

# Minimizing Work Space Stress

Creating a Comfortable and Healthy Work Environment

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Identify and manage the sources of environmental stress in your work space.

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Ling has just moved into a new office. Unfortunately, it isn't a comfortable space – the lights are too dim, the air is chilly, and she's regularly distracted by her colleagues' loud conversations. She has to commute much further to the new office, and often arrives feeling tired, stressed, and irritable.

After a few weeks, Ling realizes that her stress levels have increased, and that her productivity has dropped. She is also more irritable with her team and with her family at home.

After meeting with her boss to discuss the problem, they agree to make several small changes to her office. Now, her work space is well-lit and inviting, and the air is warm and comfortable. Ling is now able to telecommute two days a week, and, while she can still hear telephones and her colleagues' conversations when she's in the office, she listens to "white noise" through her headphones and is rarely interrupted by these sounds.

No matter what you do or where you work, it's likely that you'll have experienced environmental distractions during the day. If unaddressed, these can contribute to the levels of stress you experience. In this article, we'll look at some common sources of work space stress, and we'll discuss strategies that you can use to reduce their impact.

## Where Does Work Space Stress Come From?

Work space stress can come from any physical conditions that you perceive as irritating, frustrating, uncomfortable, or unpleasant. Sources of work space stress include the following:

- Poor lighting.
- Loud background noise, such as music, traffic noise, or conversation.
- Chairs or desks that cause discomfort, or even repetitive strain injuries (RSI).
- Unhealthy air, such as air pollution, smoke, or unpleasant smells.
- Overcrowding, or workstations in close proximity to others.
- Long, difficult, or crowded commutes.
- Uncomfortable climate conditions, such as an office that is too hot, too cold, too humid, or too dry.
- An unclean or cluttered office space.

Some of these are quite small things, but, taken together, they can significantly contribute to the stress that people experience.

## How to Manage Work Space Stress

There are several things that you can do to lessen or eliminate sources of stress in your workplace. While you can make some of these changes on your own, you might need your boss's permission for others.

## 1. Reduce Office Noise

Noise is a harmful source of stress. People often cite background noise, or a lack of sound privacy, as the most distracting element in work environments. One study found that office noise, particularly telephones ringing at empty desks and loud conversations, impaired worker concentration. Another study found that workers experienced a drop in motivation and in their ability to solve problems when exposed to low-intensity office noise.

You can reduce noise pollution in your work area in several ways.

First, consider closing your office door when you need to focus. A closed door helps you to **minimize distractions**, both audible and visual. However, if your organization has an "open door" policy, or if you work in a cubicle, this won't be an option.

Consider using headphones while you're working. Listening to music, especially classical or ambient music, will eliminate distractions and can **improve your concentration**. Alternatively, you can play audio tracks of waterfalls, birds chirping, or white noise to reduce the distraction of background noise.

If you work in an open office, ask your boss about installing noise screens. These block and absorb background noise and create a quiet space. You can also use carpets, rugs, or fabric on surfaces and walls to absorb sound.

Plants are an important addition to any office. Not only do they reduce air pollution and add oxygen to the atmosphere, but they also reduce background noise. Some plants, such as peace lilies or weeping figs, are more effective for dampening noise than others. Place plants around the edges or corners of a space for the best sound dampening effect. You'll notice a bigger difference if you use several smaller arrangements in a space, rather than one big cluster of plants.

If your colleagues regularly play music or talk loudly on the phone, ask them politely and assertively to be quieter. Keep in mind that any noise you make in your office might be a source of environmental stress for someone else, so do your best to work quietly.

## 2. Create a Healthy Workstation

You may spend much of your day sitting at your desk in front of a computer. This is why it's so important that your chair, desk, and computer are at the correct height and angle.

When these tools are routinely out of alignment, you might suffer from repetitive strain injury. This potentially serious condition occurs when you engage in prolonged, repetitive movements such as typing, clicking a mouse, or writing. RSI can result in damage to muscles, tendons, and nerves in the neck, shoulders, wrists, or hands.

