

Give Employees



the Gift of Happiness

With the approach of the holiday season, many of us are looking for the perfect presents to give to colleagues, friends, and family members. The search often leaves us wondering, what could the recipient really use? If you've ever asked yourself this question about your employees, chances are they could benefit from a variety of measures that can reduce stress and increase happiness.

Surveys suggest that U.S. workers would welcome such assistance. Last year, only a third of Americans reported being "very happy."¹ It isn't hard to guess why this might be the case; research and personal experience both confirm that stress can play a significant role in diminishing happiness.² And there is ample evidence that stress levels are rising at an alarming rate. Some studies show that American stress levels have increased by as much as 30% in the last 30 years.³

Happiness may be growing more elusive due to these increasing stress levels, but employees can still achieve it. And when they do, it benefits employers as well as the individual. Data indicate that happy workers can be as much as 22% more productive than their unhappy colleagues.⁴



Do You Have that in Medium?

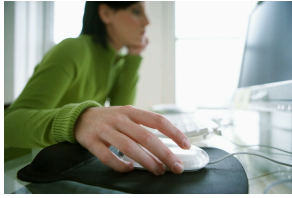
The more you know about the recipient's needs, the easier it is to choose the right gift. To increase employees' happiness by reducing their stress, it helps to understand the sources of that stress. While we all have our own trigger points, stress can be broadly understood as a response to three general categories of concern: external issues, personal issues, and professional issues.

External issues include things like unsettling events reported in the media. Consider the appearance of Ebola in American cities as just one recent example of the kinds of external issues that can intensify anxiety. After the media reported the first case in Dallas, the percentage of Americans who viewed the disease as a "major threat" jumped to over 25% – almost a 15% increase over earlier levels of concern.⁵



The personal issues that affect stress levels are myriad but health, family, and financial concerns are the among the most prevalent.⁶ When we struggle with illness, care for dependent loved ones, or wrestle with budgets, the accompanying stress permeates every aspect of our lives. In the face of major life challenges, even the simplest tasks can begin to seem overwhelming.

Professional issues also include financial anxiety – specifically in regard to one's salary or job insecurity; but professional sources of stress extend beyond dollars to include overwork and dissatisfaction with one's role.⁷ These latter concerns are as old as work itself, but today's employees also face new challenges as industry changes in response to competitive pressure require new skills, higher productivity, and additional responsibility. When employees are stressed, interpersonal relations often suffer, introducing a yet another stressor into the workplace.



Technology can compound not only professional concerns but also personal and external stressors. While technology can simplify many tasks and increase overall efficiency, its very presence in our lives can have a negative effect. Smart phones, as useful as they are, can bring a barrage of stressors directly to us 24 hours a day. For example, having constant access to work email has been shown to elevate heart rates.⁸ Twenty-four hour news feeds, Twitter conversations, and automated alerts can intensify anxiety about external events. Even something as commonplace as heavy use of computers and cell phones has been demonstrated to increase both stress and the risk of sleep disorders.⁹

An XXL snowman sweater probably won't help. But HR and managers *can* offer tools and assistance to promote happiness by relieving certain areas of stress.



If Only It Were as Simple as a Doll or a Sled...

The wide array of factors that can intensify stress and diminish happiness requires a multifaceted approach to helping employees. Steps that HR and managers can take include promoting or introducing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), offering targeted Training & Development, and communicating best practices that employees can adopt on an individual basis.

Employee Assistance Programs – the Gift of Support

Every organization should give their employees the gift of support that a quality EAP provides. EAPs have been so effective as an anxiety-reducing tool that research credits them with achieving a 24.2% decrease in the level of workplace distress.¹

EAPs can reduce workplace distress as much as 24%.¹

“EAPs don’t eliminate stress,” explains Dr. Jay Sandys, CCA’s Vice President of EAP Operations and Clinical Services. “We don’t pretend that we can. But we give people tools to cope with it.”

