

Overcoming Overwhelm: Thirty Days to Less Stress

Most Technical Customer Support Professionals experience high levels of stress, yet say they have no time for activities or techniques that would help reduce stress. Respond by answering yes or no to the following questions to determine how well you are currently managing stress.

1. I am always on time for meetings and meet deadlines for assignments.
2. I am always developing myself technically and professionally for future years.
3. I never rush through a meal and always eat a healthy, nourishing diet.
4. I have more than enough people who support me, especially my supervisor.
5. I have many approaches to resolving challenging situations and problems.
6. I always have enough time for my family and friends.
7. I have high self-esteem because I know how to advocate on my own behalf.
8. Each week I exercise at least three times.
9. I am always comfortable refusing unreasonable requests.
10. I always acknowledge my good efforts and those of my team members.

If you answered yes to nine or ten questions, you're a master at managing stress and taking care of yourself. If you answered yes to seven or eight questions, you're doing well, but there's room for improvement. If you answered yes to six or fewer questions, it's time to take steps to manage stress and take care of YOU. Don't be a disaster waiting to happen. Disaster recovery in any arena involves many more resources than prevention. Consider the following statements in order:

#1 TAKING CARE OF YOU
enables you to...

#2 TAKE CARE OF YOUR CUSTOMERS
which enables you to...

#3 TAKE CARE OF THEIR PROBLEMS AND REQUESTS

Here's what you can do to take care of yourself and reduce stress and conflict in your daily routine (or lack of it) at your customer support center and in your life beyond your work environment. Commit to doing at least five things a week that will contribute to your health. These suggestions are relatively simple. While all of them may not appeal to you, I'm sure that you will find at least five that you can implement beginning NOW.

Day 1: Plan Your Next Vacation; You'll have a restful respite to look forward to and think of when you're overscheduled with work, arriving early and leaving late each day.

Day 2: Walk For 15 Minutes At Lunchtime; You'll benefit from the brief cardiovascular work-out, and from mentally and physically leaving the office. You'll return refreshed and will have more patience working with customers and colleagues. Continue three days each week. If you're a manager and your work style is shall we say, "compulsive",...you know who you are, you may be communicating to your staff that you expect that same behavior from them. Eating lunch at your desk every day might be considered compulsive and thus stress-producing behavior for you and your staff. Encourage your team members to take lunch away from their workstations.

Day 3: Say Thank You To Somebody Who Has Helped You; You'll recognize that you're not facing challenges alone and you'll develop a closer relationship with the individual. We all need the support of close friends and colleagues in our lives. With the emphasis on teamwork in the Customer Support arena, acknowledging other team members' contributions improves overall team performance. Continue the rest of your life.

Day 4: Drink Water Not Caffeine; You'll feel better if you consume the recommended 32 ounces of water per day and limit caffeine. The stress response can cause hypertension, the continuous

flow of adrenaline, difficulty in sleeping among other unhealthy conditions. Caffeine can exacerbate these negative effects of stress. Water is a non-caloric substitute that also will help you think more clearly and nourish your skin and internal organs. You need to think clearly to respond effectively to customers and their service requests, so drink water.

Day 5: Invest Now In Your Financial Future; You'll gain in the long-run from investing in a 401K or Keough or Credit Union, now. Begin with a sum you can afford. Even \$5 a week is better than nothing. And if you're already investing, congratulations and continue to do so. Remember, there is life after Help Desk, so plan for it. Knowing you've secured a comfortable future will help you relax.

Day 6: Demand The Establishment Or Honoring Of Existing Service Level Agreements; One of the greatest sources of stress in the customer support arena is the constant flow of requests from all areas of the company. You cannot be all things to all people. Determine what you will support and who will support you in those efforts, as well as what resources are available to help provide quality solutions to your customers. If it's not in the SLA, don't do it or renegotiate the terms of the agreement. Help develop SLA's.

Day 7: Look Up At The Trees, The Mountains, The Sky, The Sun, The Moon And The Stars; You'll be able to get in touch with the big picture, i.e., you're part of an enormous, beautiful and orderly universe. Enjoy it, it may be the only order in your life! According to Dr. Deepak Chopra, an expert on health, communing with nature reduces stress. While you may enjoy endless hours at your PC, your body and mind need to connect with a higher plane to open you up to bigger possibilities and new ideas.

