

Stress Management Programs— Why Some Fail and Some Succeed

The central dilemma of workplace stress is that employers themselves are often too stressed to provide the level of care, support, communication, and flexibility their employees need, even though they really want to! This is especially true now, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey by the [American Psychological Association](#), stress increased for 67% of adults over the course of the past year, and 78% identify the pandemic as the major source of their stress.

Whatever the initial [cause](#) of stress—emotional, physical, or situational—stress lowers productivity, increases absenteeism and the risk of errors and injury. It spreads to co-workers and customers as they deal with their own stress plus the stressful reactions of others. As a result, [research](#) shows that an estimated 40% of job turnover is due to stress; healthcare expenses are 50% higher for stressed employees; absenteeism costs \$3.6 million per year; and the cost of an accident nearly doubles when stress is involved. And these statistics are pre-Covid! It simply makes financial sense to deal with stress. It also makes enormous sense to be part of creating a world in which we all thrive, where wellbeing, deep career satisfaction, and profits rise hand in hand.

Why Do Stress Management Programs Fail?

Faced with the struggle to stay afloat and with an employee pool that is more and more stressed, many leaders grab at solutions, appropriate or not. While they clearly care enough to do something, the wasted time, energy, and money spent on the wrong stress management program may be as devastating as stress itself.

Here's a typical [caution](#): "Many [stress] interventions based on sound theory have been shown to have inconsistent or small effects." For example, a program that preaches adequate rest is frustrating for employees who are expected to respond immediately to emails and phone calls, day or night. A [real-world study](#) by an English university concluded that "without a careful examination of the characteristics of interventions and the context in which they will be implemented, it is highly unlikely they will bring the intended positive effects."

So, what causes the failure of stress management programs? Unsuccessful programs:

1. **Ignore the science.** Stress causes the production of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These stress-related hormones raise heart rate and

blood pressure and reduce brainpower (especially attention span). A successful stress management program not only focuses on the science of stress and health, but provides a common vocabulary for understanding symptoms, talking about stressors, creating the right metrics, and discussing the types of help available.

2. **Ignore the real people involved.** The effectiveness of a program increases when the organization takes the time to ask employees about their level of stress and possible causes—and is willing to listen. The resulting program can then be customized to the organization and individualized, so that shared challenges are addressed, and employees feel supported in meeting their individual needs and learning styles. That's a lot more effective than a bunch of posters shouting "RELAX!"
3. **Address only part of the organization.** Leaders need to accept responsibility for the stress they suffer and the stress they cause. Executive leadership who participate as fellow human beings are showing the same vulnerability, curiosity, and a willingness to change they expect from staff. The culture and vision of the organization also have to support stress reduction at all levels—a win/win since minimizing stress usually optimizes thriving and productivity.
4. **Puts too much pressure on people.** Compel a bunch of overworked, deadline harassed middle managers to upend their schedules for a stress management class and guess what? Their stress goes up. And it's likely they feel as if the burden of curing stress for their entire team has just landed on their already aching necks. They may also need to manage the perception that the underlying intent of the program is to mitigate or justify increased workloads.
5. **Becomes a competition.** You know the type: for years, they have battled to see who can stay latest at work; if there was a prize for high blood pressure, they would aim for that, too. Now that stress reduction is "in," they compete for who can meditate longest or breathe deepest. Any stress reduction program that devolves into a competition has clearly missed its goal. It also missed the opportunity to build collaboration that supports a productive, healthy culture.
6. **Are based on unclear or unreachable metrics and goals.** As with any workplace project, a stress reduction program needs metrics. What specific behaviors does the organization and its employees expect to change? Goals are most powerful when then they are co-created. They should be precise, reachable, and undertaken one at a time. Goals that are too big are daunting, and those that are too small to inspire fail to deliver any benefit. Metrics allow everyone to see that progress is being made which reinforces the learning necessary for lasting change.
7. **Are unrealistic.** Change takes time—it requires rewiring brains. It depends on communication, training, support, practice, repetition, re-evaluation, and accountability. This is as true for lowered stress as for any other goal. The strategies offered must make sense to the individuals so they are motivated to persist. Unrealistic, arbitrary expectations set people up for failure, just as realistic expectations that align with a group's values and strengths build confidence and predispose them for success.
8. **Begin with the wrong attitude.** Stress management programs should be fun and creative and held in a safe, respectful, and compassionate

environment. The human brain needs safety before it can cut off its automatic stress reaction system to engage in any learning or growth.

- 9. *End with the wrong attitude.*** Small steps forward are still moving *forward*. Lower stress is something to celebrate. A less stressful environment is something to celebrate—and shared happiness in itself reduces stress. That's a win/win!

What Does a Successful Stress Management Program Look Like?

How do you know if your stress management program has the potential to work?

It identifies the true sources of stress. The sources and causes of stress are clearly defined and everyone contributes to finding the right solutions for the right problems.

It offers a variety of strategies that fit into an overarching model—one that honors the way humans are wired and makes sense to all. It is based on science and each module reflects the realistic goals of the people and the company.

It focuses on the individual and meets people where they are. The entire program is framed in curiosity, exploration, and care without judgment. It recognizes that because most stress management skills are never taught, all humans struggle in some areas of life. It reinforces the benefits of learning fundamental rules and new tools. Individuals receive personal (private) assessments and specific, tailored tips from which to choose their goals.

It builds connections between the organization and its people. It understands how the human element and the work environment are intertwined. You can't have a work environment without people, and you can't have satisfying work without the right environment. For example, individuals may improve their ability to handle the stress of conflict and still leave in droves if the organization hasn't changed. Leaders who see these essential connections build their people and culture together.

It leads to measurable and sustainable change. The success of a stress management program is often measured by organizational standards: lower turnover, higher productivity, fewer absences, easier talent acquisition, and more engagement. Success on the individual level requires different measurements: more energy, better sleep, less frequent complaints of headaches and physical pain, fewer but more civil meetings, or less dependency on drugs, alcohol, and smoking, for example. When the metrics established are realistic and attainable, they inspire enthusiastic endorsement for the power of wellness—a recipe for thriving humans and a thriving business.

When picking a stress management program for your organization, seize the opportunity to tap into the wisdom and intrinsic motivation of your people. Co-create a workplace where the culture and operations support the best of human potential. Empower your leadership and workforce to optimize their energy,

focus, and confidence to handle challenges. Your clients will notice. Your employees and their families will notice. Your bottom line will notice.

*With her unique background in medicine, neuropsychology, leadership development, and coaching, Dr. Cindi Ackrill brings both compassion and science to stress management. A certified leader in the field for over 25 years, Cindi understands the challenges and metrics unique to your industry and your situation. **The support you deserve is right [here](#).***