These programs have an important role to play in protecting happiness from the stress that results from all three sources:

- **External** EAPs not only provide crisis intervention to help deal with external events, they also are an excellent resource for information. As fears about the spread of Ebola elevated the public’s anxiety levels a few weeks ago, many EAPs provided communications and website links to public health bulletins and other access points for the most accurate and up-to-date information. Knowledge can go a long way toward reducing anxiety and stress.
- **Personal** EAP counselors provide valuable information, counsel employees and family members, and help individuals develop a strategy for coping with anxieties and improving underlying issues. Most also offer “wellness” seminars that address key stress areas such as health, family, and finance.
- **Professional** EAPs also help employees address the professional stress that results from conflicts with co-workers, struggles with time management, and a host of other workplace issues. In this sphere, a quality EAP is a gift that can benefit the giver as well by offering support to HR and managers in handling difficult employee situations.

Unfortunately, many employees are unaware of the support available to them. Promoting your EAP and the services it offers is a very simple step toward alleviating workforce stress.

“EAPs don’t eliminate stress . . . we give people tools to cope with it.”

Dr. Jay Sandys
VP EAP Operations & Clinical Services
CCA Inc.

Training & Development – the Gift of Knowledge

Knowledge is a gift that keeps on giving. Targeted training & development programs can give employees critical skills and strategies that equip them to cope more effectively with existing stress and even eliminate sources of future stress. In addition to stress management training, you can offer employees the opportunity to:

- Cultivate personal resiliency that can keep depression and anxiety at bay
- Strengthen communication skills to improve interpersonal relations
- Learn time management practices that can reduce workload and personal pressures
- Develop conflict management competence that can alleviate workplace stress
- Gain new skills that improve performance and increase job satisfaction

Acquiring the tools to deal with and mitigate stress also confers a sense of control. And developing a sense of control is a fundamental aspect of stress management.

Communicating Best Practices – the Gift of Information

There are myriad best practices for general stress management. But researching them is one more task in a busy day. Periodic communications reminding employees of ways they can manage stress is a way for HR and managers to not only educate their staff but also demonstrate concern for their well-being and establish a supportive work environment.

Tips for managing technology-related stress are relatively new. As much as email, mobile devices, and new apps and software can increase our efficiency, they also can create work-life imbalances and other nuisances. The following list outlines a sampling of current best practices for mitigating the negative impact of technology:

- **One window at a time** We often overestimate our ability to multitask effectively. In reality, undertaking numerous tasks at once can easily overwhelm us. This dilemma isn’t new to the digital age, but technology can exacerbate it. To minimize digital overload, HR professionals can encourage employees to keep only one window open at a time on their computer desktops.¹⁰
- **Practice the “20:20:20” rule** We all know how staring at bright screens can cause headaches. To avoid them, computer-users can take a brief break every 20 minutes and look away from their screen at an object 20 feet away for about 20 seconds.¹¹
- **Lights out before bed** In addition to causing headaches, digital devices can actually disrupt our sleep patterns with the frequencies of light that their screens emit. HR professionals can recommend that employees shut down their gadgets a few hours before bed in order to avoid tossing and turning.¹²
- **Set boundaries** A balanced lifestyle requires some time away from work, but digital devices can make this increasingly difficult – especially now that smartphones bring email straight to employees’ pockets 24/7. As a result of this recent development, many people feel as though they’re always on-call.

To establish some balance between work and home, consider urging employees to set deliberate boundaries between the two areas of their lives – for instance, by turning off the email alerts on their phone after a certain, predetermined point in the evening. They may even want to stop checking their email altogether after a certain time, or avoid syncing work email with their phone in the first place. Just as importantly, employees should clearly communicate these boundaries to their co-workers.¹³

- **Get organized** Misplaced electronic files can make busy workdays even more stressful. Help minimize employees' anxiety and wasted time by encouraging them to use their operating system's folders to arrange documents by subject, client, or whatever other criteria make sense.¹⁴

Extend the Season of Giving to Last All Year

Whether professional, personal, or external issues weigh most heavily on employees' minds, chances are they act in concert with one another to reduce happiness. The steps discussed above represent just a few ways that HR and managers can exert a positive influence in all those areas and bring a measure of happiness to their workforce. The benefits of these simple interventions won't fade with the season. The skills, tools, and, most importantly, the message of support are gifts that will stay with employees throughout the year.



About CCA

Since 1984, CCA has been helping organizations improve performance by minimizing the risk associated with their greatest asset – their people. As a premium EAP provider and HR consultant, we provide support to management, HR, and employees through our counseling, training and development programs, executive coaching, and consulting.

For more information, contact CCA at 212.686.6827 or visit ccainc.com.

Endnotes

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