



PEACEATWORK
PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT AND CARE ENHANCEMENT

MEASURES TO ELIMINATE STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

UNIT 7

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Learning Objectives

- Recognize common sources and symptoms of workplace stress.
- Assess the impact of stress on individuals and organizational performance.
- Apply evidence-based strategies to reduce or eliminate workplace stressors.
- Implement proactive tools and practices for long-term stress prevention.
- Reflect on personal stress management habits and create an individual action plan.



Introduction



Workplace stress has become a growing challenge across all sectors, affecting both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness. The modern workplace—fast-paced, digital, and often overloaded—demands resilience, focus, and adaptability. However, without the right tools and awareness, even motivated employees can experience burnout, anxiety, or emotional exhaustion. This unit explores practical and evidence-based measures to identify,

reduce, and prevent stress in professional settings. Through case studies, reflection activities, and hands-on tools, participants will learn how to recognize early signs of stress, apply coping mechanisms, and promote a supportive workplace culture where people can thrive, not merely survive.

Description of the Challenge

Stress is the body's natural reaction to pressure. In the workplace, it occurs when there is a mismatch between job demands and personal capacity. According to the Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress results from how individuals appraise a situation — not only the situation itself. Two people may face the same deadline, yet perceive it entirely differently depending on their coping resources, past experiences, and emotional resilience.

Common workplace stressors fall into several categories:

- Organizational: high workload, unclear processes, restructuring
- Social: lack of recognition, poor communication, team conflict
- Environmental: noise, workspace design, digital overload
- Personal: perfectionism, fear of failure, imposter syndrome



Consequences of unmanaged stress include absenteeism, burnout, and turnover. WHO estimates stress-related absenteeism costs the EU economy €617 billion annually. Chronic stress increases risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, and lower productivity.

Stress Signals and Early Warning Systems in the Workplace

Why Early Detection of Stress Matters

Stress rarely appears suddenly or without warning. In most cases, it develops gradually through **small, often overlooked signals** that accumulate over time. When these early signs go unnoticed, temporary strain can evolve into chronic stress, burnout, or health problems. For this reason, effective stress prevention begins with **early recognition** rather than late intervention.



Early warning systems do not require medical expertise or complex diagnostics. Instead, they rely on **awareness, observation, and reflection**—by individuals, peers, and leaders. Recognizing stress early empowers employees to take corrective action while maintaining performance, well-being, and dignity.

From a preventive well-being perspective, noticing stress signals is a form of self-care and shared responsibility, not weakness.

Understanding Stress Signals: A Holistic Perspective

Workplace stress manifests across **four interconnected dimensions**: physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. These dimensions often reinforce one another, which is why stress should always be viewed holistically.

1. Physical Signals

Physical stress signals are among the earliest indicators, yet they are frequently normalized or ignored.

Common signs include:

- Persistent fatigue or low energy
- Headaches, muscle tension, or back pain
- Sleep disturbances
- Gastrointestinal discomfort
- Frequent minor illnesses

These signals suggest that the body is under prolonged pressure and lacks sufficient recovery time.

2. Emotional Signals

Emotional changes often appear before visible performance issues.

Typical emotional signals include:

- Irritability or impatience
- Anxiety or excessive worrying
- Reduced motivation or enthusiasm
- Emotional numbness or detachment
- Feeling overwhelmed by minor tasks



These signs indicate emotional overload and reduced resilience.

3. Cognitive Signals

Stress significantly affects thinking and decision-making.

Cognitive warning signs include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness or mental “fog”
- Indecisiveness
- Negative self-talk (“I’m not good enough”)
- Catastrophic thinking

Cognitive stress signals often increase mistakes and reduce confidence, further intensifying stress.

4. Behavioral Signals

Behavioral changes are often the most visible to others and serve as key early warning signs at team level.



Examples include:

- Withdrawal from colleagues or meetings
- Increased absenteeism or presenteeism
- Procrastination or rushed work
- Increased conflict or defensiveness
- Overworking and inability to disconnect

Behavioral signals frequently reflect unspoken stress rather than lack of commitment.

Individual Early Warning Systems: Self-Monitoring Without Self-Blame

An effective early warning system starts with **self-awareness**, not self-criticism. Employees benefit from regularly checking in with themselves to identify patterns rather than isolated incidents.

