

Stress Management for the Technical Communicator

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As technical communicators, we seem to be exposed to a high level of stress in the work environment. How often have we heard the following complaints from our fellow technical communicators: overload of tasks, impossible deadlines or expectations and difficulty getting information from subject matter experts (SMEs).

A pressure-cooker atmosphere, combined with difficulties with SMEs or managers, is a recipe for disaster. However, we need not feel helpless or unable to control these aspects of our work environment. This article describes some of the causes and symptoms of stress in the work environment, and discusses strategies for dealing with stress.



What is Stress?

People experiencing stress feel tension, anger, fear and frustration. Adrenaline levels increase, blood pressure rises and the heart rate increases. Prolonged stress, over a long period of time, causes health and immune system breakdown.

A certain amount of stress can be considered as normal and even beneficial for healthy functioning. The level of stress that is optimum will vary from person to person. Our response to stress is personal. Each individual may respond differently to the exact same stressors. What may be stressful for one person (e.g., loud music) may not be stressful for another.

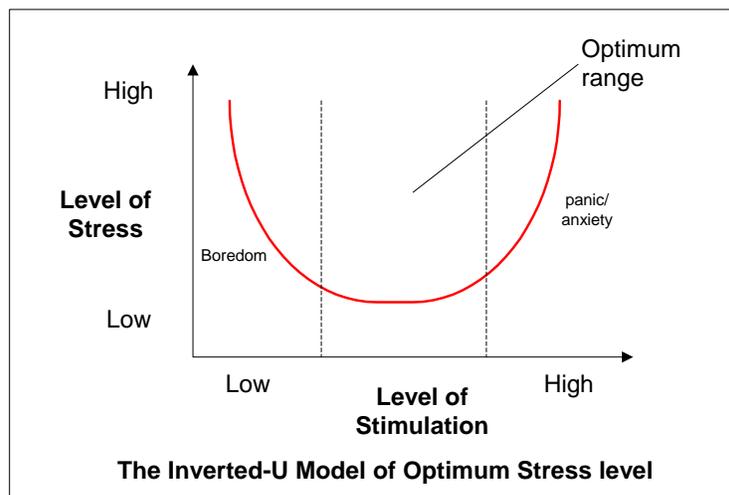


Figure 1. The Stress Curve

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How do we compare to other Professions?

In a survey of the most stressful jobs, published in the Jobs Almanac, technical writing ranked 94th out of 250 professions (1 was the lowest and 250 the highest stress profession). This stress ranking for technical communicators is based on the large workloads, tight deadlines, stringent demands for quality and the exposure to criticism characteristic of most technical and marketing writer jobs. In comparison, computer programmers ranked lower (32nd) in job stress. High stress ratings were given to jobs such as fire fighters, astronauts and physical surgeons, since these professions combine a high degree of risk and uncertainty, with harsh working conditions.

How do technical communicators rate their level of work stress?

Techwr-I conducted a poll (August 2001) where technical communicators were asked to rate how stressful they found their jobs. 14.7% indicated their jobs were very stressful, 39.7% indicated moderately stressful and 21.6% indicated only slightly stressful. The results of this survey are available at: <http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/>

What do Technical Communicators find Stressful?

In a recent (August 2001) stress survey¹, conducted by the author, technical communicators listed the five largest stressors in their work and the strategies they used to cope. The most common stressor was time deadlines and changes to deadlines. Other common stressors were poor project scheduling and management, difficulty dealing with subject matter experts (SMEs) and problems with managers.

Within the profession, there is a wide variation in the reported levels of stress and types of stressors. Some technical communicators consider their profession to have a low stress level (since it lacks the mission-critical importance of other jobs). Others indicate high stress levels, linked to bad project organization, unrealistic deadlines and problems with SMEs and managers.

Some of these factors are explored below:

Work overload and time pressures

The combination of too many tasks and tight deadlines can create a pressure-cooker atmosphere. This is the most commonly cited source of stress for technical communicators. Long work hours and overtime can add to stress levels and leave you feeling tired and burnt out.

Project ambivalence

This refers to projects with a high level of uncertainty, where ownership is not clear and features and deadlines have not been clearly defined. Such projects seem to hang in limbo and demand constant energy and time.

¹ Thanks and acknowledgements to the members of TECHWR-L and techshoret for their participation in this survey.

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Computer problems

Just when you least need it, problems on your computer may occur. These include software bugs or hardware failures, problems opening or converting documents, or other problems related to your operating system and tools.

Difficulty with SMEs

Difficulty getting the information you need can place stress on your workload and cause backlogs. Problems with SMEs is a commonly cited source of stress.

Lack of control

Lack of control over your office environment or the tasks you do or the noise level in the office all contribute to feelings of helplessness in the work environment. In an experiment where subjects were exposed to high levels of noise, those subjects that could predict when the noise occurred were better able to adjust to the noise level and showed less stress when compared to subjects exposed to random and uncontrolled noise.

Incongruent expectations

If expectations have not been clarified, and your co-workers or boss has a different expectation of your role or of your contribution to a specific project, this can lead to friction.

