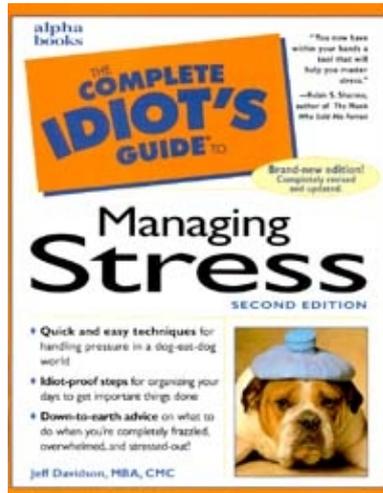


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PART 1 WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

Would you like to reduce the level of stress in your life? Welcome to a club with tens of millions of members in the United States and billions more around the world. Life, even from birth, is inherently stressful. Life's

no fun when the amount of daily stress you experience is too high.

All around you there's evidence that you're experiencing stress. It hits you in the face, the gut, or wherever else you might personally experience it (maybe it's the base of your neck). If you learn to manage your stress now, the quality of the rest of your life will be better. Sure, new events and new stressors fall like rain into each life. If you're armed with effective coping techniques, however, your future will look brighter and brighter.

Enough opening banter these first three chapters examine an array of factors that lead to stress in your life. The stressed-out club has the largest membership on earth! Stress wears many different faces, and many people find their domestic lives are more stressful than their professional lives! Armed with these pleasant notions, let's continue.



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Newfoundland and Ireland. A scant 10 years later, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

And the Insistent Beat Goes On

You know what's happened since then. In the 1980s, we witnessed the development and enhancement of cellular phones, fax machines, voice mail, and all the rest. By the end of the 1990s, online communications

via cable, ASDL, and ISDN lines sped images and data to us 28 to 30 times faster than the earlier, simpler modems. Capabilities for gathering and disseminating information will continue to be greatly enhanced with each passing year. At the same time, our expectations also will continue to increase.

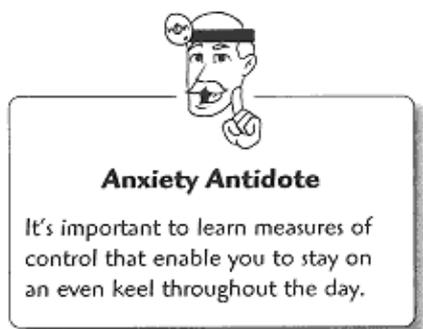
Even the simplest breakthroughs, which might seemingly have no downside, contribute to increased expectations and ultimately to stress. Take the washing machine. Prior to its development and widespread use, people commonly wore the same clothes several days in a row (or at least several days in a week or a month) before washing them. With the advent of the washing machine, higher standards of cleanliness developed. Soon it became unthinkable *not* to wear a freshly washed shirt to work every single day. WISK detergent, the staunch defender against ring-around-the-collar, still sells today because of the sociocultural expectation that no one should dare be caught at work without a freshly washed shirt.

The list can go on and on and on. From innovative products in personal hygiene to chewing gum and breath mints, we're all making ourselves frantic in our quest to live up to social expectations and living in fear that we might slip up.

A Margin Call

In his book *Living On the Margin*, Dr. Richard A. Swenson says that there's a specific point at which we reach overload" .Â .Â .Â .Â where the demands on us exceed our limits. We have, as a culture, crossed that line." Swenson points out that 268 million Americans are all "hitting the wall together." He believes that the demands on our time and energy and our ability to cope with these demands can be mapped and plotted with the same accuracy as the path of a comet.

As science and technology vastly outpace our ability to keep up, we predictably find that our responses to our surroundings are not what they used to be.



Swenson says we're not simply facing time hurdles, we're expending mental, emotional, and physical energy. He points out, for example, that by the time your days are up on this earth, you'll have learned how to operate some 20,000 different devices from can openers to cam-corders. Name a generation in history that's experienced even 1/20 of that.