Helpful self-monitoring questions include:

- How is my energy level compared to last month?
- Am I recovering well after workdays?
- Which tasks drain me the most right now?
- Have my reactions changed recently?



Simple tools such as **stress journals, energy trackers, or weekly reflections** can reveal trends and enable early adjustment—before stress escalates.

Importantly, self-monitoring should focus on **curiosity and compassion**, not perfection.

Peer and Team-Level Stress Signals

Stress is not only individual—it is often **collective**. Teams develop shared stress patterns that can be detected early through observation and dialogue.

Team-level warning signs include:

- Increased misunderstandings or tension
- Declining collaboration or trust
- Silence in meetings or reduced participation
- Constant urgency without recovery
- Informal complaints or cynicism

Peer awareness plays a critical role here. Colleagues often notice changes before individuals recognize them in themselves. Creating a culture where people can **check in with one another respectfully** supports early intervention and psychological safety.

The Role of Leaders in Early Stress Detection

Leaders and supervisors are key actors in stress prevention—not as therapists, but as **observers and facilitators**.

Effective leadership behaviors include:



- Noticing changes in behavior or performance patterns
- Asking open, non-judgmental questions
- Normalizing conversations about workload and stress
- Acting early rather than waiting for crisis
- Adjusting expectations when warning signs appear

Early intervention by leaders often requires **small adjustments**, such as redistributing tasks, clarifying priorities, or encouraging recovery time.

From Signals to Action: Responding Early

Detecting stress signals is only meaningful if it leads to **timely and proportionate action**. Early responses should focus on reducing strain and restoring balance, not on performance punishment.

Examples of early actions include:

- Short-term workload adjustments
- Flexible scheduling or recovery days
- Peer support or mentoring conversations
- Clarification of priorities
- Encouraging use of existing well-being resources

Early action prevents escalation and demonstrates care and responsibility.

Learning Activities and Reflection Exercises (Early Warning Focus)



Activity 1 – Stress Signal Mapping:

Reflect on the last month and identify one physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral stress signal you noticed.

Activity 2 – Pattern Recognition:

Think of a period when stress increased. What early signals were present that you ignored at the time?

Activity 3 – Team Observation Exercise:

In groups, discuss non-invasive ways teams can notice stress without blaming or stigmatizing.

Activity 4 – Action Planning:

Choose one early signal you recognize in yourself and define one small preventive action you can take this week.

Summary

Stress signals are not signs of failure—they are **early messages from the body and mind** indicating a need for adjustment. By learning to recognize physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral warning signs early, individuals and teams can prevent stress from escalating into burnout. Early detection transforms stress management from crisis response into everyday well-being practice and strengthens resilience at both personal and organizational levels.

Employee Self-Regulation Toolkit: Everyday Practices to Reduce Workplace Stress

What Is Self-Regulation and Why It Matters

Self-regulation refers to the ability to **notice, manage, and respond constructively** to internal states such as stress, emotions, thoughts, and energy levels. In the workplace, self-regulation is not about suppressing stress or “staying strong at all costs,” but about **adjusting behavior and expectations** in ways that protect health and performance.

From a wellbeing perspective, self-regulation is a core life skill. While organizations play a crucial role in reducing stressors, employees benefit greatly from having **simple, reliable tools** to restore balance in real time—especially in situations they cannot immediately change.

Self-regulation supports resilience, emotional stability, focus, and sustainable productivity.

Principle 1: Pause Before Pressure Escalates

Stress often escalates because there is **no pause** between pressure and reaction. Creating short pauses allows the nervous system to reset and prevents impulsive responses.

Practical pause techniques include:

- **Box breathing** (inhale 4 seconds, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4)



- Taking three slow breaths before responding to emails or feedback
- Standing up and changing physical position during moments of tension

Even brief pauses reduce physiological stress responses and improve clarity.

Principle 2: Regulating Attention and Focus

Constant interruptions and multitasking increase cognitive stress. Self-regulation involves **protecting attention as a limited resource**.

Helpful practices:

- Time-blocking focused work periods (30–90 minutes)
- Turning off non-essential notifications
- Single-tasking instead of multitasking
- Starting the day by identifying 1–3 priority tasks

These strategies reduce overload and increase a sense of control and accomplishment.

Principle 3: Emotional Self-Regulation at Work

Workplace stress is often emotional rather than technical. Learning to regulate emotions supports both wellbeing and professional relationships.

