How to Deal with Stress in Teams

Activity

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Stress is super common when working with other people and on issues that are important. Everyone reacts to stress differently, and therefore it is useful to consider the different reactions people might have to stress and think about how to prevent it.

Things to Consider

1. Allow time and space to understand what causes stress

Unclear roles, unmet expectations, lack of support, different priorities, interpersonal tensions, or very high workload are some of the many things that can lead to increased stress. Investing some time and energy to establish trust and good working relationships can help allow people to be open about what they are going through (see Working Together Well).

Clarifying roles, aligning expectations and priorities, and supporting team members can help reduce triggers and stress (see Group Agreements, see Transition in Group Culture).

2. Psychological safety and trust are key

Creating a safe environment where team members can communicate openly and express concerns can help reduce stress. This can often happen by building trust and good rapport (see Building Trust).

3. Focus on tasks and relationships

Effective teams focus both on doing the work (tasks) and building relationships with each other. This can look differently with different teams. For some it's going out for coffee or dinner outside of work, for others it's team-building activities during work, or doing something during breaks (see Effective Groups, see Task-Process-Relationship).

4. Manage conflicts effectively

Stress can escalate if conflicts are not managed timely or ignored. You can use methods such as The Circle Way or Consent Decision-Making to resolve conflicts in a positive and productive manner (see Shared Governance and Working in Circles, see Decision by Consent, see Re-Framing Conflict, see Conflict Styles).

5. Encourage self-awareness and well-being

When working in teams, it is helpful to raise awareness around your own personal stressors, triggers, and reactions. Having this self-awareness will make it easier to communicate your stressors with the team and ask for support when you need it.

Techniques like check-ins and grounding exercises can help your team monitor stress levels and address issues proactively (see Seeking Support, see Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience, see Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions).

Below are several activities that can help to understand stress and reduce its effects.

Activity - Understanding stress – mine and yours	
Duration:	35-45 minutes
Participants:	Up to 20, in small groups of 2-3
Purpose:	Find out more about the stressors of your teammates and how they react to them.
Materials needed:	- A quiet space with enough room for everyone to sit comfortably. - Large flipchart paper if you want to write down any take-aways at the end of the session
Flow: 25 minutes total or so 3 minutes each 2 minutes each 3 minutes each	Invite everyone to form small groups of 2 or 3. Discuss and explore the questions below, making sure everyone has equal time talking. Use active listening - allow one person to talk as the others listen without interruptions or comments. The facilitator can keep time and suggest when to move on to the next question. - What kind of things stress you – make you annoyed or upset? - What do you do when you are stressed? *For example: go quiet; get snappy; shout, or walk out, or cry.* - How can others help you when you are stressed? *For example: leave me alone; ask me what's wrong; tell me a joke*.
10 minutes	Go round the whole group, inviting anyone to share a short version of their answers.
5 minutes	As a whole group together reflect on how it was to do this activity, and what you've learnt that might be helpful in dealing with stress in the future.

Activity – Grounding	
Duration:	15 minutes
Participants:	Any number of people
Purpose:	Very helpful before meetings or meet-ups, this activity uses mindfulness techniques to calm the mind, ease stress, and bring participants into the present moment. It helps you feel connected and prepared for the meeting ahead (see Mindfulness + Resources, see Mindfulness - Re-Centering).
Materials needed:	- A quiet space with enough room for everyone to sit comfortably. - Optional: calming background music or nature sounds.
Flow: 2 minutes	**1. Welcome and Set Intentions.** Invite participants to sit comfortably in a circle, either on chairs or the floor. Welcome the group and briefly explain the purpose of the activity – "to help everyone let go of stress and focus on the present moment. It's a way to reset before we start our meeting together."
3 minutes	**Deep Breathing Exercise** 1. Invite everyone to close their eyes. 2. Guide them through a simple breathing exercise: - Breathe in deeply through the nose for 4 seconds. - Hold the breath for 4 seconds. - Exhale slowly through the mouth for 6 seconds. 3. Repeat this 4–5 times, encouraging participants to notice the sensation of the breath entering and leaving their body.
7 minutes	**5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique -** engaging the senses to reconnect with the present moment. **5 Things You Can See**: Ask participants to open their eyes and silently notice five things in the room. Encourage them to observe details, such as colours, patterns, or shapes. **4 Things You Can Feel**: Invite participants to silently notice four things they can feel, such as the texture of their clothes, the chair under them, or the floor beneath their feet. **3 Things You Can Hear**: Ask participants to listen for three sounds in their environment, such as a ticking clock, distant chatter, or the sound of their own breath. **2 Things You Can Smell**: Ask participants to notice 2 things they can smell. **1 Thing You Can Taste**: Ask participants to focus on the taste in their mouth or recall a favorite flavor.

1 minute	**Wrap-Up** Thank participants for joining the exercise and invite them to carry a sense of calm into the meeting. Optionally, ask if anyone wants to share how they're feeling before transitioning into the meeting.

Related Resources

Working Together Well
Group Agreements
Transition in Group Culture
Effective Groups
Building Trust
Task-Process-Relationship
Shared Governance and Working in Circles
Decision by Consent
Re-Framing Conflict
Conflict Styles
Seeking Support
Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience
Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions
Mindfulness + Resources
Mindfulness - Re-Centering
Self-Care: Physical and Sensory

References

The Circle Way - Ann Linnea and Christina Baldwin
Consent Decision-Making - Sociocracy 3.0
Self-Care for You(th) - SALTO Resource
Amygdala hijack - Wikipedia

For more resources like this one, go to https://resources.transitionnetwork.org/
or to the Transition Network international website www.transitionnetwork.org

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