

# **Managing Workplace Stress:**

## **Work Overload + High Demands + Low Control = Unfulfilled Goals**

by Thomas W. McKee

Work overload, high demands, and low control often result in unfulfilled goals. Translation: *STRESS*. And since most of the time we cannot change these stressors, such as an emergency meeting called by a client or boss, it is essential to learn how to manage the way we respond to workplace stress. These three proactive stress busters have become essential tools in my stress management toolbox.

### **Stress Buster One: Neutralize Work Overload with Small Victories**

When we are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work overload, we often become paralyzed. We need rejuvenation.

Last May a participant in one of my workshops shared how for the last twelve years he had a 1962 Thunderbird in his garage—in pieces. He had wanted to restore this car, but the job seemed overwhelming. Last January he placed a white board in his garage and determined not to go to bed until he could write a completed task on that white board. The task could be as simple as "polish a headlight." He announced to the class that in only five months the car was almost done. Breaking the project down so that we can achieve small victories makes the overload manageable.

### **Stress Buster Two: Regain Control with Routines**

Routines stabilize my life. They are the proactive, disciplined rituals that produce balance, harmony and a sense of control.

What are your lunch routines? The average manager spends fifteen minutes a day for lunch in front of the computer—working. This is not a proactive way to gain control. Recently I was working with production supervisors who are under the constant pressure of a high quality production schedule. They have recently started spending their lunch time playing dominos together. They have a rule that they cannot talk about work, and when lunch is over they all go back to their projects with a new perspective and energy. Some managers work out at the gym, go for a walk, run, or go out to lunch with some friends. I recently heard about a group of emergency room residents that used their 15-minute breaks to have foot-races up the stairwells. They went back to a high stress environment laughing and feeling good.

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People can choose to control the following areas of their lives: nutrition, breaks (i.e. lunch), exercise, spirituality, planning, sleep, and even commuting. Commuting seems out of control because I'm trying to schedule a one-hour commute in 45 minutes. However, listening to audio-tapes during a commute, or reading the newspaper on light-rail puts me in control.

Establish disciplined routines in these areas and you will not only feel better physically, but also feel like your life has rhythm and healing.

### **Stress Buster Three: Just Do It**

Unfulfilled goals are a silent stressor. For years my first book was in my mind, but not on paper. I read that James A. Michener claimed that many of his neighbors were better writers than he. The difference, however, was that he wrote and they didn't. He would get up each morning and write for at least four hours, often throwing away over 80% of what he wrote. I got the point and realized that I needed to quit thinking about writing and just start writing. It made all the difference. Spending a few hours a week writing, I soon had the first book ready for press.

When I am stressed because of high demand and low control, I need to take this advice:

Neutralize work overload with small victories

Develop healthy, disciplined rituals

And, Just do it