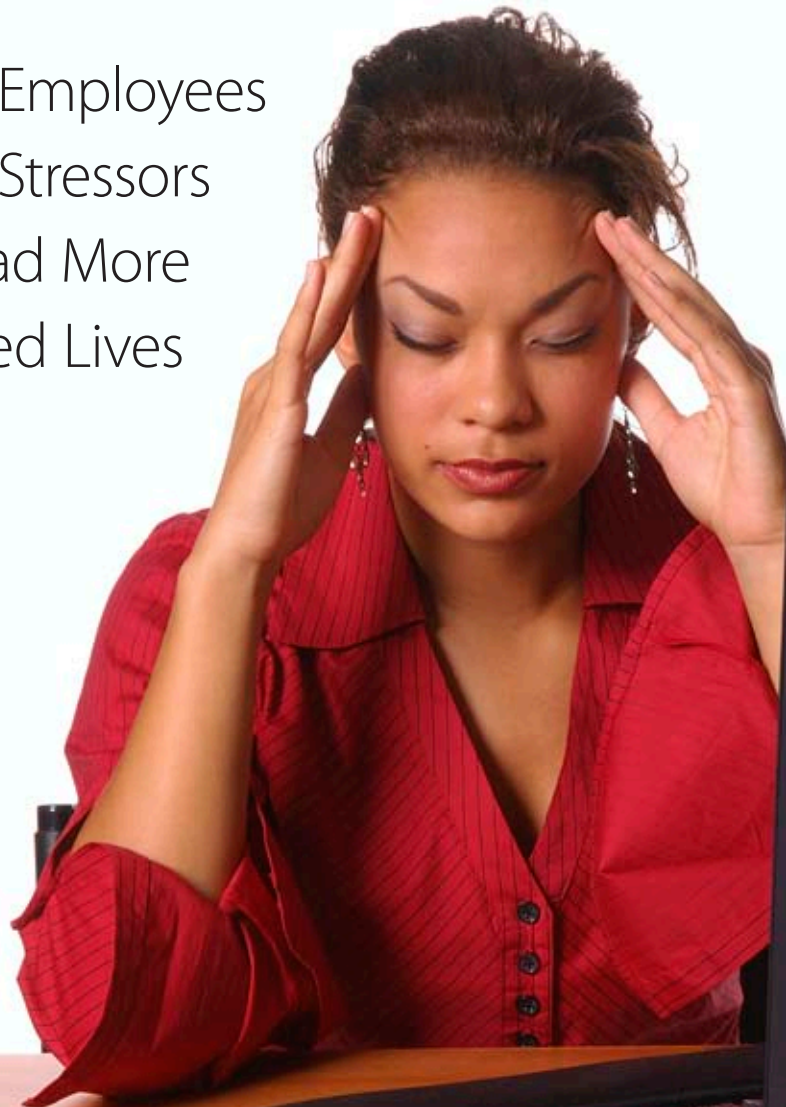


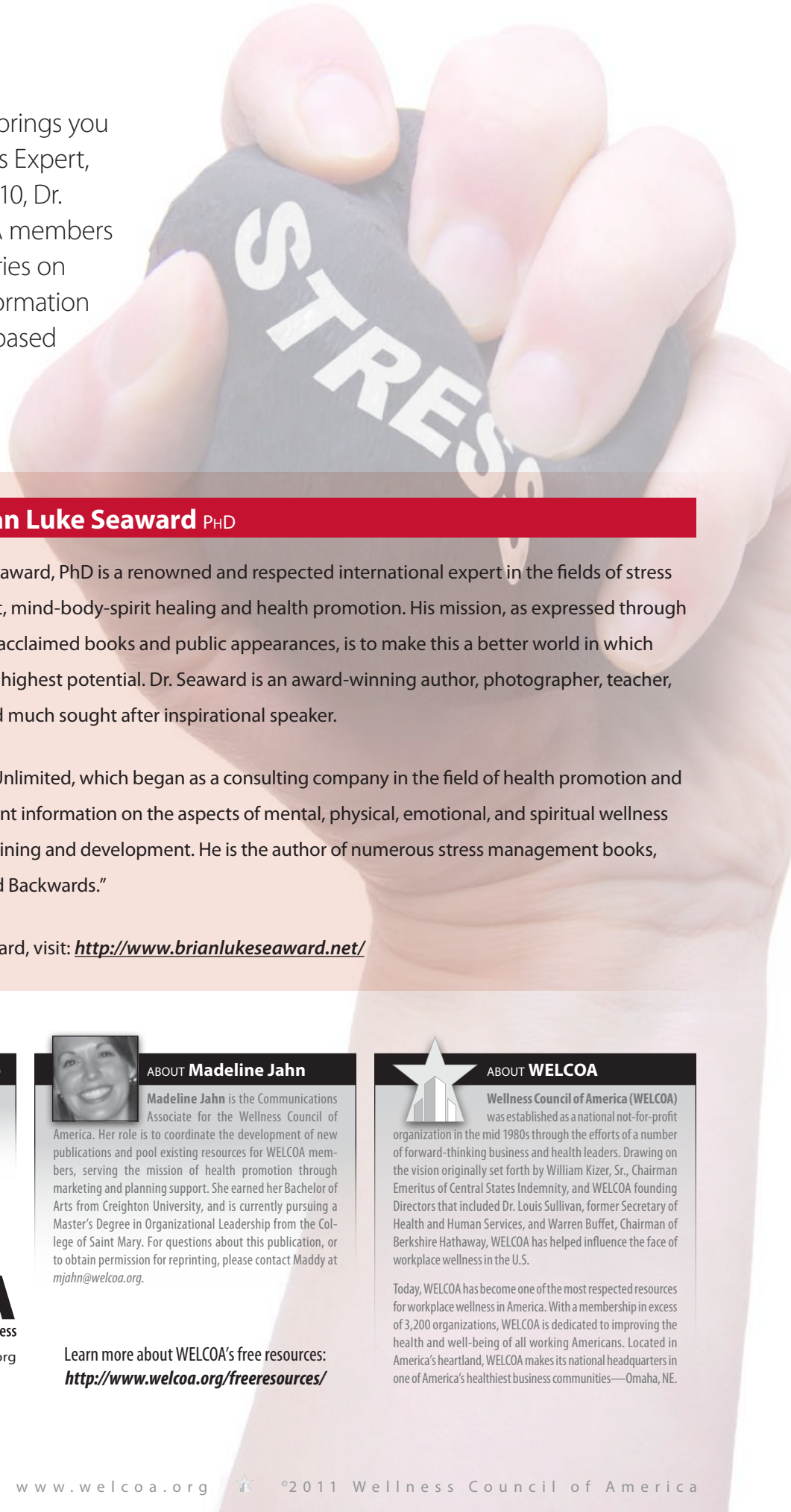
THE WELLNESS COUNCIL OF AMERICA PRESENTS

# Letting **Go** of **Stress**

Help Your Employees  
Identify Stressors  
and Lead More  
Balanced Lives



This WELCOA feature article brings you the insights of National Stress Expert, Dr. Brian Luke Seaward. In 2010, Dr. Seaward addressed WELCOA members with a three-part training series on stress management. The information shared in this publication is based on Dr. Seaward's WELCOA webinar presentations.



**ABOUT Brian Luke Seaward PhD**

Brian Luke Seaward, PhD is a renowned and respected international expert in the fields of stress management, mind-body-spirit healing and health promotion. His mission, as expressed through his legacy of acclaimed books and public appearances, is to make this a better world in which to live by having each of us reach our highest potential. Dr. Seaward is an award-winning author, photographer, teacher, celebrated film director/producer and much sought after inspirational speaker.

Dr. Seaward is the CEO of Inspiration Unlimited, which began as a consulting company in the field of health promotion and wellness, and provides the most current information on the aspects of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness for both personal and professional training and development. He is the author of numerous stress management books, including "Stressed is Desserts Spelled Backwards."