Simple emotional regulation tools:

- Naming emotions (“I feel overwhelmed”) to reduce their intensity
- Cognitive reframing (“This is challenging, not impossible”)
- Using short grounding techniques (feet on floor, noticing surroundings)
- Practicing self-compassion instead of self-criticism

Emotional regulation strengthens psychological safety and prevents stress spillover into conflict.

Principle 4: Energy Management Instead of Time Management

Not all hours are equal. Self-regulation focuses on **working with energy cycles**, not against them.

Key strategies:

- Identifying personal high-energy and low-energy times
- Scheduling demanding tasks during peak energy

- Taking micro-breaks (2–5 minutes) every 60–90 minutes
- Including movement, hydration, and daylight exposure

Energy-based planning reduces exhaustion and improves sustainable performance.



Principle 5: Setting Boundaries Without Guilt

Poor boundaries are a major contributor to chronic workplace stress. Self-regulation includes learning when and how to say **no, later, or differently**.



Boundary-setting practices:

- Clarifying availability and response times
- Using calendar boundaries (focus time, recovery time)
- Negotiating deadlines rather than silently overloading
- Disconnecting intentionally after work hours

Healthy boundaries protect recovery and prevent burnout without harming commitment.

Principle 6: Using Social Regulation and Support

Self-regulation does not mean managing stress alone. Humans regulate emotions and stress **socially**.

Supportive practices include:

- Short check-ins with trusted colleagues
- Peer mentoring or buddy systems
- Asking for help early rather than late
- Normalizing stress conversations

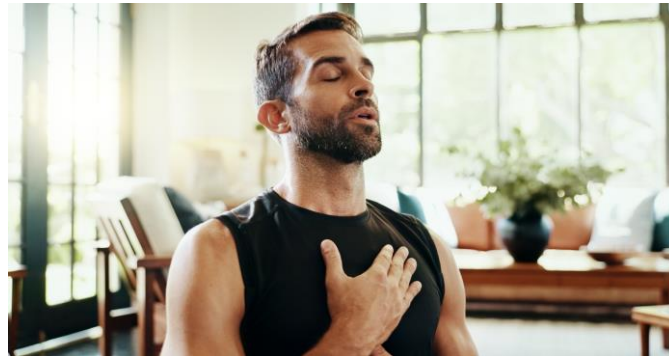
Social support buffers stress and enhances resilience.

Micro-Toolkit: Self-Regulation in 5 Minutes or Less

Employees can use these tools immediately at work:

- 3 conscious breaths before a stressful task
- One stretch or posture change
- Writing down the next small step instead of the whole problem
- Reframing one negative thought

- Brief walk or window break



Small actions, practiced consistently, have cumulative impact.

Learning Activities and Reflection Exercises (Self-Regulation Focus)

Activity 1 – Personal Toolkit Creation:

Choose 3 self-regulation techniques that feel realistic for your workday. Write when and how you will use them.

Activity 2 – Stress Scenario Practice:

Imagine a stressful workplace situation. Which self-regulation tool would help most in that moment?

Activity 3 – Boundary Reflection:

Identify one boundary you struggle to maintain. What is one small change you could test this week?

Activity 4 – Energy Mapping:

Track your energy levels for one day. How could you adjust tasks to better match them?

Self-regulation empowers employees to respond to stress **before it becomes overwhelming**. By pausing, managing attention, regulating emotions, respecting energy cycles, setting boundaries, and seeking support, individuals can significantly reduce daily stress and build resilience. These tools do not replace organizational responsibility—but they equip people to navigate work demands with greater awareness, balance, and wellbeing.



Self-Regulation Checklist for Managing Workplace Stress

Use this checklist to **notice stress early, respond constructively, and protect your energy** during the workday. You do not need to apply everything at once—start small and build consistency.



