

SELF-CARE & RESILIENCE DURING PEAK CHALLENGING TIMES

Busy work environments that involve important project outcomes, deadlines and maintaining client satisfaction can be energising *and* challenging at times. You want to be at your peak performance in order to assist your colleagues and clients, and enjoy your work. This can be made more difficult during busy 'peak times' when competing demands and frustrations may spill over into your own 'stress tank' or you find yourself lacking in energy and motivation. You may also be balancing work with challenges at home or spreading yourself too thin over numerous pursuits. Peak times are a normal part of working life, yet we don't often prepare for them.

Sounds all quite normal doesn't it? Yes! Frustration and stress are normal, but when they turn from 'motivating stress' into 'bad stress' that wears you down and it can impact on your physical and mental health. Stress also affects our relationships and communication style, i.e., we fail to listen well, rush conversations, tell people what to do versus asking, and react more defensively to constructive feedback.

The trick to maintaining resilience and relationships, even during the most challenging times, is to build and maintain self-care. Self-care is a word for the set of healthy behaviours and attitudes we deliberately employ to look after our own wellbeing, leading to a physical and mental 'stress buffer'.

The word **PEAK** is an easy-to-recall acronym for a set of self-care strategies you can use to maintain resilience - **Prepare, Energise, Ask, Know**.

Prepare yourself mentally and physically organise yourself, ready for peak times

Energise daily with strategies to invigorate your body and mind

Ask questions as a method of positive communication and clarifying expectations

Know yourself, your personal limits and signs of stress, so you can manage early on

The following strategies can form part of your PEAK Plan; the steps you can take to maintain your personal resilience.

PREPARE

Prepare physically and organise your self

- Inform (forewarn) your social network, spouse and family about the peak time coming up and how this might change your timetable, availability and energy

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- Plan around the possible timetabling challenges for other demands in your life – you might need to put some things on hold or rearrange things like childcare and social events
- Ensure a good sleep pattern by going to bed on time and the same time each night
- Keep up your physical activity – walking and general exercise are fantastic for resilience
- Organise and plan meals, so you avoid skipping meals or eating junk, therefore not missing out on good nutrition

Prepare mentally with realistic expectations

- Because what we think greatly determines how we feel and react – it is best to give yourself some mental preparation in the form of ‘positive self-talk’ to combat negative thinking about peak times
- Use self-talk statements like, “Yep, it’s a busy time again and I can expect to be tired at times, but I have some strategies in place to keep energised. I know that in working with others there will be conflicts of opinion as usual, and I’ve dealt with these challenges before, so I can focus on the good parts and the bigger picture and listen to constructive feedback...”
- Develop a personal motto which brings your focus back to the positive work and the enjoyment of the job, such as “I really like this work and the benefits it brings me” or “No matter what comes my way, I can make my day”, or short and sweet like the NIKE phrase “Just do it!”

ENERGISE

Energise physically each day and throughout the day

- A lot of people fail to recognise that frustration can stem from actually being hungry, tired or dehydrated, and not really about the situation in front of you at all
- Eat before you go on your shift and eat your lunch/dinner in your break
- Drink more water and less energy drinks or coffee
- Use a quick deep breathing or relaxation technique in a quiet space to relax
- Use a quick energiser to stimulate the endorphins (positive hormones) – e.g., stretching, a quick walk, singing (quietly if needed), shaking your arms and legs – simple but effective
- Determine your own practical ‘stress busters’ or ‘energisers’ that you can use each day and let your colleagues know, so they can remind you to use them
- Energise mentally each day by using your own positive focal point
- You can make your own day by choosing and using a positive focal point whether it be a statement, a memory, an attitude or a person
- Recall all the positive situations, the successful jobs and fun with colleagues

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- Use your personal positive motto or 'borrow' one you like from someone else
- Think about a positive event or person or scenario – even for a few seconds – to re-set your mind
- Try a quick meditation or visualisation technique (many people already know how to do this, or you can learn then by attending a personal consultation with an EAP counsellor)