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One Thing at a Time

Regardless of how quickly you proceed from task to task, you'll do your best work on *all* your projects if you give your complete and undivided attention to the individual task currently at hand, for however brief a time that might be. In other words, develop your concentration so that, even if you only have 10 to 15 seconds to focus on what confronts you, those 10 or 15 seconds are highly directed to the task at hand. Let me give you an example:

You're sitting by the airport gate waiting to board when your flight is suddenly canceled. A swarm of angry customers surrounds the gate agent looking to quickly reroute their passages. How does the gate agent handle the throng? One passenger at a time, intently focusing on that passenger's previous itinerary, looking at the computer monitor to see what options are available, and making arrangements that satisfy the customer's needs. Only then does he turn to handle the next customer's complaint. Whether it takes one minute per customer or five, a skilled gate agent stays relatively unflapped.

What's Worth Your Precious Attention?

If you have five tasks confronting you and you're stymied as to how to proceed, what is the fastest and easiest way to tackle the five tasks and keep your stress in check? The answer is to prioritize! Put the tasks in order of importance and handle them one at a time. Child's play, you say anyone could have figured that out. Anyone could but hardly anyone does.



Calming Concept

Handling one customer or tackling one project at a time rubs up against the very nature of modern society, which seems to demand that you do as many things at once as you can. The modern-day work ethic seems to be telling you to just get it all done *now*. Never mind how stressful it is—jump on your horse and ride off in all directions.

The modern tendency to try to do everything at once turns up everywhere. Consider your last visit to your health club, for example. You no doubt saw lots of people getting on the stair climber while wearing headphones. They're listening to their favorite tunes, a lecture, or perhaps simply the radio. What they're *not* doing, however, is tuning into the rhythm and therefore the relaxation of their physical exercise.

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They're not focusing on the moment. Some people take it even further. I once saw a headphones-wearing woman get on the stair-climber and then whip out a book to read. All she needed to bump her multitasking into truly high gear was to take a call on her cell phone as well.

Would you surmise then that, back at the office, our multitasking stair-climber tackles tasks one at a time? Probably not. But she's not alone. Management sage Dr. Peter Drucker once conducted his own survey of top

executives. He found that they, too, attempt to do too much, resulting in a loss of productivity and an increase in stress.

Drowning in Paper

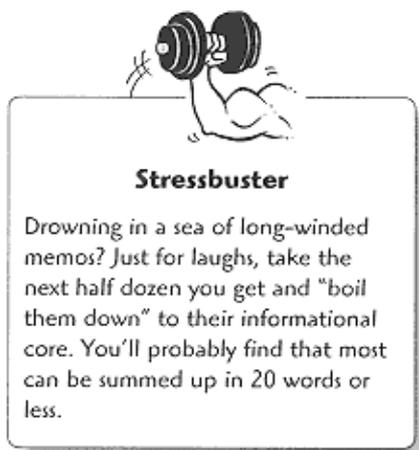
Another key source of distraction can be found in the sheer volume of paper that confronts us all. Personal computers, fax machines, laser printers, and personal copiers combine to produce a larger outpouring of paper to inundate your life than anyone could have predicted 20 to 25 years ago. Paper gluts the offices of industry, government, professionals, retailers, you name it.

F.D.R.'s Personal Paperwork Reduction Act

Is all this paper really necessary? I once heard an anecdote, the veracity of which I cannot verify, attributed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president of the United States from 1933 to 1945.

Supposedly, F.D.R. commissioned a special task force to determine the answer to a question critical to his administration. The task force met for a period of eight days and generated a voluminous report. The task force spokesperson brought the report to F.D.R., who was busy at the time. He told the messenger, "Please, boil it down." The spokesperson left, returning in a couple hours with a slimmer version of the report.

F.D.R. looked at it and said, "No, I mean *boil it down*." Again the spokesperson left, this time returning in about an hour with a concise, executive summary of eight pages.



Even that, however, was not enough. Two more times, F.D.R. was presented with an ever-decreasing handful of papers, and two more times he asked for greater concision. When the aide returned with a single paragraph, F.D.R. finally said, "Can you give it to me in a sentence?"

The moral of this story? Everything and I mean *everything* can be communicated more succinctly and with greater precision if you try.

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Pulling the Plug on the Paperwork Overflow

How can you do your part to cut back on the volume of paper you cope with regularly?

