

Stanford Help Center

Stress and Organizational Change

Phone: 650-723-4577 or

Email: helpcenter@lists.stanford.edu

During organizational change, employees often experience:

- Anxiety connected with the loss of:
 - sense of security
 - sense of competence
 - relationships
 - sense of direction and control
 - territory
 - job
- Anger, sense of betrayal
- Helplessness, vulnerability
- Uncertainty and ambiguity
- Lowered concentration skills
- Active rumor mill
- Survivor guilt
- Desire to punish the organization
- Heavier workloads
- Low morale
- Decreased productivity
- Increased stress-related symptoms (muscle tension, headaches, intestinal distress, depression, insomnia, exhaustion, prone to illness, etc)
- Burnout

Challenges to Work Relationships During Transition

- More time needed to discuss the process of change and our reactions to it; less time to do it
- Less time available for informal relationship building

- Free time often spent talking about the changes
- Increased frequency of saying goodbye and forming new relationships
- Increase in time spent on training and orienting self or others when workload is already high
- Development of new reporting relationships
- Increase in rumors, gossip, complaining
- Increased frequency of interactions that feel tense or hostile; people less patient, not as diplomatic or polite
- Misunderstandings are more frequent: it is difficult to speak clearly and to hear accurately if emotional intensity is raised, or if people feel rushed
- Increased competitiveness due to job insecurity
 - holding information back from others
 - gathering up responsibilities
 - increase in territorial behavior
 - not cooperating, not speaking
 - tattling, sabotage, self-marketing
 - mistrust
- Increased paranoia, resentment and mistrust of supervisors, managers and the institution
- Fear of speaking up on controversial issues due to job insecurity
- Disruption in the sense of belonging to a team

Managing Work-Related Stress

- Protect your health: notice and respond to stress warning signs
- Healthy lifestyle habits: good diet, adequate sleep, exercise
- Protect and use rest periods
- Focus attention on what you can control
- Avoid excessive overworking: separate work and home
- Keep up interests outside of work
- Limit setting: saying "no"
- Maintain sense of humor
- Develop and maintain supportive relationships

Damage Control for Work Relationships During Organizational Change

- Honesty
- Ask for information and disseminate information about changes

- Acknowledge and accept our own and others' emotional reactions to change and adjust our expectations accordingly
- Use reflective listening and check understandings with others. Take sufficient time with verbal interactions
- Exit from non-productive conversations involving complaints or rumors which are draining, anxiety provoking or depressing
- Remember your sense of humor
- Help and encourage those around you
- In direct and respectful ways, ask for what you need, express feelings, and attempt to resolve conflicts
- Choose the right time and place for settling a dispute with someone
- Disengage from destructive, escalating arguments. Reschedule the discussion
- Consider taking the first step to resolve a long-standing conflict with another
- Take a deep breath, count to 10 (or higher) before responding if a highly emotional situation develops
- Apologize after making a mistake that affects someone negatively

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