For more information about Dr. Seaward, visit: <http://www.brianlukeseaward.net/>



**ABOUT David Hunnicutt PhD**

Dr. David Hunnicutt is the President of the Wellness Council of America. As a leader in the field of health promotion, his vision has led to the creation of numerous publications designed to link health promotion objectives to business outcomes.



**ABOUT Madeline Jahn**

Madeline Jahn is the Communications Associate for the Wellness Council of America. Her role is to coordinate the development of new publications and pool existing resources for WELCOA members, serving the mission of health promotion through marketing and planning support. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from Creighton University, and is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership from the College of Saint Mary. For questions about this publication, or to obtain permission for reprinting, please contact Maddy at [mjahn@welcoa.org](mailto:mjahn@welcoa.org).



**ABOUT WELCOA**

**Wellness Council of America (WELCOA)** was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid 1980s through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Drawing on the vision originally set forth by William Kizer, Sr., Chairman Emeritus of Central States Indemnity, and WELCOA founding Directors that included Dr. Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Warren Buffet, Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, WELCOA has helped influence the face of workplace wellness in the U.S.

Today, WELCOA has become one of the most respected resources for workplace wellness in America. With a membership in excess of 3,200 organizations, WELCOA is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all working Americans. Located in America's heartland, WELCOA makes its national headquarters in one of America's healthiest business communities—Omaha, NE.



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## The Impacts of Stress

Stress is part of the human condition. The average American is seemingly bombarded with varying types of stress from all different directions. To say that life is more complicated now than it was several hundred years ago is no exaggeration.

It's very clear that when stress accumulates—whether it's at the worksite, at home, or anywhere in between—it has extremely harmful effects on the body. These effects include, but are not limited to, increased heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension. Moreover, the association between stress and disease is colossal. Stress is connected to several conditions and diseases, including hypertension, chronic pain and a suppressed immune system, which can be responsible for everything from the common cold to cancer. In fact, the association between stress and disease is about 85 percent and that's not just a loose association; there's a direct causal link there.

## Tackling Stress in the Workplace

For health promotion practitioners, addressing and implementing stress management programs is no small task, nor one that should be taken lightly. The good news is that there are plenty of resources and strategies readily available at your fingertips. In most cases, you can help employees effectively cope with stress by providing basic education along with simple tips and tools.




**An exclusive WELCOA interview with the leading expert on stress is at your fingertips—and absolutely FREE.**

Download your copy of WELCOA's Expert Interview with Brian Luke Seaward, PhD, and find out:

"Are Your Wellness Programs Prepared For The Super Stress Super Storm?" Dr. Seaward discusses how practitioners can help employees navigate through their everyday stress.

**Don't miss this great resource:**

[http://www.welcoa.org/freeresources/pdf/2010newsviews\\_seaward\\_062510.pdf](http://www.welcoa.org/freeresources/pdf/2010newsviews_seaward_062510.pdf)



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The remainder of this article will provide you with basic stress-education that your employees need to know, along with strategies and coping techniques to effectively address common stress factors in the workplace. Because stress management programs can encompass an infinitely large number of techniques, the following information is intended to help you build your existing programs, or get a new one quickly off the ground.

**Dissecting Stress**

Being in health promotion, you've probably heard your fair share of stress definitions. Indeed, stress has been studied by professionals in psychology, sociology, anthropology, physiology and theology, and as a result, there are several different definitions from several different disciplines.

**Luckily, there is a common definition agreed upon by most experts: *stress is a perceived threat (real or imagined) to our mind, body, spirit or emotions.***

To further dissect the meaning of stress, take a moment to reflect on the components of this definition:

**Stress is a... Perceived threat**—When a person perceives something, they place their own interpretation on it, meaning two people in the exact same situation may respond differently. Wellness practitioners need to consider employee perceptions when it comes to addressing stress management, and help individuals identify their personal interpretations of the “whats and whys” that are causing them stress.