ASK

Ask questions outwards to others to open up good communication

- When we're feeling tired or stressed, we tend to restrict our communication rather than slow down, ask questions and listen more, which can lead to accidental misunderstandings
- Ask questions to determine others' expectations of you – this takes out the guess work and avoids potentially awkward encounters
- Just by clarifying what can be achieved, and asking colleagues and managers about how you can jointly manage the load, can lead to a reduction in pressure, as you determine realistic expectation together
- Ask if you can help others – always a winner if you're in doubt or stuck in a challenging conversation: gently ask what the main issue, concern or need is, and ask 'how can I help you?' and 'what would you like me to do?'. This tends to defuse frustration and lead towards some better information that you can actually deal with
- Ask for help and support when you need it
- Ask questions inwards to yourself to maintain self-awareness in the here-and-now
- One of the best ways of avoiding stress and conflict with colleagues or customers is to develop immediate self-awareness of your own frustration levels and enable yourself to act more deliberately and positively
- Asking questions of yourself can, in itself, be a good 'stress buster' as it can lead to a broader and less pressured perspective. The answer usually comes into mind based on your past experience. It can also switch you into a patient and effective customer service mode, for example:
 - "How did I handle this type of situation last time?"
 - "What can I realistically achieve before the end of my shift?"
 - "Am I reacting strongly to this colleague or client today because of another reason, like being tired?"
 - "What's the best way I can manage this now, that will lead to a good outcome – rather than what I'd really like to say?"
 - "What would my very patient colleague do or say right now?"

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- “How can I turn criticisms into feedback that works for me?”
- “How will my actions right now likely impact on the other person – and do I want that?”
- Ask yourself questions to form a checklist approach for daily resilience. For example:
 - “Have I had enough to eat and drink today?”
 - “Have I had a good break?”
 - “Have I followed my personal plan or forgotten something?”
- Ask yourself honestly if you might need to brush up on your resilience skills – taking action to join a course or gain coaching or counselling can be one of the most rewarding steps you take in life.

KNOW

Know your physical limits so you stop short of the edge

- Accept that you will have limits to your time, energy, patience and skill-sets, and this may even be changeable depending on what’s happening in your life
- Everyone is different, don’t try to compete, just determine your own healthy limits and communicate these as needed to your close network. You can take a lot of pressure out of setting limits with others by simply and unashamedly telling them what you can manage and what you can’t right now
- Some limits you might want to monitor in case you run the risk of stress are: the amount of sleep you need; the amount of extra-curricular activities you can squeeze in; the length of your typical work shift; the amount of time you need personally to re-charge; how long you can go without using your entitled leave due to you; how many extra jobs you can handle for others at work on top of your usual tasks; the level of your current skills in your role and how far you can stretch without extra training (i.e., many people stretch into other jobs at work and may in fact not be ready or resourced to take them on).

Know your own early warning signs of stress so you stop short of boiling point

Everyone has early warning signs of stress and if you catch them early you can use a practical strategy to maintain your balance both in terms of wellbeing and for interactions with others These are some early warning signs of stress:

- Increasing tension or headaches
- Negative thinking and ‘swearing in your head’
- Moments of tiredness and de-motivation
- Sighing more

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- Getting snappy or short in conversations
- Rushing
- Concentration lapses
- Critical of yourself and others
- Lack of empathy towards colleagues or customers

These are some later warning signs of stress:

- Ongoing fatigue and tiredness
- General irritability and agitation
- Difficulties with sleep pattern
- No appetite or overeating
- Feeling more anxious or nervous
- Feeling down or negative about things
- Feeling low in self esteem
- Ongoing headaches or muscle tension
- Heart beating heavy or fast
- Feeling hot, sweaty or itchy on the skin
- Loss of libido
- Increased use of stimulant or depressive substances: alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, etc
- Problems concentrating, making decisions and/or remembering things
- Wanting to or avoiding normal activities and people in your network
- Lack of general motivation for work and customer service (uncharacteristic of your normal approach)

Resilience can be developed and stress can be managed. You can make it happen by determining your own **PEAK Plan**, by selecting your set of strategies. **Record them, talk about them and do them!**

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