

Handout

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Go on the offensive: Tackle job stress with a proactive service game plan

We're all stressed out. But that's not uncommon — stress is, after all, a fact of life in the workplace, no matter what your profession.

The American Psychological Association identifies the feeling of powerlessness as being a universal cause of job stress. In the customer service field, that feeling often comes from the key role you play as the point-of-contact between customers and the company. Let's face it, many customers never contact a company until something goes wrong.

While there are various lifestyle strategies you can use to help manage job stress, such as a healthy diet, adequate exercise, hobbies, relaxation methods, and a positive outlook, you can also significantly lessen its effects by taking a proactive approach to customer service. Following are positive actions you can take to keep your stress at a manageable level.

■ **Change the way you react to irate customers.**

Sure, the customer has a problem, and he or she has the right to feel frustrated. However, the way a customer expresses irritation may trigger a physiological stress reaction in you (the well-known "fight-or-flight" response). That can escalate a difficult phone call into a highly stressful calamity. It's up to you to keep that from happening.

One popular technique CSRs use (especially those who are aspiring actors) is to separate their personal and business personae. Consider this: While you're at work, you're a rational, even-tempered, competent business professional. It's more than simply acting a part — create the character, then be the character. When a problem arises, your character takes charge of the situation with calm efficiency. An irate customer cannot ruffle you.

■ **Check out your work environment.** There are also environmental conditions associated with the workplace that can lead to stress, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Common stressful conditions include excessive or annoying noise, ergonomic problems, lack of privacy, excessive temperatures (too hot or too cold), crowding, poor lighting, and poor ventilation (stuffy offices).

These are conditions that are within your control. Too often, we put up with irritating circumstances at work, when a simple change could remove the psychological stressors. Do you find it difficult to hear what your customer is saying because you sit next to a noisy copier? Talk to your supervisor about relocating it.

■ **Identify situations that stress you out.** What particular events cause you distress at work? Keep a stress log for a month. When you notice the stress warning signs (rapid heartbeat, nervousness, anxiety, shallow breathing), write down the event or situation that preceded your reaction.

Once you've identified the events/situations that cause feelings of pressure or strain, try to pinpoint the particular stressors that are present in those situations. For each stressor, ask yourself, what can I do to change this?

For instance, let's say your stress log reveals that handling customer calls about a particular product installation procedure leaves you feeling strained. When you dig deeper, you find that customers are typically misunderstanding the same key step in the installation process. By the time they call you, they're frustrated and irritable.

So what are your choices? You can eliminate the problem by fixing it at the source — bring it to your supervisor's attention (show him or her your log to illustrate how often it occurs). If it cannot be eliminated, just being aware of the stressor will help to reduce the intensity of its effect on you.



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