“You can help employees effectively cope with stress by providing basic education along with simple tips and tools.”

**Stress is a...Threat (Real or Imagined)**—Whether real or imagined, situations create stress in peoples' lives. Real stress threats refer to tangible stressors, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of income, the end of a marriage and/or the diagnosis of a disease. Imagined threats include those things that people worry about before they happen, and have to do with anxiety or negative thinking about future events. Many people are guilty of worrying about situations or events that never come to fruition.

Regardless of the source of stress, the definition tells us that if stress is perceived in any way shape or form, it acts as a threat, and can cause damage to your employees' health.

### Identifying Stress

It is important to distinguish between two types of stress:

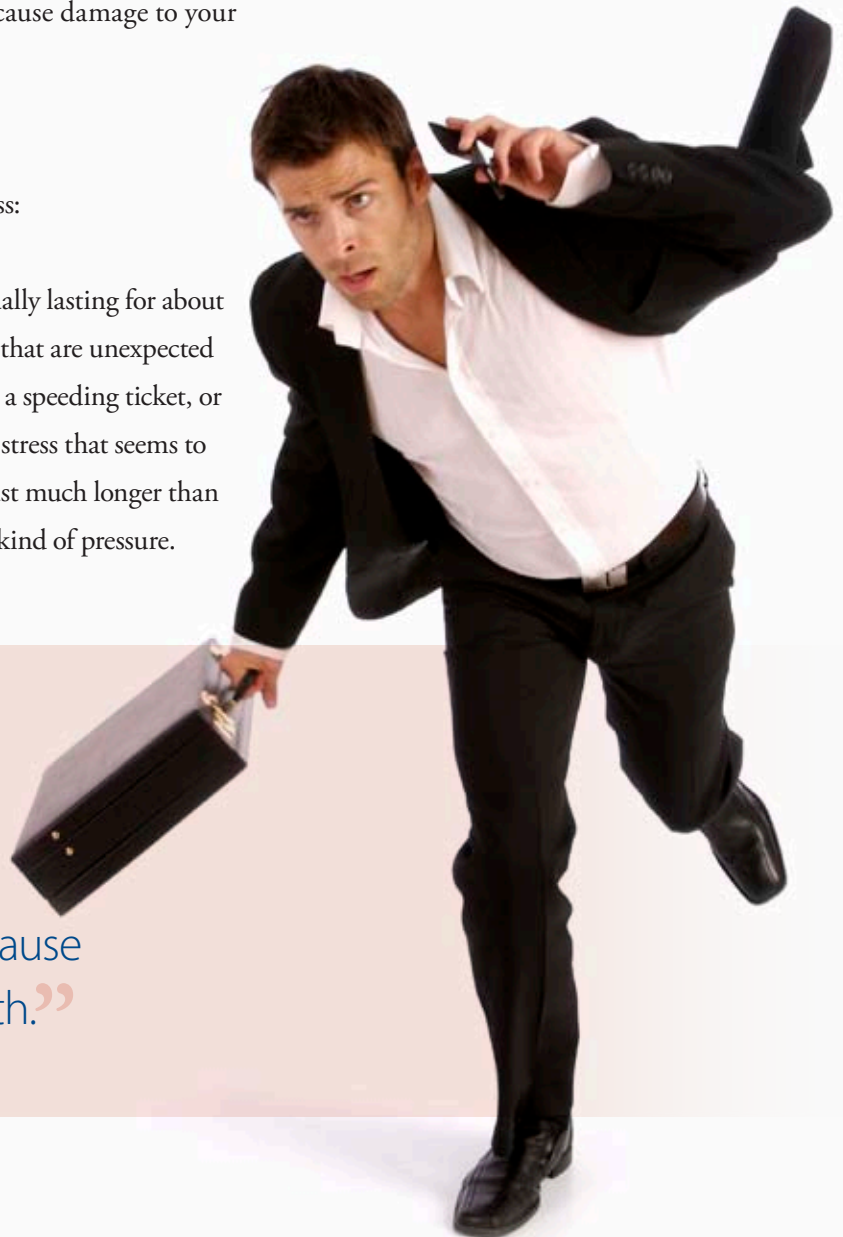
**Acute Stress** can be very intense, but is short-lived. Usually lasting for about 20 minutes or so, this type of stress occurs in situations that are unexpected and brief, such as a car accident, getting pulled over for a speeding ticket, or witnessing a traumatic event. Acute stress is the kind of stress that seems to make your heart pound out of your chest, but doesn't last much longer than 20 minutes because your body couldn't withstand that kind of pressure.