- ☞ Quickly reduce books to their essence by scanning the entire book. Copy the key pages you want to retain along with the title page and the table of contents. Recycle the book when you're done.
- ☞ With other printed information such as catalogs, fliers, and brochures, scan them quickly, break out the few scraps of information relevant to your needs, and recycle the rest.
- ☞ If you don't have time right now to assess incoming papers, books, catalogs, or brochures, at least get them off your desk. Set up a drawer to temporarily house them *out of sight* (where they're out of mind). When you have time, go back to the drawer, take out the items, and as F.D.R. would say, "boil them down!"
- ☞ For each item of paper that crosses your desk, ask yourself the following questions:
 - "What is the issue behind the document?"
 - "Should I have received this at all?"
 - "How else can this be handled? Can I delegate this?"
 - "Will it matter if I don't handle it at all?"
 - "Can I file it under Things to Review Next Month?"

Why is cutting back on the paper you face each day a stress-reducing strategy? Because the volume itself can be overwhelming and because it's hard to find the few valuable nuggets of information you need when they're buried in all the extraneous paper that usually surrounds them.

Timing Is (Nearly) Everything

If workplace distractions still seem insurmountable even though you've taken to heart the words here and in Chapter 7, you might need to examine the concept of timing. In other words, sometimes you can cut back on the destructive effects of distractions by simply adjusting the timing of what you do.

Getting Up with the Early Birds . . .

Could you, would you adjust your schedule so you go to bed earlier, wake up earlier, and get to the office before everyone else? Many top executives do, and they remark that this is one of the bright spots of their day when they get the most done. In the early morning, the phones haven't started ringing, and no one even knows they're in the office, and there's no one to wander by "just to chat."

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Calming Concept

We're all supposed to know our job inside out, current events (political and economic), the top 10 pop culture hits (movie, music, and whatever else), and the tag lines from last night's popular sitcom. Trying to keep up on all of this can make you crazy. If you really *must* stay up-to-date this way, just ask your more bleary-eyed colleagues around the water cooler. They'll be happy to fill you in and you won't have to stay up nights, personally getting the scoop from Leno or Letterman.

This kind of schedule adjustment might require a concerted effort to change a longstanding habit. America has become a nation of night owls, so you're probably staying up too late. (I'll discuss the role of sleep in Chapter 13, "Running on Empty.") It can be done, however. Before the 1960s, the concept of staying up late to catch the news and the late-night talk shows was unheard of. Then Steve Allen and Jack Paar became the first in a long line of talk show hosts (the most famous being Johnny Carson) who induced an entire nation to stay up later than it was accustomed to.

Today, Leno and Letterman are battling it out every night, and they're followed by all the "late-late" talk shows that go well into the morning hours. Is it any wonder, then, that so many millions of people drag themselves into the office in the morning? Where is it written that you have to be among the sleep-deprived? Turning in earlier can make a difference in your stress level, and all you'll miss is a couple of jokes.

••• *Or Staying Until the Cows Have Gone Home*

You might not be a morning person millions of people aren't. If you're not at your best during the early part of the day, you might want to reconsider your departure time from work instead. If you customarily leave between 4:30 and 5:30 in the afternoon, only to fight your way home in that moving parking lot they call a freeway, perhaps it would be better to leave at 6 or 6:30 P.M. after everyone else has taken off. Then, when you actually *do* head for home, you'll have missed the worst of the rush-hour traffic. You might actually manage to get in that extra hour of work and still get home close to your usual time!

Of course, we don't want to confuse the issues. In earlier chapters, I discussed the vital importance of not overworking, and I stressed that you shouldn't stay late. That's still good advice as a general rule. If, however, in your particular instance based on your job, where you live, with whom you live, your commuting distance, and your mode of transportation it makes sense for you to work a later shift, by all means go for it. Just

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don't overload your day with working hours. If you leave an hour later in the evening, go in an hour later as well.

Shake Me, Wake Me

To make sure you have many viable options, here are more ways to shake up your routine and whip distractions so you can work productively with less stress and feel good about yourself and your career.

Find workplace alternatives to your office. When you change your scenery, you open up new vistas and escape interruptions. The anti-stress benefits are immense and immediate. When you do this for certain tasks (especially tasks that require creative thinking), you'll be more productive than ever.

Let your mail sit for a day or two. Postpone tearing through all your mail. We tend to place an immediacy upon things that often is unnecessary. Most communications are not so urgent that you need to attend to them on the very day you receive them. When you're away for a few days and have several days of mail to plow through, often you're more efficient at handling it *because* of the increased volume!

