

An important aspect of recovering from depression is continuing to participate in as many of your regular daily activities as possible during treatment. Work is obviously high on that list. But it can be challenging to function at your best on the job while dealing with the symptoms of your depression. The following is list of tips and strategies for maximizing your performance on the job. They include:

- Problem Solving
- Staying Vital at Work
- Dealing with Distraction
- Managing Your Time
- Managing Conflict
- Striving for Work/Life Balance

Problem Solving

Most of the stress we encounter at work can actually be traced to worrying or being upset about things we can't control. This leaves us with less time, energy and focus to put to work to solve real issues. How you frame problems and plan to tackle them will greatly determine how well you function at work. Here's a 5-step exercise to try when facing a stressful problem:

- **Step 1: Identify the problem.**
Write out the specific problem – what it is and why it's problematic for you. Write out just one problem at a time.
- **Step 2: State what you WISH you could do to resolve the problem if you had the power.**
If you had the power to do anything at all, what would you make happen?
- **Step 3: State what you are NOT able to do to solve the problem.**
Realistically admit your limits when it comes to addressing the issue.
- **Step 4: State what you ARE able to do to solve the problem.**
What can you reasonably do to change the situation? List all f the ways you could approach the problem.
- **Step 5: Choose your course of action.**
Cross off your list the items you wish you could do, and those you cannot do. Then examine what's left, selecting the best option or options and planning how you will put them into action. The result will be a complete, “doable” plan you can follow through on until the problem is solved – or at least improved.

Staying vital at work

Maintaining high spirits, motivation and a sense of purpose at work can be challenging. Here are some tips to try when you feel your working life needs a boost:

- **Do more of what you like.**
Draft a list of things about your job you most enjoy, and areas where you think you make the greatest contribution. Then look for patterns and opportunities to create more of those opportunities.
- **Learn something new.**
Develop and nurture your curiosity and untapped talents.
- **Practice gratitude.**
At the start of the workday and again at the end, acknowledge your coworkers for their contributions.
- **Create a quiet space for reflection.**
Find a place away from noise and interruption to go when you need to gather your thoughts.
- **Ask yourself these questions:**
What did I do today to make someone else's day better?
What values drove my actions today?
- **Create a forum where others can share the differences they're making.**
Perhaps there is an opportunity at regular staff meetings for a few minutes of this kind of sharing, which is fun and provides a chance for genuine connection.
- **Remember: everyone has a story.**
Take time to listen to others and reflect on what you share in common.
- **Coach someone else to find their passion.**
Ask questions about what another person is looking for in their work. You may find that you can help them find ways to bring more to their work experience.
- **Aspire each and every day.**
Whether or not you ever reach it, setting a goal for the future helps provide you with direction and a reason to be enthusiastic today.
- **Look for motivation to tackle difficult or unpleasant tasks.**
Some people prefer to start with a difficult task to get it out of the way. Others alternate pleasant with unpleasant jobs so that as soon as a tough task is finished, it's followed by a more enjoyable one. Determine what strategy works best for you.
- **Whenever possible, collaborate.**
Not only is working with others more energizing and fun, but some of the best work results when individuals "bounce" ideas off of each other.

Dealing with distraction

Try these simple strategies to help keep you focused on the job:

- **Start each day with a task list.**
Keep your list in sight all day, checking off each assignment as it is completed.
- **Break down big assignments into five-minute “mini-tasks.”**
Smaller tasks form the stepping-stones to completing the whole project over time. Even if you are interrupted along the way by an emergency or “must do now” request, finish your current mini-task first so that it will be clear later which step to undertake next.
- **Check e-mail only at regular intervals.**
Constantly stopping your task each time you receive an email prompt makes progress very difficult. Plan regular times to check your email such as on the half-hour to avoid getting sidetracked.
- **Control or eliminate distractions.**
When possible, find a way to schedule uninterrupted work time. Strategies like closing your door, posting a sign to let others know you are unavailable, or forwarding your calls to voicemail.

Managing your time

Two of the most common complaints expressed by people dealing with stress or anxiety are that they have “too much to do in too little time” and that they wish they had “more hours in the day.” The fact is, the more worried and stressed you are, the less energy and focus you have to devote to the tasks at hand because of the draining nature of stress itself. That’s why the first step toward better time management is to address your stress level and increase your energy:

- **Spend time each day on relaxation.**
Feeling more relaxed and invigorated will help you tackle the tasks at hand with more productivity and less anxiety.
- Here are some additional steps you can take to better manage your time:
- **At the start of the day, make a prioritized task list.**
List every major task you need to accomplish that day, and prioritize them from the highest importance to the lowest. Then cross off each task as it is finished (or delegated). If you do not complete all of the lower-priority tasks by day’s end, don’t worry – lower-priority tasks can wait until another time. Realizing this, and recognizing the accomplishments you have made during the day both serve to reduce stress and anxiety.
- **List all of the tasks you need to address during the next day, week, month and year.**
Rank these tasks by importance (such as “3” for critical, “2” for important, “1” for optional). Then, write out a plan for when and how you will accomplish the higher ranking tasks. Post the list and chart your progress, focusing first on the most essential tasks. Remember to delegate whatever tasks you can. **Remember, you can’t do everything.** Do the best you can with the time and energy available.
- **Regularly clean up and organize your work and living spaces.**
Arrange your work materials, making sure that what you need is organized in a logical, user-friendly system that works best for you.
- **Use a planner throughout the day.**
A daily planner is portable, and can be useful in planning, checking off, and reassessing again and again. Select a planner you will like and use, whether it is the traditional paper type or an electronic organizer.