“Regardless of the source of stress, the definition tells us that if stress is perceived in any way shape or form, it acts as a threat, and can cause damage to your employees' health.”

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**...This article is based on the work of National Stress Expert, Brian Luke Seaward, PhD.**

Dr. Seaward is among the most notable experts on stress management and sleep disorders in the United States. His insights in the field of health promotion have contributed to numerous WELCOA publications and presentations on such topics. Dr. Seaward is an award-winning author, photographer, teacher, celebrated film director/producer and much sought after inspirational speaker.

**For more information about Dr. Seaward:**

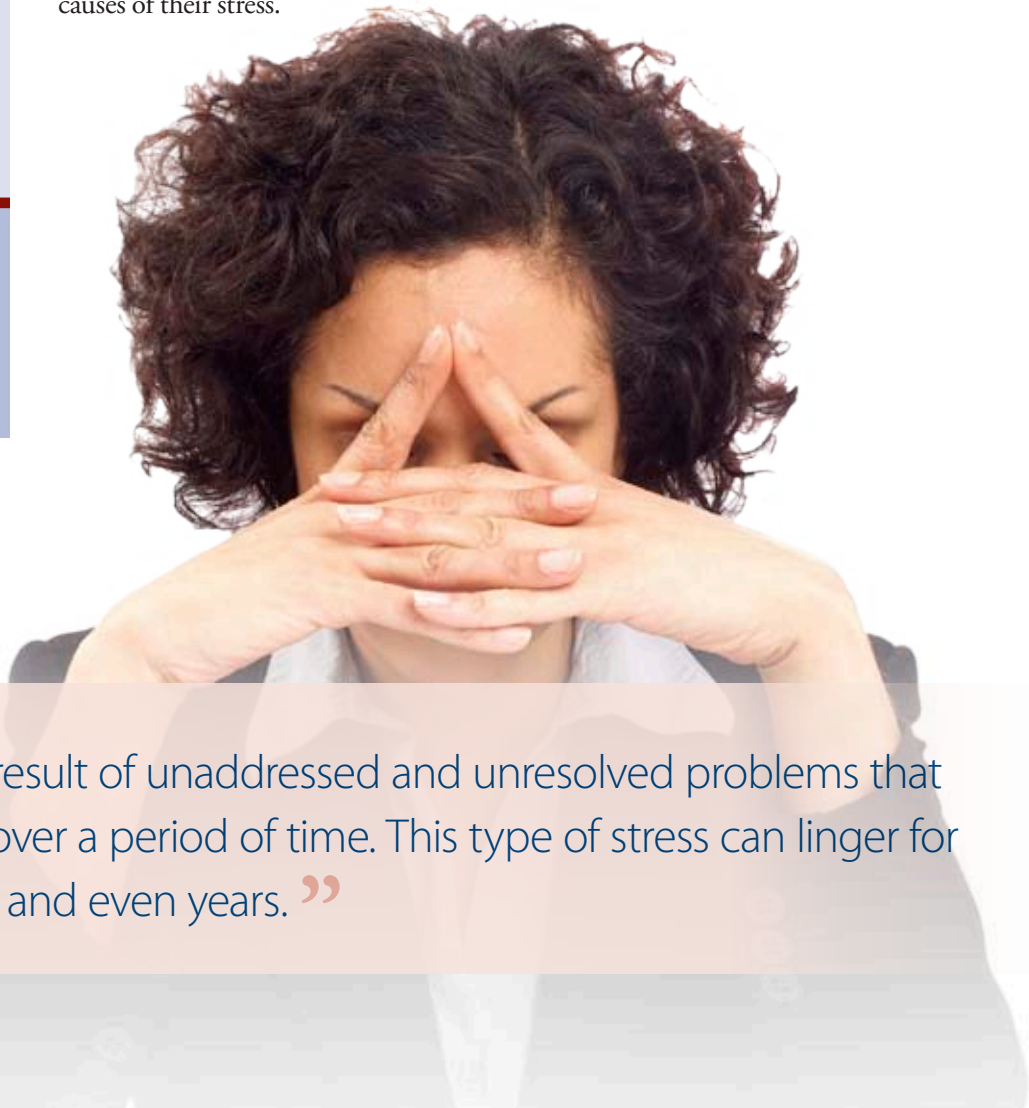
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! While you're there, don't forget to pick up your copies of his best-selling books!