Good posture at your desk is an important part of reducing or eliminating RSI. Ideally, you should follow these guidelines when at your desk:

- Sit with your feet flat on the floor, with your knees directly over your feet. Your knees should be bent at a right angle, or slightly greater, and they should overhang the chair's end by two or three inches.
- Your lower back should be arched in, perhaps supported by your chair. Your upper back should be naturally rounded.
- When typing, your elbows should be bent at, or slightly greater than, 90 degrees. Your mouse should be located very close to your computer, so that you don't have to lean or stretch to reach it.
- Your computer screen should be directly in front of you, not off to the side. It should be no more than 15 to 25 inches from your eyes.
- Take frequent breaks to move around when you're working. Prolonged sitting in a fixed position can affect your health and contribute to RSI. Walk around for at least five minutes in every hour.

Proper lighting is also an important element of a **healthy workplace**. If the light in your office is too dim, you risk straining your eyes. Poor lighting can also contribute to back pain, since you might unconsciously and repeatedly lean forward to see more clearly.

Make sure that your office is well-lit with lamps, or, ideally, with plenty of natural light. Move your desk closer to a window, and open the blinds to let in as much light as possible. If bushes or trees are blocking the light, consider having them trimmed.

However, keep in mind that direct light in your eyes, or on your computer screen, will cause you to squint and can make working difficult.

### 3. Clean and Organize Your Office

A cluttered, disorganized office can be a considerable source of stress, especially when you can't find what you need, or when the office isn't cleaned thoroughly because of clutter.

Take time to **get organized**. You might want to do this before the workday starts, when colleagues or urgent tasks are less likely to distract you. Although no one likes an earlier than usual start, you'll be more productive as a result.

Honestly assess what you need in your office and what you don't. Recycle papers and files that don't contribute to your work, and prioritize those that do. Go through your filing system and make sure that it's organized and that you can quickly find what you need. Our article on **The Art of Filing** shows you how to file paper and electronic documents effectively.

Your office or work space should be a pleasant space. Do whatever you can to make it comfortable and enjoyable. This might mean getting your boss's permission to paint the walls a bright color, putting up soothing or meaningful artwork, or adding a small desktop fountain. The more pleasant and comfortable your work space is, the more enjoyable and productive your workday will be.

### 4. Look at Your Commute

Whether you drive or use public transportation, your commute can add stress to your day. It can also have a negative effect on your working relationships and productivity. One **study** found that stressful commutes caused participants to express more hostility and aggression at work. **Another** found that professionals with a long commute were more likely to experience back pain, fatigue, and worry, compared with those who had shorter commutes.

Lessen the stress of your commute by preparing for it the night before. Lay out the clothes that you want to wear, and prepare your lunch. Try to leave early, so that you can beat the rush.

Use your commuting time to relax or learn something new. Listen to music, audio books, or podcasts, or read a book (if you take public transportation). Take different routes to work; while some routes might be longer, you might arrive at the same time if there is less traffic. The variety and reduced stress might be worth the extra distance.

Think about setting up a carpool at work, or in your neighborhood. Commuting with others means that you can rest on the days when someone else is driving, and sharing the ride lessens costs and stress for everyone involved.

Exercise is also important for handling a stressful commute. You can **fit exercise** into your busy schedule by walking during your lunch break, or even by joining a gym near to your office. By going to the gym straight after work, you'll avoid the rush hour and arrive home feeling peaceful and energized.

Ask your boss whether you can **telecommute** one or two days a week, in order to reduce the effects of your commute. Or, see if you can set up a flex-time arrangement that allows you to work slightly different hours; even coming in an hour earlier and leaving an hour earlier can spare you much of the stress of a rush-hour commute.

Last, if your commute is long and particularly unpleasant, consider moving closer to your office.

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## Key Points

Work space stress comes from any physical conditions that are irritating or frustrating while you're trying to work. These can include background noise, strange or unpleasant smells, an office that's too hot or too cold, or a workstation that's uncomfortable or contributes to repetitive strain injury.

To minimize sources of work space stress in your office or work area, take steps to reduce office noise, create a healthy workstation, organize your office, and improve your commute.