1. Awareness: Noticing Stress Early

- ☐ I regularly check my **energy level** during the day
- ☐ I notice early **physical signals** (tension, fatigue, headaches)
- ☐ I notice **emotional signals** (irritability, anxiety, loss of motivation)
- ☐ I notice **thinking changes** (rushing, self-criticism, confusion)
- ☐ I recognize **behavioral signals** (overworking, withdrawal, procrastination)

→ *If I notice 2 or more signals, I pause and take action.*

2. Pause & Reset (1–3 minutes)

- ☐ I stop before reacting automatically
- ☐ I take 3 slow, conscious breaths
- ☐ I change posture or stand up
- ☐ I briefly step away from the screen
- ☐ I remind myself: “*I can respond calmly.*”

3. Focus & Attention

- ☐ I identify **one priority task** at a time
- ☐ I reduce unnecessary notifications
- ☐ I work in focused blocks (30–90 minutes)
- ☐ I avoid multitasking when stressed
- ☐ I break large tasks into small steps

4. Emotional Self-Regulation

- ☐ I name what I feel (e.g. “I feel overwhelmed”)
- ☐ I avoid harsh self-talk

- ☐ I reframe challenges realistically
- ☐ I ground myself in the present moment
- ☐ I allow emotions without judging myself

5. Energy Management

- ☐ I know my **high-energy** and **low-energy** times
- ☐ I plan demanding tasks during peak energy
- ☐ I take micro-breaks (2–5 minutes)
- ☐ I hydrate and move regularly
- ☐ I respect the need for recovery

6. Boundaries & Workload

- ☐ I clarify priorities when overloaded
- ☐ I negotiate deadlines instead of silently coping
- ☐ I set limits on availability when possible
- ☐ I disconnect intentionally after work
- ☐ I allow myself to rest without guilt

7. Social Support

- ☐ I talk openly with a trusted colleague
- ☐ I ask for help early, not only in crisis
- ☐ I participate in peer or team check-ins
- ☐ I support others without judgment
- ☐ I remember: stress is human, not personal failure

8. Daily Reflection (End of Day – 2 minutes)

- ☐ What helped my well-being today?
- ☐ What drained my energy most?
- ☐ What is one small adjustment for tomorrow?

Reminder



Self-regulation is not about perfection.

It is about awareness, small actions, and consistency.

Distinguishing Healthy Stress and Harmful Stress in the Workplace

Why Not All Stress Is the Same

Stress is often portrayed as something that must be eliminated entirely. In reality, **stress is a natural and sometimes useful response** that helps people adapt, focus, and perform. Problems arise not from stress itself, but from **its intensity, duration, and lack of recovery**.

Understanding the difference between healthy stress and harmful stress empowers employees and organizations to **manage stress intelligently**—supporting motivation and performance while preventing exhaustion and burnout.

Healthy Stress (Eustress): When Stress Supports Performance

Healthy stress, often called **eustress**, is a short-term, manageable form of stress that **energizes and motivates**. It typically occurs when challenges are meaningful, achievable, and supported by sufficient resources.

Characteristics of Healthy Stress:

- Feels challenging but manageable
- Is time-limited
- Enhances focus and alertness
- Is linked to motivation and engagement
- Allows recovery after effort

Common Workplace Examples:

- Preparing for an important presentation
- Learning a new skill or role
- Working toward a meaningful deadline
- Taking on a stretch assignment with support



Healthy stress often contributes to **learning, growth, and a sense of accomplishment**, especially when employees experience autonomy and purpose.

Harmful Stress (Distress): When Stress Becomes a Risk

Harmful stress, known as **distress**, occurs when demands **exceed personal or organizational resources** over time. Unlike eustress, distress drains energy and undermines both health and performance.

Characteristics of Harmful Stress:

- Feels overwhelming or uncontrollable
- Persists without adequate recovery
- Reduces concentration and motivation
- Affects physical and mental health
- Leads to exhaustion, cynicism, or disengagement

Common Workplace Examples:

- Constant overload without clarity or support
- Ongoing role conflict or job insecurity
- Persistent time pressure without breaks
- Lack of control or recognition
- Long-term digital overload and constant availability

Distress is strongly associated with burnout, absenteeism, and reduced well-being.

Key Differences at a Glance

Healthy Stress (Eustress)	Harmful Stress (Distress)
Short-term and temporary	Long-term and chronic
Motivating and energizing	Draining and exhausting
Supports performance	Undermines performance
Allows recovery	Prevents recovery
Linked to growth	Linked to burnout

The Role of Recovery in Stress Health

The **most important factor** distinguishing healthy from harmful stress is **recovery**. Even positive stress becomes harmful if the body and mind do not have time to reset.