The real concern, and the stress on which wellness practitioners should focus, is **chronic stress**. Chronic stress is not nearly as intense as acute stress, but it goes on for much longer than 20 minutes. Chronic stress is the result of unaddressed and unresolved problems that continue mounting over a period of time. This type of stress can linger for days, weeks, months and even years.

There is certainly not a short list of items that could qualify as chronic stressors. Examples include an unpleasant relationship with an ex-spouse, an irritating co-worker, a troubled teenage child, or a chronic illness. Although chronic stressors are different for each person, examples usually fall into the same broad categories. Whether it's at home or at work, a common theme for many employees is: having to do more, with less.

The following "Stress Indicator Checklist" can help employees pinpoint the root causes of their stress.



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## What's Stressing Us Out?

Employees can identify and categorize their top stressors with this simple exercise:

1. **Have employees write down their top stressors.** Any type of problem or situation that causes prolonged stress and grief should be included. They don't need to get into much detail, just have them make a list of the major areas in which they feel stressed.
2. **Once they've finished listing stress-factors,** your employees can use the list below to match a description to each of their stressors, which will help categorize and identify the types of stress that need to be managed.
  - People:** This section should obviously include anyone that is causing stress—a boss, a co-worker, a friend, etc. If your employees have distractions like “Bob always interrupting during the workday” or “Cindy’s constantly negative attitude,” these stressors should be marked under the “People” category.
  - Values or a values conflict:** A value is something of importance that is often symbolized with a concrete possession or object. (For example: education is a value, and a diploma symbolizes that value; Leisure is a value, and a vacation might be a symbol of that.) However, even while an employee’s continuing education may be a value, there may also be stress on the employee in the process of earning his/her degree. And while leisure time is certainly valued by many, the costs and logistics of planning a vacation are sometimes very stressful on individuals. Employees should identify these types of stressors, and mark them under the “Value/Value Conflict” category, even though these stressors may not be the most obvious or negative factors in employees’ lives.
  - Priorities.** Lastly, have employees check off anything on their list of stressors that involves a meaningful priority in life. For example, they may have listed “not having enough family time” or “spending too much time at work” as a stressor. These types of items should be marked as priorities.



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**How to Manage Stress**

Once employees have made a categorized list, they can really begin to see where their stress is stemming from. If they have several people-related stressors, maybe re-examining relationships should be their focus. This could also be an indicator that your employee needs to communicate how he/she feels to these individuals. If there are several checkmarks related to values, encourage the employee to determine if that value is worth the stress it is causing them. If they determine that it is, help your employee find a way to address and cope with the associated stress. Stress factors marked in the priorities category might indicate that it may be time for your employee to re-organize their schedule to focus on what's most important to them.

Once employees have completed the *Stress Indicator Checklist*, use the following list of coping techniques and strategies in the Tips & Skills Section of this article, to help your employees manage the stress that is affecting them every day.

