'"

Your boss is likely to have better insight into the different types of careers available at your company and know where your skills will be most useful, she says. "Most bosses can help you plan for your future if you bring them enough information. Your boss may say this is just not going to happen here." If that's the case, he or she might be

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willing to put you in contact with someone outside the company.

"Let [your boss] be part of helping you succeed. You shouldn't be so scared of going to your boss. At the end of the day, they want people to succeed," Kane says.

Develop an exit strategy

If you've got your eye set on the nearest way out, start to work on your exit plan now.

"There is no reason to wait for a news flash that it's time to start looking for another job," says Tannahill-Moran.

Update your resume and create a complete list of people you want to keep in touch with.

Pull together documentation of your achievements, such as performance reviews, awards or emails from your boss complimenting you on a job well done.

Jennifer Davidson, a career coach in Portland, Ore., recommends preparing for future opportunities by getting an accountability partner.

Whether you ask a friend or hire a coach, "find someone who you schedule time with to specifically discuss your career goals, resume readiness and networking strategies," says Davidson.

"Make the career accountability session work for you. A coffee date out, happy hour or a weekly walk. Simply do something that helps you fuel your energy tank," she says.

Start each session with five minutes of venting about whatever you want, without requiring feedback from your partner,

Davidson advises. "The five minutes allows you to get things off your chest and gives you a voice. However, five minutes is not so long that you will spend all of your time being negative."

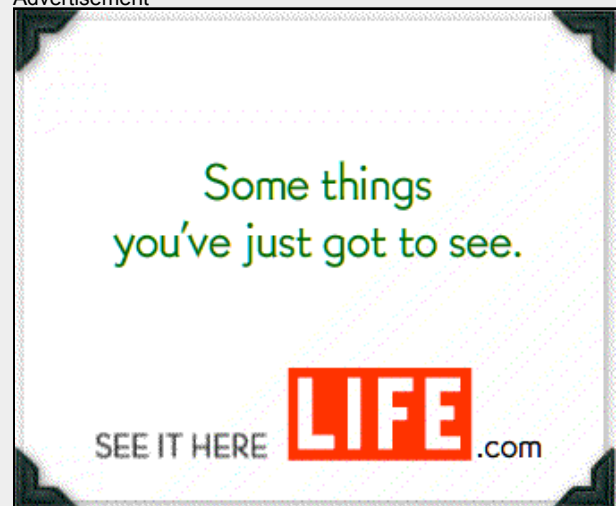
Taking time out for accountability sessions will increase your energy, morale and provide perspective, she says. "Imagine exactly what you want, how it will feel and what it looks like. Know what you want, write it out and share it with your career accountability partner. Accountability reminds you that you are not alone and gives you a set time to focus on the future in a positive way."

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