Managing work stress is all about building your capacity to adapt well and bounce back from difficult circumstances. As a supervisor, you can serve as a role model to your team in becoming more resilient and preventing burnout. How? You have the ability to lessen many of work’s greatest stressors for the individuals you supervise.

**What are work stressors?**

Work stressors are common in the workplace due to increasing demands and limited resources. Below are the four most common work stressors:

- **Role Conflict**: Facing conflicting demands (i.e. succeeding at one part of the job will mean failure in another part).
- **Role Ambiguity**: When expectations and goals are not well understood (i.e. unsure of responsibilities and how to prioritize issues as they come up; lack of clarity about what success looks like).
- **Interpersonal Conflict**: When disagreements and conflict become personal and emotional, and are not addressed.
- **Lack of Social Support**: Feeling disconnected from others within and outside of work; lack of help solving problems or not enough emotional support.

**What happens when work stressors linger?**

Burnout. This is how the mind and body try to cope with a high level of ongoing work stress. These are the three most common symptoms of burnout:

- **Exhaustion**: being tired and worn out, or feeling “drained” of energy.
- **Cynicism**: disengagement or detachment from the work. *This can sound like: “I don’t even care. I’m done, I’m over it.”*
- **Inefficacy**: feeling helpless and ineffective, having trouble concentrating, and decreasing in productivity.

Burnout can impact performance. It’s easy to write people off when you start to see these types of behaviors, but first consider, might they be overwhelmed or need more support?

**Watch Out for: Compassion Fatigue**

If you work with other people (e.g., direct reports, students, clients, patients, etc.), you might experience compassion fatigue when:

- You consistently work with others who are experiencing a high level of stress
- You have a high capacity for empathy
- You’re in a work environment where work/life balance is not
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What can I do to prevent burnout?

Preventing burnout involves effectively managing work stressors which requires resilience.

What is resilience? Resilience is your own capacity to adapt well, and helping your teams and departments adapt in the face of stress, change, and uncertainty. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.

Keep In Mind Individual Differences

We all have different temperaments and the ability to adjust which lead some of us to handle stress more naturally and easily than others. Regardless of these factors, resilience can be learned and developed.

Recharge

Be intentional about creating time to relax and recharge: free time between the workdays, during weekends, and holidays or vacations. At work, schedule short breaks or try unscheduled breaks by shifting your attention to other work tasks.

Watch Out for: the “Dark Side” of Resilience

Is there such a thing as too much resilience? Yes. Resilience can be overused, which can lead to strengths becoming weaknesses. In addition, people who are overly resilient may not realize they are reaching the threshold of doing too much, risking burnout. For example, overly resilient people may:

- **Focus on unattainable goals**, which may lead to them eventually giving up. For example, taking on a leadership role or challenging project without carefully thinking through the time and effort it will take. At a certain point they might realize that they have overestimated their abilities and will have no choice but to give up or ask for help.

- **Take on more than they can manage**, which might encourage leaders to assign them even more projects and assignments. Leaders may not recognize that these individuals might be close to burning out.

- **Accept an unhealthy or even toxic work culture or environment.** Overly resilient people may not realize when a toxic work culture is beginning to impact their health and well-being. They may do their best to adapt to a bad situation even when it is harmful.

As a supervisor, you can help your team to adapt to difficult circumstances by coaching them to use effective coping strategies by reducing or even removing work stressors.
How can I build resilience around work stressors?

Building resilience is an ongoing skill that requires **self-awareness and practice** with the outcome of **viewing yourself positively** and **having confidence in your strengths**. Building resilience also means **finding healthy ways to manage the stress** at work and the ability to coach your team to use effective coping skills.

### DETERMINE YOUR LEVEL OF CONTROL

Focus on what you can control and respond accordingly:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>No control/Influence</th>
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| This is where you have the most influence and control. Focus on making progress toward important goals, skill building, and taking the time to manage your own stress by considering:  
- What are some things you can control in the short-term and long-term? Oftentimes, we do have the ability to influence and control things in the long-term.  
- Ask yourself, “What is one thing I know I can accomplish now that will move me forward?”  
- How are you feeling about your own needs and what do you need to do to take care of yourself? | Here you have some level of influence and control but it may require collaboration with others. Consider:  
- Are you confident in your skills to solve problems rather than detaching from challenging situations, wishing they would just go away?  
- Do you have self-awareness and know the circumstances and people that might trigger stress in you?  
- Are you able to trust your ability to use your strengths in working through stressful situations? | This is where decisions may have a significant impact to you or your team/department, but no one asks for your opinion about it. Consider:  
- Can you be adaptable when things change and be willing to accept that goals and plans may need to shift accordingly?  
- Do you look at challenging events outside of your control to discover more about yourself and how you might use these circumstances as a means of personal growth? |

As a supervisor, part of your job is helping people see what they can control and helping coach them on how they can influence a situation.

If having no control or influence causes burnout, it’s time to consider if you are in the right job or situation or if it might be time to walk away.
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SELCT A COPING STRATEGY

If you do have influence/control then you can cope with a situation through problem solving, reframing the situation, or managing its impact. As a supervisor, you can coach individuals to do the same.

A. Problem-solving

Resilient people find the most productive way forward by either adjusting the growing demands at work or by seeking more resources to help meet those demands. Understanding the main source of work stress will help you address it, or even remove it:

Role Conflict: Clarify roles and responsibilities

Are individual expectations clear? Does everyone on the team know what others on the team are doing? Be sure everyone on the team knows what is expected of them in what (results) they are doing and how (behaviors) they are expected to work.

Role Ambiguity: Provide ongoing feedback and coaching

Talk regularly about capacity, goals, and progress towards the goals. Help set boundaries with client and other external requests.

Interpersonal Conflict: Use of conflict management skills

Start by managing emotions and practicing reflective listening.* Help determine the source of conflict and encourage team members to be open in asking for and providing support to one another.

Lack of Support: Support by managing emotions and solving problems in day-to-day work

Recognize even small successes in team meetings and in other ways, noting the impact their efforts have made on others.

Let others know that your relationships with them are a priority to you, which will signal that you respect and value them.

Establish and revisit the norms that foster psychological safety,** this will help improve honest and open communication.

* See the Managing Emotions and Building Trust quick guides, part of the Managing Conflict module for more information on delayed response, non-reactive statements, and reflective listening.

** See the Quick Guide to Establishing Norms and Expectations, part of the Leading Teams module for more information on psychological safety.
B. Reframing the problem

If the stressor cannot be removed and still remains, take a closer look at your mindset and assumptions. Often times what seems like a crisis, is not actually one. Consider how such situations fit within the bigger picture.

- Do you tend to overreact to minor issues or take things too personally?
- What are some things you can control in the short-term and long-term? Can priorities be shifted?

C. Managing the impact

If there is no or very little control over the work stressor, then focus your effort on managing its impact by prioritizing self care, and, if possible, removing or distancing yourself from the difficult situation.

- Are you or your direct report(s) being mindful about self-care (healthy eating, exercise, sleep, etc.)?
- Can you remove yourself or your direct report(s) from parts of the difficult situation?
- What can be re-assigned or delegated?
- Could you build some positive, supportive relationships to counteract the ones that drain you?

Stress at work is a growing concern that causes loss of productivity and engagement that might lead to burnout. Knowing the most common work stressors will help you determine the most productive way forward and build resilience in you, your team, and department.