**Letting Go of Stress**

For decades, several stress management programs have placed a tight focus on relaxation skills. While this is certainly a critical component of stress management, relaxation skills only address the symptoms of stress, not the causes. If we don't consider the causes of stress, we're really only treating half of the problem. The most effective stress management programs will address both the causes and symptoms of stress.



“The most effective stress management programs will address both the causes and symptoms of stress.”

## Tips & Skills: Techniques & Strategies to Help Your Employees Manage Stress

Effective coping skills and relaxation exercises can increase your employees' awareness of stress-producing issues and provide them with tools necessary to work toward a resolution. Here are some skills they should know to effectively manage their stress and achieve balance in their lives.

### Coping with Stress:

- **Reframe the situation.** Reframing is all about changing perception. When an employee reframes their situation, they make a conscious effort to put things into perspective and look at the bigger picture. This approach includes looking at the lighter side of things. For example, maybe your employee is stressed because they tripped on their words during a presentation in front of a boss and peers. Although it wasn't ideal, in the bigger scheme of things, it's probably not going to have a major impact on their job and career path. So, encourage them to take a second think about the situation in a more lighthearted manner, and maybe take a second to be grateful that the situation isn't worse! Finding the humor in a seemingly stressful situation can help put a smile on an employee's face. If you teach them to reframe a situation, your employees can ultimately re-interpret the scenario to avoid feeling threatened and stressed by it.

“When an employee reframes their situation, they make a conscious effort to put things into perspective and look at the bigger picture.”

- **Journal your thoughts and feelings.** A recent study took blood samples from people who regularly wrote down their thoughts and feelings. The study found that the subjects who kept journals tended to have a better, healthier immune system than those who didn't. Encouraging your employees to journal or reflect on their feelings may help alleviate pent-up feelings or anxieties that are causing them stress.



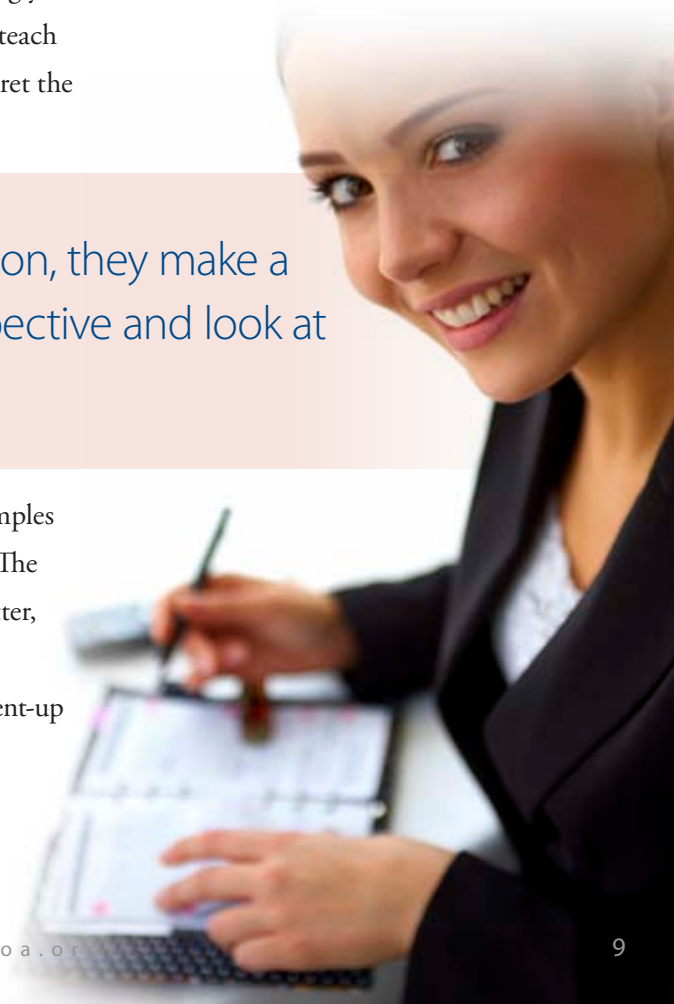
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*[Link to Health Bulletin on Heart Attacks in current edition of Absolute Advantage]*