Day 8: Learn To Smile And Say No; (one of my favorites) Think before saying "yes" to another project, additional work hours, or even a social event connected with work. Be assertive. We become so accustomed to serving others that we forget the option of saying "no" to unreasonable requests. Write "smile and say no" on a 3"x5" card and keep it posted at your desk.

Day 9: Pray; "Dear Lord, don't let this caller be the "Dragon Lady" from Finance." But seriously, in a survey I conducted among Help Desk professionals nationwide, praying, spirituality, and a close relationship to God were stated as contributing to extraordinary performance. If you pray and worship as a member of a congregation, you will benefit not just by relaxing and focussing on spiritual issues, but also by creating a larger network of people within your congregation who can help to support you and your family in times of need or loss. Of course you need not be part of organized religion to pray for your hopes and dreams.

Day 10: Get A Dog; Studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society show that animals can have a positive impact on physical and mental health. Caring for a pet can help lower blood pressure and reduce stress. Another recent study placed subjects in stressful situations with their spouse, or with a dog. It was found that the subjects handled stress better with the support of a dog than with their own husband or wife.

Day 11: Focus On Rewards; If you're a manager, this is especially important for you and your team. What Customer Support professionals say they get least in their work environment and want most is RECOGNITION and APPRECIATION. Out of 200 respondents to my survey, 30% stated that recognition and appreciation motivates them most. A motivating environment emphasizes rewards which helps reduce stress. Have you heard the expression: "I'm making record time, but I don't know where I'm going"? When a project is completed or a customer satisfaction survey has shown improvement, recognize this so everyone knows they've reached a milestone.

Day 12: Enroll In A Seminar; Continuous process improvement means continuous learning. And wouldn't it be less stressful to actually use and understand the new software product you're being asked to support before it's installed at your customers' sites? According to Help Desk Institute, in

a typical eight-hour day, two to three hours should be spent away from the telephones or walk-in desk. That time should be devoted to learning via projects, computer-based training, or seminars. This daily variety of activities will also reduce burn-out.

Day 13: Get To Bed Early; Get a good night's sleep. If you're overwhelmed with anxiety and stress, the body and mind may not calm down as easily as you wish. Getting to bed early allows plenty of time to fall asleep and still wake up with the alarm. If you suffer from chronic insomnia, see a physician. According to the American Institute of Stress, 75% of doctor visits are stress-related, either directly or indirectly.

Day 14: Clean Up Your Office; You may not think that junk and clutter has anything to do with stress. It does. In order to be effective and get more done in less time, you must be organized. If you waste even ten minutes a day looking for a note or a file or the solution to a problem you solved last month, you're losing close to an hour a week. Get that hour back, by creating an orderly and efficient work area.

Day 15: Clean Up Your Office; If you're like me, this will take some portion of two days. If you're done in one day, throw out the junk and clutter at home. The effect will be more clarity in your life. You'll feel better and make better decisions. If you don't believe that, ok. Believe this: others will think you're more efficient and professional when your office conveys that.

Day 16: Get A Buddy To Exercise With You; Aerobic exercise is known to be among the best stress-busters, however few people schedule this into their day. If you're unable to walk at lunchtime, make an appointment after or before work to meet a friend at the company fitness center, local gym, or a health club. Your commitment to another person may strengthen your commitment to yourself to get fit. If you can afford it, work with a personal trainer the first few weeks. He/she will help you get started and stick to a weekly work-out plan.

Day 17: Learn To Negotiate; Many of these stress management tips will rely on your ability to negotiate on your own behalf. If you want to improve your situation, you need effective communication and negotiating skills to present your view and specific requests or alternatives that are acceptable to you as an employee. As you stand up for yourself more and more, you'll feel more comfortable doing it. There are many good audio tapes available on the subject. Herb Cohen, who was a keynote speaker at the International Help Desk Conference and Expo last year, takes an entertaining approach to the subject on his tape series.

Day 18: Schedule A Break; In your Day-Timer, Day Runner, Franklin Day Planner, whatever time management system you use, schedule an appointment with yourself. This will prevent others from monopolizing all your time. You'll feel more in control and actually have some time to yourself to catch up on what's important to you. Day

19: Be A Teacher; Teaching others shows you how much you have mastered in a particular technical or business-related area. Sharing your expertise helps others while building your positive self-esteem. Within Customer Support, there are many opportunities to be a teacher, both formal and informal. More and more, training and support are being combined into one area. Capitalize on it.