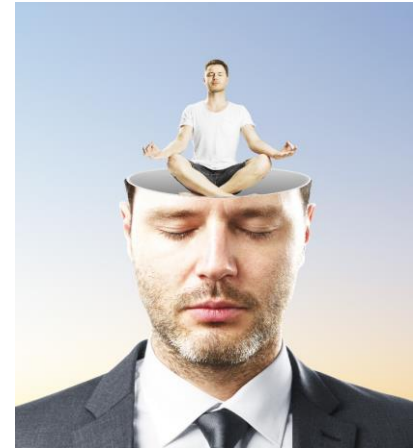
Recovery includes:

- Breaks during the workday
- Psychological detachment after work
- Sleep and physical restoration
- Emotional support and relaxation
- Variation in task intensity

Without recovery, eustress gradually transforms into distress.

Individual Perception and Appraisal of Stress

According to the **Transactional Model of Stress**, stress is influenced not only by external demands but also by how individuals **interpret and appraise** situations.



Two people may experience the same workload differently depending on:

- Experience and skills
- Confidence and self-efficacy
- Available support
- Sense of control
- Personal values

This explains why stress management must combine **organizational measures and personal self-regulation**, rather than relying on one approach alone.

Warning Signs That Healthy Stress Is Turning Harmful

Stress becomes harmful when early signals are ignored. Common transition signs include:



Persistent fatigue without recovery

- Irritability or emotional numbness
- Reduced enjoyment or motivation
- Sleep problems
- Increasing mistakes or disengagement

Recognizing these signs early allows timely adjustment and prevents escalation.

How to Maintain Stress in a Healthy Zone

Employees and organizations can work together to keep stress at functional levels:

At the individual level:

- Use self-regulation techniques (pauses, boundaries, energy management)

- Reflect regularly on stress signals
- Communicate needs early

At the organizational level:

- Design realistic workloads
- Encourage recovery and flexibility
- Normalize conversations about stress
- Intervene early when warning signs appear

Healthy stress supports performance only when **care and limits are respected**.

Learning Activities and Reflection

Exercises

Activity 1 – Stress Classification:

List 3 recent stressful situations and classify them as healthy stress or harmful stress. Explain why.

Activity 2 – Recovery Check:

Reflect on how well you recover after demanding workdays. What helps? What is missing?

Activity 3 – Early Warning Reflection:

Identify one sign that tells you stress is becoming unhealthy for you.

Activity 4 – Adjustment Plan:

Choose one small change that could help keep stress within a healthy range this week.



Summary

Stress is not the enemy—**unmanaged stress is**. Healthy stress can motivate, energize, and support growth when it is temporary and balanced by recovery. Harmful stress emerges when demands persist without control, support, or rest. By understanding this distinction, individuals and organizations can move from avoiding stress to **managing it wisely**, protecting well-being while sustaining performance.

Summary: Key Takeaways

Workplace stress is a natural response to pressure, but it becomes harmful when demands exceed resources over time and recovery is insufficient. This unit has shown that stress management is not about eliminating all stress, but about **recognizing early signals**,

responding proportionately, and restoring balance at both individual and organizational levels.

The unit began by exploring workplace stress as a multidimensional challenge shaped by organizational, social, environmental, and personal factors. Stress is not determined solely by external demands, but also by how situations are perceived, appraised, and managed. Understanding this interaction helps move away from blame and toward shared responsibility for well-being.

A central focus of the unit was the **early detection of stress signals**. Stress rarely appears suddenly; it develops gradually through physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral warning signs. Learning to notice these signals early transforms stress management from crisis response into everyday prevention. Early awareness protects health, dignity, and performance, and allows timely adjustments before stress escalates into burnout or illness.

The unit highlighted that stress is not only individual but often **collective**. Team dynamics, communication patterns, workload distribution, and leadership behavior strongly influence how stress develops and spreads. Supportive leadership, open dialogue, and psychological safety play a crucial role in recognizing stress early and responding with care rather than control.



A key part of the unit focused on **self-regulation as an everyday well-being skill**. Self-regulation does not mean suppressing stress or coping alone; it means responding consciously to pressure by pausing, managing attention, regulating emotions, respecting energy limits, setting boundaries, and using social support. Small, consistent self-regulation practices—such as micro-pauses, energy management, and boundary-setting—can significantly reduce daily stress and strengthen resilience.

The unit also distinguished clearly between **healthy stress (eustress)** and **harmful stress (distress)**. Healthy stress can support motivation, learning, and performance when it is time-

limited, meaningful, and followed by recovery. Harmful stress arises when pressure is persistent, uncontrollable, and unsupported. Recovery emerged as the key factor that determines whether stress remains functional or becomes damaging.