If possible, hold all calls for a day or two. Think of it as if you're on vacation and are unable to be reached for a couple days. Would the world come to an end? Probably not. You don't have to respond immediately to every call. When you hold your calls for a few hours or for an entire day you open up a block of time so you can get things done in a way that would be impossible if you were preoccupied with answering calls. You don't want to be totally inaccessible all the time, but you can coach potential callers to adapt to your schedule (see Chapter 7).



Anxiety Antidote

I can proofread much better on the porch of my house than while sitting at my desk. Identify places that are welcome retreats where you can go and work—a library, a park, even a shopping center.

Mind Over Distractions

Even if you can't put an end to the distractions that occur during your day, there are simple mental techniques you can use to diminish their damaging effects. Dr. Wayne Dyer, author of *Your Erroneous Zones*, *Pulling Your Own Strings*, *You'll See It When You Believe It*, and a variety of other self-help books, recalls an instance when he was tranquilly looking out at the scenery, and a gentleman on the next property began using a power mower with a particularly wicked engine noise.

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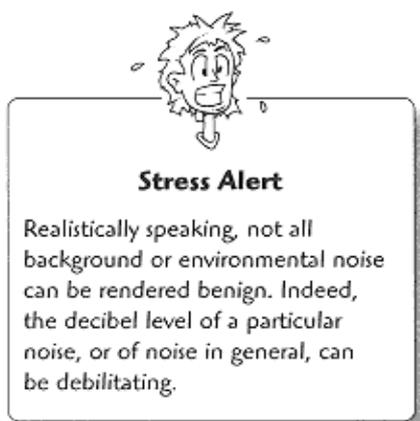
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Each time the power mower came close to where Dyer was sitting, he became upset. The noise was disrupting his quiet contemplation. After a while, however, Dyer managed to incorporate the noise of the mower into his environment. It no longer was a distraction, nor did it diminish his feelings of tranquillity.

How did Dyer get to this hallowed state? He accepted that people cutting grass are a normal part of the overall environment and that there's a rhythm and a hum to the power mower, much like that of a gurgling brook or other phenomena of nature. He was able, in other words, to let it slip into the background.



How can you make this technique work for you? Imagine you're trying to read while on an airplane. Suddenly, someone three rows back starts coughing. If you focus on the cough, you'll find yourself dreading the next time he or she coughs. You'll start *listening* for the cough, *anticipating* it. Sure enough, you won't get any reading done.

If you simply accept that coughs happen, however even loud, obnoxious, airplane-rattling coughs you can tune it out and continue to focus your attention on your book. More often than not, the distraction of the cough will diminish, sometimes to the point where you don't even think about it.

Affirm and Win

Tuning out a distraction is one way to go. Using it affirmatively is another. Here's how this technique works: Suppose you're in your office and someone in the office suite upstairs is banging on the wall a couple times every three or four minutes. Obviously, some type of equipment installation or office renovation is going on. How do you take such a potential disruption and turn it to your favor? You can use affirmations to creatively employ potential distractions as triggers to help you concentrate more deeply.

Mentally say to yourself, "With each bang on the wall, I will become even more focused on the task at hand." Thereafter, with each bang on the wall, allow your concentration to get more focused and more intense. This won't happen automatically. At first, each outside disturbance will continue to be annoying. If you stick with the process, however, each successive noise will, miraculously, begin to diminish in amplitude and, seemingly, in frequency.

Once you are adept at this process, you'll reach the point that you don't even hear the external noise. You'll still key into it subconsciously, however, as a signal to tighten your focus.

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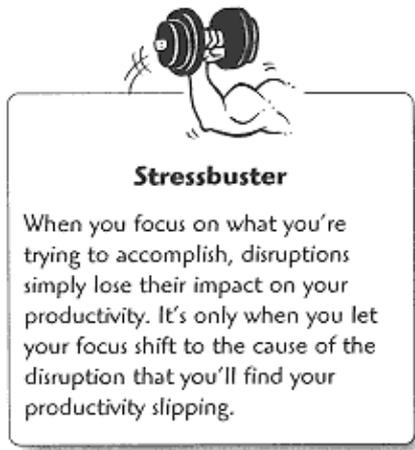
Calming Concept

Taking control of the noises you tune into isn't as hard as it sounds. Think about people who buy property under the flight path of a major airport. How could they possibly live with planes flying overhead all day long? After a few weeks, however, the noise of the flights overhead becomes part of the overall environment. The noise is no longer disruptive, stress inducing, or even particularly worth noting.

