Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

By Warren Singer

In part 1 of this article we defined stress as occurring when we perceive outside demands as being greater than our resources to cope (source: http://www.intelihealth.com). We noted that the indications from informal polls such as TECHWR-L and career ratings such as the Jobs Rated Almanac are that technical communicators in general have a moderate to medium level of stress in their work environment.

In part 1 we also looked at the stressors that technical communicators are most likely to encounter in their work environment. Based on an informal survey[1], conducted in August 2001, I identified the following major stressors cited by technical communicators:

- Work overload and time pressures
- Last-minute changes
- Difficulty with subject matter experts
- Problems with managers
- Limited knowledge of technology or access to a product
- Poorly defined and managed projects
- Computer problems
- Workspace and desktop equipment
- Job security
- Lack of control over the work environment

In part 2, I offer some practical suggestions for increasing your ability to cope with each of the above work-related stressors. The "See Also" section at the end of each topic provides links to additional online resources and articles related to the topic, which help clarify or expand on the strategies briefly described under each topic.

Stress management is a broad topic, with many facets, involving not only using our problem-solving and networking skills, but also taking a close look at how we handle unavoidable stressors and the contribution of our life styles and personality to stress. It is difficult to do justice to such a broad topic in a single article. I end this article with a general section, describing ways to increase our ability to cope with unavoidable stressors, and provide links to online resources, which you can use to further explore this fascinating topic.

Strategies for Coping with Job-Related Stressors

Efficiently managing your time and work load

"I cocoon myself in my cubicle and force myself to get it done (whatever it is). The stress is high when I'm working, but when it's done I feel great." Rebecca Downey

As companies tighten their belts and cut back on staff, technical communicators are expected to handle more tasks in less time, leading to work overload and time pressures.
To cope with these demands, try some of the following suggestions:

- Stay organized. Keep a diary or palm pilot – listing all your activities, meetings, appointments and phone numbers – for quick reference. Leave your desk clean and your files organized each day.
- Handle tasks immediately – don't procrastinate, or delay what you can do immediately. Don't allow paper to pile up on your desk and emails to go unread or unanswered – handle these as they come in, so that you don't have to read the same email twice.

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[1] Thanks to the members of TECHWR-L and Techsoret, for their participation in this survey.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

- Plan and prioritize your tasks by importance and need. Keep a "to-do" list of tasks in a prominent place. Checked off each item as you complete it.
- If you are part of a technical writing team, delegate tasks you can't handle to other writers, and return the favor later. If possible, outsource tasks that cannot be handled in-house.
- Focus your time on a single task. Schedule a meeting with yourself, which you devote to completing this task.
- To cut down on interruptions when you are really pressed for time, close your door and take your telephone off the hook, or come in to work early, when there are fewer disturbances. Avoid corridor gossip and long lunches. Cut short unnecessary telephone conversations (e.g., social calls, not related directly to your job). Ask to be excused from lengthy meetings.
- Not all tasks need to be completed at a desk: while waiting for meetings to start, read through your notes, email or printed material; hold working lunch meetings. Travel to work with the public transportation system (taxi, train or bus), or have someone drive you, so that you can use this time to read, catch up on your email and phone messages, and make calls.
- Look closely at your work habits. Work overload may be the result of impossible expectations and demands, but more often than not, it is the result of your own decisions to accept these demands or due to inefficient use of your time.
- Install time management software, which can be used to keep track of the time you spent on tasks. Review your time record monthly, to evaluate how effectively you are using your time.
- Don't commit to more than you can handle. This may sound trite, but many of us are constantly over-committing, out of eagerness to please others or simply the desire to prove ourselves or gain new responsibilities. Learn when and how to say "no!".
- Speak to your colleagues or your manager about ways in which your productivity could be improved. For example, you may be wasting hours per day on a task that could be handled automatically, rather than manually, or completed in less time, using a more efficient tool.
- Learn to efficiently use the tools you have to complete your tasks (e.g., desktop publishing and graphics programs). Ask your company to subsidize a course in a tool you often use or have problems with. Join online forums that discuss the tools you use.
- Take a break! When you're running out of energy or feel swamped, change over to a different activity or take a short walk to refresh your batteries.