Day 20: Create A Gratitude Journal; Focus on the positive. One way to do this is to make an entry in a journal that is for your eyes only. Do so before 4pm everyday and again later in the day if you wish. The purpose is to recognize the good that people and situations bring into your life both in and out of the workplace. Because all we hear all day long are complaints and problems, it's easy to lose sight of our accomplishments, good deeds, and blessings. When something good occurs, write it down and be thankful. This will improve your overall customer service attitude and allow you to respond more positively to stress.

Day 21: **Organize A Laughing Session**; It's so easy to get caught up in a gripe session around the water cooler. Rather than griping about company politics or difficult customers or the network that won't work, find humor in situations. Laughter helps reduce stress by physically releasing tension. It also takes the focus off of challenging work issues for awhile and gives you a breather.

Day 22: **Find A Mentor**; Find someone within your company or profession that you admire and trust. Ask them about how they have succeeded amidst all the chaos and demands of technical customer support. Develop a professional relationship with them so that you have a mentor to talk with when you need advice.

Day 23: **Read To Your Children**; If you don't have children, read for yourself. Reading helps to expand the imagination which will help you unleash better problem-solving ideas and new approaches to ever-changing demands at the Help Desk. You'll also reacquaint yourself with the values that children's books espouse such as self-reliance in *Secret Garden* and empathy in *Heidi*, to name a few. Make your family a priority. If you're at the office too much, consider the following study. A five-year study on the attitudes of America's workforce conducted by the Families and Work Institute found that 60% of the workers surveyed said that they took their most recent job because of the effect on their personal or family life.

Day 24: **Get A Pedicure**; Pamper yourself.

Day 25: **Get To The Root Cause**; In solving problems with clients you often need to know the root cause of the problem to offer the best solution. Ask yourself why are you stressed? Dig deep. Look for an answer beneath the surface responses of: "work overload", "no control of my schedule", "irate customers", "need 50 hours in each day", etc. Only you can manage yourself and therefore, your stress level. No one will take care of you if you don't. There is no corporate policy that demands that you work yourself into hypertension, insomnia, panic attacks or any of the other stress-related symptoms I've encountered in working with Help Desk Professionals. There's an interesting statistic with respect to heart attacks which we know are stress-induced. Deaths from coronary disease correlate more strongly to job dissatisfaction than to hypertension or other symptoms. The second strongest correlation with fatal coronary disease is a low self-happiness rating. Identify the real stressors in your life, eliminate them or change your response to them.

Day 26: **Be Flexible**; Be open to other people's views. "Minds are like parachutes, they only function when open."...anonymous. Being mentally and physically flexible will help you cope with stress, particularly the kinds of personality conflicts can exist in a customer support environment; e.g., between Level One and Level Two Support.

Day 27: **Get A Hobby**; Many Help Desk professionals say that they think about work even on their days and evenings off. Focussing on an avocation or hobby that is fun for you will help take your mind off of work, helping to reduce stress. Whether your hobby is gardening or reading or listening to music, making time to relax and enjoy yourself is critical to your health.

Day 28: **Eat Fruits And Vegetables**; Chronic stress can deplete the body's supply of magnesium, causing muscle cramps and spasms, back and chest pain, convulsions, arrhythmias and heart attacks. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture nutritional surveys, 75% of Americans are magnesium deficient. Since Customer Support Representatives rank among occupations highest in daily workplace stress levels, be sure to intake enough magnesium to help your body cope. Consume vegetables, nuts, and whole grains instead of processed foods.

Day 29: **Establish Professional Goals**; And write them down. The Help Desk Industry is rapidly growing which means there are many professional opportunities available to you. If you need certification to progress at your Help Desk, get certified. Know what you're aiming for and never take your eye off the ball.

Day 30: **Repeat Five Times**; "I Don't Need To Control Everything"; Relax, your job title isn't "hero". You're human. You're not expected to perform heroic deeds every minute. Do your job well and go home each evening knowing that you've helped a lot of people be more productive.

Below is an exercise to help you begin to get stress under control before it controls you. Just fill in the blanks:

Identify a bad habit you will stop to better manage stress:

Identify a good habit you will continue to improve managing stress :

Identify a new habit you will begin to take better care of yourself:

Take care of yourself first; so you can take care of all your customers including co-workers and supervisors; so you can take care of their problems and requests.