You Gotta Have Zen

With the success of the NBA's Chicago Bulls in the 1990s, the coaching methods and philosophies of Phil Jackson have become of interest to many people (and not just basketball fans). In Jackson's book, *Sacred Hoops*, he discusses his approach to the game and to life in general. Jackson, who has been meditating in the Zen Buddhist fashion for more than 20 years, drew on his meditational experiences when he coached his team:

"Basketball is a game, a journey, a dance. I emphasize to the players that when they work together, good things happen. [It] requires shifting from one objective to another at lightning speed. To excel, you need to act with a clear mind and be totally focused. The secret is not thinking. This means quieting the endless jabbering of thoughts so that your body can act instinctively."



When Jackson encountered a particularly intense moment, instead of focusing on a mistake or disruption, he focused on *recovering from* the disruption and moving on to the next challenge in the game.

Likewise, your ability to recover from interruptions, distractions, and all the other malarkey that goes on in today's contemporary offices will enable you to get more work done each day, to feel less stress, and to feel better about the whole deal.

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Relief Is a Maneuver Away

Here are a variety of other short-term maneuvers that can bring relief from office interruptions.

- ✂ Take a walk. Whatever is distracting you might be gone by the time you return. If not, perhaps it'll be less of a distraction.
- ✂ Turn on a fan, the air-conditioning system, or some office equipment. Its hum can help serve as a noise mask.
- ✂ Keep an eye out for distraction-free sanctuaries wherever they might be. This might include the lunchroom after the line closes, the chairs in your building's lobby, or a rooftop overlook.
- ✂ Coach others to support you in your quest for quietude. Ask them not to interrupt you at certain times of day, for example.

The Least You Need to Know

- An interruption-management system can reduce your daily disruptions by half or more.
- Multitasking is fine for office equipment, but it's a bad idea for you.
- Consider rescheduling. Maybe you need to get to the office much earlier or stay later.
- Mental methods for reducing distractions can be the most powerful of all.

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Chapter 9

The Office Danger Zone: When Stress Leads to Violence



In This Chapter

- The increasing possibility of violence at work
- The dangers of workplace stress
- Dealing with an abusive manager
- Becoming Mr. or Ms. Congeniality

If your work environment is stressful but relatively tolerable, you might be inclined to skip this chapter. It's a good idea however, to skim through it at least once.

This chapter tells you what you need to know if someone you work with, work for, or who works for you is a candidate for workplace violence. I'm assuming that you personally are not prone to violence, regardless of how much stress you experience professionally or personally.

A Rising Tide of Aggression at Work

"Trench Coat Mafia Members Kill 11 Students, One Teacher, and Themselves"

"FBI Arrests Five Teenagers Plotting Mass Murder at School"

"Sociologists Agree That People in This Country Are Just Angrier These Days"

Headlines like these are appearing with increasing frequency, and you might have even witnessed acts of violence at work, at school, or in between. The phenomenon of

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Finding Comfort in Ultra-Rapid Change

Professor Charles Hardy, author of *The Age of Paradox*, has this to say:

We stand at a crossroads, seeking our way to the future. It is a place of paradox, confusion of simultaneous opposites, of unexpected consequences, of altered meanings and oxymorons. What was once obvious, like the necessity of economic growth, is now hedged with qualifications. We thought we knew how to run organizations, but the organizations of today bear no resemblance to the ones we knew. We're confused because things don't behave the way we instinctively expect them to behave. What worked well the last time around is not guaranteed to work well the next time.

This paradoxical living could be stressful, but I tend to find comfort in it. Why? Because everyone is pretty much in the same boat. There's a certain equality among this flock of human beings as we encounter the brave new world. The changes will come swiftly and no one will have an edge.

We're All Equally Confused

Lowell Catlett, noted author and professor at New Mexico State University, says that the rate of change in the United States and Canada is such that a new high technology is introduced to the marketplace every 17 seconds. That's more than three a minute, more than 200 an hour, and well more than 5,000 a day. With each new high-technology product comes at least 100 related services. Yet, in just a few years, there will be 17 new high-technology products produced every *second*.