Managing conflict

Disagreements are a natural part of human interaction, not necessarily the sign of personality problems. Each person has a different set of experiences, and sometimes the needs of one person conflict with the needs of others. Conflict can be seen as an opportunity to find out something you didn't know before; namely, the other person's point of view.

Conflict management experts agree that there is one easy, inexpensive and always available tool to resolve a disagreement: listening. The challenge is that often, the time when we most need to listen is the time we are least willing to do so.

Although it can be difficult, you can make listening work for you. Try these steps to help manage the inevitable conflicts you may face at work and at home:

- **Be calm.**
When you are upset, physical and chemical changes occur in your body that can affect your thoughts, feelings and even body language, making it difficult to problem-solve. Breathe deeply, count to ten, take a quick walk around the building, or take some other action to return your body to a more rational state.
- **Give yourself time to consider whether and how to approach the other person.**
Ask yourself these questions:
 - What set me off? What am I really upset about?
 - What's the problem that needs to be resolved between us?
 - Is this really important, or is it too petty to matter?
 - Am I jumping to conclusions about the other person's motives?
- **Gently let the other person know you're troubled.**
Even though you've been giving the problem serious thought, that doesn't mean the other person has. Your concern may take them by surprise. Find a quiet private time and place to say, "I'm upset about ____, and I'd like to find a time we can talk about it." Remember that this is an invitation, not a challenge, so your tone should remain as neutral as possible. Make this invitation face to face, not by e-mail which can serve to escalate the disagreement.
- **Schedule a private place and time to talk.**
Make sure you're away from where others can overhear, and that there is enough time available for you both to talk.
- **Invite the other person to describe his/her version of what has happened first.**
Since you've initiated the conversation, you're responsible for its effectiveness. The other person is much more likely to listen to you once he/she feels heard. Remember that the other person may feel awkward or defensive. Your request to hear their story must be genuine, and may need to be repeated.

- **Stay with it until you resolve it.**
 Your goal is to see the situation through the other person's eyes and learn all you can about the situation. Encourage the person to continue. Stifle any body language that signals disagreement (such as rolling eyes, shaking head, etc.). If you're not clear about what's being said, ask for clarification. Summarize what you've heard and allow the other person to confirm whether or not you heard it correctly.
- **Don't argue with their story.**
 This can be very challenging, but remember: this is not a debate. You need to know what is going on in the other person's mind. You may strongly disagree with or be upset by what is said, and it is a test of strength to listen without responding. But that is exactly what you need to do.
- **Ask if they're willing to hear your side of what happened.**
 Most people will be willing to listen, even if grudgingly.
- **Describe exactly what you saw, thought, understood or felt.**
 Make your points in ways that tell your story without assigning blame. For example, instead of saying, "it was impossible to deal with you," try "I was too uncomfortable to say anything."
- **Take time to mull it over together.**
 Make sure each person understood the other. Are there more questions you've raised for each other? Do you now see the problem that needs solving? Is this an occasion where you should "agree to disagree?" Are you both willing to do that and move on?
- **Work out the resolution together.**
 What might you be willing to change? What do you still want the other person to change? Try and find something you can both agree to try out for a week or two, and then regroup to see whether it is working.
- **Finally, find a way to say thanks.**
 The other person has agreed to work through this with you. It wasn't easy for either of you, and you both deserve to be acknowledged for your efforts.

Striving for a work/life balance

Whether raising children, pursuing education or a hobby, or taking care of an elderly relative, balance is something everyone strives to achieve. Sometimes, the key is not in better balancing, but rather in reducing the amount of conflict between these different aspects of life.

The conflict that can arise between different priorities can be divided into three types:

Time-based conflict occurs when there are not enough hours in the day to accomplish everything.

Strain-based conflict occurs when the worries of one area of life spill into another, for example, when you are preoccupied about work obligations while at home, or vice versa.

Role-behavior conflict occurs when your interactions in one area of life are inconsistent with your interactions in another area. A good example is when one's work style is characterized by efficiency and professionalism. These qualities may not be as highly valued at home, where more affection and patience are needed for parenting.

Here are some tips to help reduce the conflict that can arise between work and family:

- **Prioritize.**
Learn time-management strategies.
- **Outsource.**
Employ others to take on routine household tasks, so that you can focus on more important family obligations. Hire a neighborhood kid to cut your lawn, for example.
- **Ask for help.**
Split household chores with a partner, roommate or spouse. Divide childcare responsibilities between both parents.
- **Evaluate your current situation to see if you can make changes.**
Can you negotiate a flexible schedule at work? Can you take a semester off of school?
- **Remember that the issues of work/life balance or work/life conflict change over time.**
Recognize that even if this is a difficult time, it is not necessarily permanent. Children grow up, school is completed, and family issues stabilize.

For More Information

University of Michigan Depression Center
800-475-6424
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