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- **Discover and make time for hobbies.** When employees can make time for the activities they enjoy, it helps create healthy work/life boundaries and balances out stress. Moreover, when they're actively engaged in healthy hobbies, they'll be better equipped to handle stressful situations. For example, if an employee is experiencing a lot of problems at work, their outside activities can help keep their mind off the situation and give life more meaning. An individual who doesn't participate in any hobbies may be more inclined to react negatively to stressful situations, as they may feel continually rattled by and/or stuck in unhealthy scenarios. Hobbies are a great way for employees to create their own order and avoid the chaos that unstructured time and constant stress can bring.
- **Build strong social connections.** The research is clear that people who have strong social support groups tend to buffer themselves against stress, more so than those who don't. A word to the wise: technology is great, but is no replacement for true social support groups such as friends and family. While it is great to use social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, employees should be encouraged to remember that virtual friends can't match the real thing.

**Relaxation Techniques:**

Relaxation techniques should return the body back to a sense of homeostasis. When a person is stressed, their body reacts by increasing the heart rate, blood pressure, metabolism and/or breathing. When homeostasis is achieved, the body is brought back to a state of calm and tranquility.

Here are some great relaxation techniques to help your employees bring their bodies back into a state of balance:

- **Exercise.** Exercise is a healthy and controlled way to respond to stress. When a person is stressed, the body produces a whole slew of chemicals such as cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine. Cortisol, in particular, helps increase the sugars and lipids in the blood for the body's "fight or flight" response to stress. However, it is well-documented that when cortisol gets done with its stress responsibilities, it can hang around, destroying white blood cells and thus suppressing the immune system.



When a person exercises, they essentially flush out stress hormones that have built up in their body. If your employees are sitting on their computer for eight to 14 hours a day and not exercising, they are creating a toxic chemical stress cocktail, which can have serious effects on their body and immune system.

Whether it's yoga, Tai Chi, walking, swimming, cycling or running, employees should be encouraged to exercise and flush out those stress hormones!

- ▶ **Meditate or breathe.** Simple deep breathing, even if it's just for five minutes a day, is a fantastic technique employees can easily utilize to relax at work. Taking time out to just clear your mind (also known as meditation) can also do wonders to reduce the symptoms of stress.
- ▶ **Music therapy.** Research has shown that music has a positive effect on the body and psyche. Listening to favorite songs is an easy way for employees to instantly lift their mood and relieve some stress.

### The list can go on and on...

These tips are not intended to represent a comprehensive list. A Google search for "relaxation tips" or "stress management," or a trip to your local bookstore can yield hundreds of suggestions. In terms of techniques, the most effective methods are going to be different for every employee, and therefore every wellness program. Stress Management programs will require some trial and error effort. But the point is to offer several different options, as one approach will not work for everyone.

### Implementing a Stress Management Program

Plain and simple, stress is just a part of life. In many circumstances, we can't control when and how stress occurs. We can, however, control how we cope with it. To help employees manage stress, it's critical to arm them with basic education and tools to identify their stress. Moreover, the best stress management programs should include both coping skills and relaxation techniques. Just remember that people need various options to address and let go of stress, as there isn't any "one-size-fits-all" prescription for stress management programs.

Lastly, in addition to the suggestions in this article, there are several resources and strategies on stress management readily available, including free information at [www.welcoa.org](http://www.welcoa.org), and even a free stress management campaign for WELCOA members. The bottom line: don't stress out about implementing your stress management program!

### WELCOA Members Have FREE Access to Stress-Management Webinars by Dr. Luke Seaward

One of the most powerful elements impacting employee health and productivity is stress. And although it's one of the most talked-about wellness topics, stress is one of the least addressed issues in workplace wellness. In this three-part training experience led by the nation's best stress expert—Dr. Luke Seaward—participants will have the opportunity to explore the dynamics of stress and how to systematically design programs and environments that reduce the harmful effects of this epic problem.

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