But you can't eat more than one dinner at a time (unless you're a real glutton), drive more than one car at a time, sleep in more than one bed at a time, or appreciably speed up bodily functions in some vain, ludicrous attempt to stay on top of "it all." Nor will you have to.

Everyone experiences stress in some cases major stress, in many cases unprecedented levels of stress. It's not exactly the same stress you're experiencing, but on balance,



Calming Concept

Understanding that these broad, sweeping changes are perplexing everyone will help you see the larger picture: We're all in the same boat.

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workplace violence is real. A Centers for Disease Control study reveals that, within a 30-day period, "more than one in three high school boys admitted to carrying a gun, knife, or club." And an article in *Postal Life* magazine poses the question "Are you afraid to come to work?"

Snapping Under Pressure

As the level of violence in society rises, so does the level of violence at work. The National Workplace Resource Center conservatively estimates 1.5 million incidents of workplace violence annually. Nearly 1,000 employees murder their bosses annually. The U.S. Justice Department reports that husbands and boyfriends annually commit 13,000 acts of violence against women in the workplace.

The Society for Human Resources Management surveyed its members about workplace violence and found that one-third of respondents reported that their workplace had experienced a violent incident in the past five years and that the frequency of such incidents is on the rise. Forty-four percent of respondents said that the most recent incident of workplace violence occurred in the past year.



Stress Alert

Since 1990, the volume of information you're expected to process on the job has increased 60-fold over. Put this together with bad bosses, unfair working conditions, and escalating performance demands, and you've got a sure-fire recipe for stress.

*Stress,
Substance
Abuse, and*

Sabotage

Chemical and substance abuse in one's personal life obviously has ramifications in one's performance and behavior in the workplace. Alcohol and other drugs are associated with 50 percent of spouse abuse cases, 68 percent of manslaughter charges, and 52 percent of rapes.

The workplace is besieged with saboteurs. Deliberate damage to computer hardware and software occurs with alarming regularity. These are not signs of a well-functioning society or harmonious workplaces.

I don't condone violence, not for one second. Yet, I'm beginning to understand it. More people are feeling more stress more often at work. The volume of information, growing responsibilities, and the competition for the time and attention of the typical employee rises beyond anyone's capacity. You already know that the volume of information you encounter is increasing exponentially.

Maladaptive Management

A majority of managers say their jobs are more stressful than a decade ago surprise there. Many predict that their jobs will become even more stressful in the next three to

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four years. By some estimates, at least half of American managers suffer too much stress and are becoming abusive, intolerant, and dictatorial.

If these aren't signs of stress bubbling over the top, what is?

☞ When General Motors gave a manager in his mid-50s the option of early retirement, he had to think about it carefully. Four of his colleagues in similar situations accepted the offer, but shortly thereafter they killed themselves.

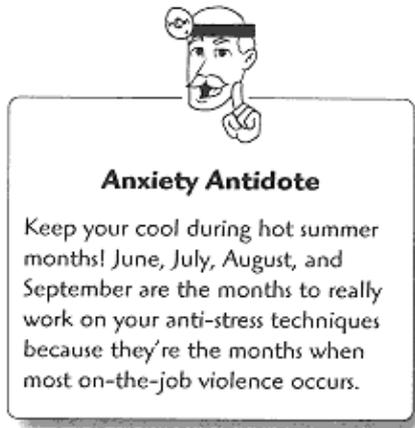
☞ When JCPenney moved its corporate headquarters from New York to Plano, Texas, many employees were so despondent that the company increased its professional counseling staff from 1 person to 12.

☞ Mental health experts estimate that as many as 15 percent of executives and managers suffer from depression or critical levels of stress.

Workplace Stress at the Boiling Point

Many organizations don't understand or are in denial about the problems confronting their workforce. Few corporations want to address the reality that their policies and procedures contribute to high stress high enough to result in workplace violence. Sometimes companies offer programs, but such treatment programs aren't likely to address the needs of seriously stressed or depressed employees.

Your chances of changing your corporate or organizational culture usually are between slim and none. Still, it's best to take a protective posture arm yourself with some basic facts about workplace violence and some basic tips for what you can do to help yourself and others.