Micro-management

This refers to the type of manager who controls every aspect of your duties and limits your independence. This is often cited as a source of stress.

Computer equipment

Your monitor, mouse and keyboard and the chair you sit on can all play an important part in body stress, leading to eye strain, back problems and carpal tunnel syndrome symptoms. A monitor that is not IVR protected can cause stress and damage to your eyes. Incorrect usage of your keyboard and mouse can cause repetitive stress on your wrist and fingers. An uncomfortable chair, with a soft back can cause back strain.

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What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress ?

The most popular form of stress management cited by technical communicators is some form of physical exercise. Visualization exercises (daydreaming, meditation), forms of humor (e.g., comics or TV), and drinking beverages (often alcoholic) are also commonly cited stress reduction strategies.

Some recommended strategies for reducing work-related stress are discussed below:

Plan your use of time

Plan your time and tasks. Outsource projects that you cannot complete with your time restrictions. Make sure that you have enough free time for administrative tasks. As a rule of thumb, you should have at least 1 hour per day free just for administrative tasks (this includes reading your email, answering your telephone and voice messages, and organizing your files and desk space).

Prioritize your tasks

Focus on essential tasks and set aside or delegate less essential tasks. For example, during stressful periods, such as just before product releases, cut down on inessential meetings, which can waste hours of your time per day.

Set up your system with all the required software

If you need to install new software, always keep a backup copy of the old software. Ideally, there should be a second computer or backup system, containing older versions of software, with configurations that work. New software should be installed, tested and configured during quieter periods and not during mission-critical periods, when you need the software to work without problems. Experience and planning will enable you to solve and prevent most computer-related problems.

Be clear on your expectations

You should be clear with yourself – and your colleagues – about your job expectations at the company where you are currently employed. Ideally, your expectations should be written out, in a document such as a Job description, or departmental roadmap. This includes the career-enhancing skills that you would like to learn and use on the job, and your expectations for future vertical or lateral promotion within the company.

Set up your workspace

Invest in an ergonomic keyboard, a ball mouse and an adjustable, swivel chair, with a firm back support. Rest your hands and eyes by taking constant, three-minute breaks. Stand up and walk around the office.

Cultivate a support network

A support network is a group of colleagues in the office who you are comfortable with and with whom you can interact on a personal level, exchanging personal information and receiving support and recognition. A support network provides an informal source for letting out steam, and for discussing work-related or people-related problems (otherwise termed “gossip”).

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Learn to listen

In our fast-paced work environments, listening is a much-needed skill. Listening means paying attention not only to what the other person is saying (the content), but also how they are saying it (body language and tone of voice). By learning to listen and pay attention to our colleagues, we gain insight and understanding as to their ways of thinking and behaving, reducing misunderstanding and friction.

Have a sense of humor

A sense of humor is essential when dealing with other people. It helps to diffuse tense situations and put things in perspective. However, humor should never be directed at another's expense. A sense of humor means seeing the lighter side of the office environment.

Other Strategies

In addition to the strategies discussed above, the following strategies can help you reduce your overall stress level, enhancing your ability to cope with work-related stress:

- **Exercise regularly.** A healthy body is essential for dealing with stress. Walking and cycling are examples of inexpensive anaerobic sports that stimulate the cardiovascular system and help maintain health. Other examples of non-stressful, relaxing sports include Yoga and Tai Chi.
- **Control your diet.** A balanced diet, providing all the essential vitamins and minerals, ensures that you have the energy to face day-to-day tasks and stressors. Avoid skipping meals or rushing your mealtimes because of work or time pressures. Small doses of Vitamin B6, Vitamin C and folic acid can strengthen your immune system. Homeopathic options include ginseng, wild honey, garlic and ginger.
- **Get sufficient rest.** Make sure that you are getting sufficient time to sleep and rest. Constantly cheating the clock may have serious repercussions on your health in the long-term.
- **Have a regular time-to-yourself period.** During the week, or once each day, set aside a brief period where you can be by yourself and focus on the activities and hobbies that you enjoy. Reading is an example of a popular hobby.
- **Treat yourself.** Treat yourself occasionally to a small gift, a haircut, or a bunch of flowers – something to tell yourself that you are appreciated and to brighten up your day.
- **Take a vacation.** If you are feeling burnt-out or run-down, now may be the time to take a vacation. Remember though, that vacations can also be stressful. Choose to spend your vacation on activities that are enjoyable and relaxing to you.
- **Set realistic goals.** Setting short-term goals that you are capable of reaching provides a means of channeling your energies towards the things you desire and is one of the best means of controlling your stress. It is important to be able to visualize these goals in your mind and to work towards them.

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Additional Reading

Books

- Cooper, C.L. and Palmer, S. (2000). Conquer Your Stress, London: Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Hartland, D. 2000 Understanding Stress, Caxton Edition.
- Patel, C. 1996 Complete Guide to Stress Management, Vermilion

Online

- American Institute of Stress: <http://www.stress.org>
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/jobstres.html>