Finally, the unit emphasized reflection and action. Through checklists, learning activities, case studies, and an individual stress management action plan, learners were encouraged to translate awareness into **practical, realistic changes**. Effective stress management is not about doing everything perfectly, but about making small, intentional adjustments consistently.

In conclusion, eliminating harmful workplace stress requires a **balanced approach** that combines organizational measures, supportive leadership, team awareness, and individual self-regulation. When stress is recognized early and addressed constructively, workplaces can protect well-being, sustain performance, and create environments where people can cope, adapt, and thrive over the long term.

Further Resources

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Workplace Stress: A Collective Challenge

https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/WCMS_466547

An accessible overview of workplace stress, its causes, consequences, and preventive measures, emphasizing shared responsibility between individuals and organizations.



UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

Work-related Stress, Anxiety or Depression

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress>

Practical guidance on identifying stressors at work, early warning signs, and organizational measures to reduce psychosocial risks.

Mental Health Foundation

How to Manage and Reduce Stress

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/stress>

Clear explanations and self-help strategies for managing stress, recovery, and emotional well-being, suitable for general public learners.

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Early Stress Signals in a Project Team

Brief Description:

A project team in a service organization was facing increasing time pressure due to overlapping deadlines and frequent changes in client requirements. Team members were highly committed and initially responded by working longer hours and skipping breaks. Open conflict was rare, and the team continued to meet performance targets.

Over time, however, subtle signs of stress began to appear. Several employees reported constant fatigue, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Informal communication declined, and team meetings became shorter and more task-focused. Although no one described their situation as “serious stress,” many felt continuously tense and mentally exhausted.

The team leader noticed reduced energy and growing mistakes but initially assumed the situation was temporary. Without early intervention, stress levels continued to rise, increasing the risk of burnout.

Problem Description:

Early stress signals were present but normalized and not addressed in time.

Emotional / Physical Effects:

Persistent fatigue, irritability, reduced focus, and emotional strain.

Response / Intervention:

The team introduced regular workload check-ins, clearer prioritization, and short recovery breaks. Stress levels gradually decreased.

Reflection Questions:

1. What early stress signals were visible in this case?
2. Why were they difficult to recognize?
3. What preventive actions proved most helpful?

Individual Stress and Boundary Management

Brief Description:

Maria worked in a marketing role with flexible working arrangements. While she appreciated the autonomy, she struggled to disconnect from work. Notifications arrived late in the evening, and Maria often responded immediately. She felt responsible for staying available and feared appearing uncommitted.

Gradually, Maria experienced sleep problems, constant mental tension, and difficulty relaxing. Although her workload had not formally increased, the lack of boundaries created continuous stress. She blamed herself for not coping better and did not discuss her situation with colleagues or her manager.

The stress remained invisible until Maria's motivation declined and mistakes increased.

Problem Description:

Blurred boundaries and lack of self-regulation led to chronic stress.

Emotional / Physical Effects:

Sleep disturbance, anxiety, mental fatigue, reduced motivation.

Response / Intervention:

Maria learned to set clearer boundaries, limit availability, and schedule recovery time. Supportive dialogue with her manager helped normalize stress prevention.

Reflection Questions:

1. How did flexibility become a source of stress?
2. What role did boundaries play in stress management?
3. How could earlier action have helped?

Stress in a Multigenerational Workplace

Brief Description:

A manufacturing company employed workers from different generations with varying physical capacities and work expectations. Older employees reported physical strain and fatigue, while younger employees experienced pressure to perform quickly and prove themselves.

Stress manifested differently across age groups, but open discussion was limited. Some employees felt misunderstood, while others felt pressure to adapt without support. As a result, stress-related tension increased within Teams.

Management initially addressed stress through general policies, but these measures did not fully reflect individual needs.

Problem Description:

One-size-fits-all stress measures failed to address diverse stress experiences.

Emotional / Physical Effects:

Fatigue, frustration, reduced engagement, and tension between colleagues.

Response / Intervention:

The organization introduced differentiated measures, flexible shifts, ergonomic adjustments, and open dialogue. Stress indicators improved.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do stress experiences differ across life stages?
2. Why is individualized prevention important?
3. How can dialogue reduce stress?

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