In the Society for Human Resources Management survey, respondents indicated that the motivation for the most recent violent incident was a personality conflict. A majority said they couldn't have identified the assailants' potential for violence, although anger, aggressiveness, and threatening behavior were the most common traits of assailants who could be identified. Other common traits included apparent emotional or mental disorders, loner status, sullen behavior, obsessiveness, extreme quietness, or moroseness.

Following a violent incident in the workplace, many organizations rely on a professional employee-assistance program. Other resources include counseling for employees, training, increased security, more thorough security, reference checks among new hires, and installation of new security systems.

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Ticking Time Bombs: Not Just a Postal Problem

The U.S. Postal Service has been gripped by workplace violence for more than a decade. The Postal Service has endured up to 2,000 cases of workplace violence in a year. In his book, *Ticking Bombs: Defusing Violence in the Work Place*, author Michael Mantell says, "Workplace violence has never been a prominent business or social issue until now." Workplace violence has grown and evolved from an "underground problem for business into a substantial hazard, not only for the nineties, but well into the next century."

It's easy to dismiss many incidents as simply another "nut with a gun at work" story, but the problem is far more complex. Murder on the job is the third leading cause of occupational death.

Sabotage at Work

Hopefully, your organization, department, or division has been lucky enough not to experience overt acts of violence such as one individual striking or attacking another. What about acts of subversion? Consider the following questions.

- ☒• Has anyone damaged a PC, printer, fax machine, or pager?
- ☒• Has anyone tampered with the postage meter?
- ☒• Has anyone vandalized a vending machine?
- ☒• Are the public phones in and around your grounds inoperable?
- ☒• Do electric doors, escalators, or elevators frequently and mysteriously break down?
- ☒• Are appliances in your office kitchen in good working order?
- ☒• Does the plumbing in your washrooms get backed up often?
- ☒• Are any cars in employee parking lots ever vandalized?
- ☒• Are any pictures, posters, display windows, bulletin boards, and the like defaced or torn down?
- ☒• Do office furnishings break with increasing regularity?
- ☒• Is the landscaping outside being vandalized?
- ☒• Are objects frequently missing from the waiting room?

If you answered "yes" to any of the preceding questions, this might indicate that subversion is occurring. Because subversion could lead to overt violence, the subversion and anyone suspected of committing it should be reported as quickly as possible.

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Firing (And Being Fired Upon)

In some organizations, downsizing continues to be prevalent not that downsizing itself is the cause for increased violence. Kevin Flynn, Ph.D., a consultant based in Los Angeles, says a key problem with downsizing is that management is often "ill-prepared to deal with the turmoil and anguish of employees. Instead of dealing compassionately with it, they ignore it." Too many employees are hired with the message, "Yes, we value loyalty," only to be let go with the message, "Sorry, things have changed; your services are no longer necessary."



Calming Concept

This concept is not so calming. We're accustomed to thinking that workplace violence is a "postal" kind of thing. Well, it's not. Industries and businesses across the spectrum are reporting violence and sabotage. The reported incidents are just the tip of the iceberg. Countless incidents of violence go unreported every day.

Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry?

Professionals who deal with newly unemployed individuals find that approximately 10 percent experience problems, including severe anxiety or depression, sufficient enough to warrant professional help. When weeks and months go by without finding new work, the strain on their family and themselves can lead to undesirable behavior.

In thousands of cases each year, ex-workers show up months after being terminated to seek vengeance on their former boss, supervisor, or someone who they identify as the source of their misfortune.

Defusing the Danger of Departures

If you suspend a worker for breaking rules, will he or she come after you? Maybe. If you need to fire someone for gross incompetence, do you also need to worry about them coming back with a gun? Possibly. Employees who lose their jobs can react with furious anger. More than a few have outwardly destructive outbursts in exit interviews with staff.

In one instance, a supervisor was about to put a problem worker on probation and soon thereafter terminate the employee with no severance pay or benefits

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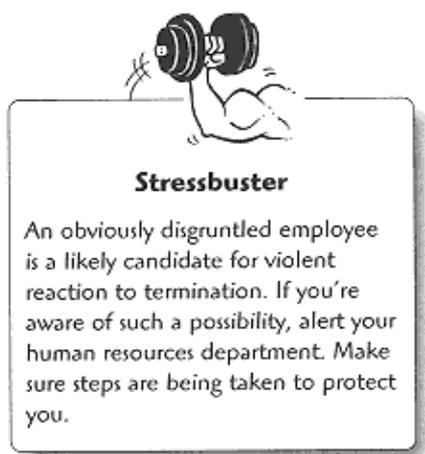
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forthcoming. A co-worker familiar with the situation told the supervisor to watch out because the employee about to be put on probation had expressed his desire to kill the supervisor should he lose his job.

Shaken to his core, the supervisor called his boss, who brought in a specialist in handling workplace violence. In this case, things worked out for the best. The specialist devised a plan in which the employee not only was retained but eventually was rehabilitated. This doesn't usually happen. The supervisor, his boss, and the specialist met with the problem employee and presented the plan in a calm, even-handed manner.

The employee realized the gravity of the situation and agreed to accept counseling as well as additional job training so he could retain his position in the company. The plan worked because the problem employee wasn't dangerous, according to the specialist. He simply was suffering from emotional distress in his domestic life that spilled over to his work life. In such cases, treatment generally is successful.



Responses to Retaliatory Threats

Specialists often advocate that problem employees be dealt with as early as possible, while there's still real potential for improvement. In addition, here are other steps for dealing with problem employees.

- ☞ When confronting such an employee, be firm, listen as much as you speak, and visibly show empathy.
- ☞ Create a threat-management team. This team might consist of a psychologist, someone from your legal department, someone from human resources, security, labor, and perhaps an outside specialist.
- ☞ Devise an organizational policy to let employees know how and where to report threats, violence, and subversive behavior.
- ☞ Give supervisors at least an hour's worth of training each month about recognizing trouble signs.
- ☞ Instruct supervisors about when and how to refer a problem employee to a specialist.

When violence does occur, the violent party's immediate boss usually didn't recognize the potential threat. Often, co-workers are aware of problems but aren't informed how, when, or to whom to report them.

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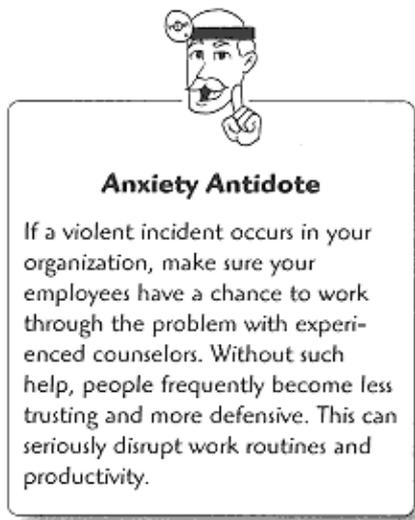
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Proactive Possibilities

Some organizations dispense confidential employee surveys on a regular basis to take the pulse of the organization, a department, or a division. If your organization does this, make sure you have the assistance of an impartial third party who is skilled in dispensing such surveys. Otherwise, you might simply be coaching employees to report what you want to hear as opposed to how the climate really is.

Properly firing someone requires care. Progressive organizations put significant time and attention into the firing process. They recognize that someone who's been laid off or terminated has to be treated with respect and compassion. The longer someone has been with the organization, the more time he or she needs to adjust to the termination.

Organizations that already have invested significantly in their people need to recognize the importance of ensuring that these valuable employees continue to work in an environment in which they feel free to be productive and relaxed.



Strategies for Handling an Abusive Manager

Chapter 5 covered how to keep stress under control even when you work for a bad boss. But what about when you work for a boss who borders on psychopathic?

The Monster Masher is a manager who indulges in sexual harassment of the crudest sort—physical and verbal threats and all manner of inhumane acts (despite potential lawsuits!). He (or she) is still a common figure in the workplace. Bosses who engage in such practices can trigger violent behavior in someone who might not otherwise have engaged in it. Employees victimized by such brutal bosses can suffer from anxiety, depression, heart problems, gastrointestinal disorders, headaches, skin rashes, insomnia, and sexual dysfunction.

Obvious offenders such as these are not the only managers or management techniques known to trigger workplace violence. Electronic surveillance systems, for example, are used by some organizations to monitor and control employee behavior in ways that cross the boundaries of reason and respect. These actions have driven some employees over the edge into disruptive acts.

What can you do in the face of management abuses?

- ☛• If you get overly anxious from working for a harsh boss, remember that, ultimately, you are in