Some technical communicators work best under an atmosphere of "busy" productivity, with many projects coming in and out. If you don't handle the pressure of heavy workloads and time limits very well, or have other time-consuming commitments (such as young children or study), it is quite legitimate to consider finding a less demanding job at another company, or working less hours.

See Also
- The Dovico.com web site provides several useful articles on time management:
  - Time Wasters (www.dovico.com/article_timewasters.html)
  - The Big Hole in the Day (www.dovico.com/thebiholeinday.html)
  - Hocus Focus (www.dovico.com/hocusfocus.html)
  - Time Flies (www.dovico.com/timeflies.html)
  - The 12 Rules of Time Management (www.dovico.com/the12rulesoftime.html)
- For information on time tracking software, try: www.timetrackingsoftware.com
- For information on palm devices and PDAs, try: www.palmblvd.com

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

Coping with last-minute changes

"Nail down exactly what can be accomplished in the time allowed and communicate this to the requestor. (For the ASAP deadline, nail down a time)." Sella Rush

Last-minute changes occur when developers rush to have a product ready in time for shipping and often leave final changes to the days before a deadline, or fail to involve the technical communicator until the end.

The following suggestions may help you cope with last minute changes:

- Set realistic cut-off dates, after which changes to features will not enter the documents, but will go into the release notes or into the next documentation release (make sure first that these dates are agreed upon in advance, by those involved).
- Offer to review the user interface for usability. This will give you the opportunity to keep up-to-date with changes.
- To reduce document errors due to the last minute rush to complete a task, ask a third party – a colleague or editor – to review the sections that were changed.
- Get the support from your manager behind timely reviews. Set up a meeting with your supervisor to evaluate the workflow and review process in your company, and to ensure the smooth flow of information from SMEs, and their timely review.
- If you have a large number of releases per year, consider moving away from printed documentation, towards online-only formats, such as HTML, XML or PDF (provided that this suites your customer's needs). This could cut up to two weeks off time-to-delivery, allowing you more time to handle last minute changes.
- Consider moving towards a modular design, which allows you to slot in updated sections, without affecting the rest of the documentation. You may want to start out first with a few documents and see if this approach fits your reader's needs.

See Also
- <u>What to Do While You're Waiting</u>, by S. Bruce Carruthers, in the December 2000 edition of Intercom.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

Increasing your access to a product and understanding of a technology

"When I do not have access to software or system, I request screen shots. When possible, I sit with a SME and observe them using the system. For systems that are in development, request to attend the regular team meetings, get a copy of the specs, establish rapport with the principal SMEs, and absorb as much info as you possibly can."
Laura MacLemale

Writers may have limited access to a product, either because it is still under development, because the writer works off-site, or because there are a limited number of workstations that can run the product. Writers may also have limited training in a technology or limited access to the end users.

To cope with limited access, try the following strategies:

- Ask your company to subsidize courses and training sessions in relevant technology fields. Most companies offer training for new employees. You can also search the Internet for additional information on most technology topics or consider investing in an online course.
- Review any existing user interface documentation, or requirement specifications, for information on the purpose of the product, how it aids users to complete tasks, and what features were specified. These documents may also contain preliminary designs or prototypes of the interface.
- Arrange for times when you can review the product at an operational or testing workstation. Ideally, explore and play with the product on your own, so that you have a chance to discover how it works for yourself.
- Try to observe real users – whether customers or your own field engineers – install and use the product. Identify their real needs and how they use the product to accomplish their goals.
- Make screen grabs or take pictures of all interfaces/windows and paste these onto large blank white sheets of paper, in a tree diagram that illustrates the workflow. Each workflow should have its own sheet of paper. Then ask SMEs to review the workflow.
- Offer to review the user interface during the early stages of design and try be part of the interface review process.
- In the absence of firm details about a product, invest in developing an accurate workflow and outline, into which you can later slot in the details.

See Also

- The Project Kickoff Form Aid for Launching and Managing New Projects, by Liz Russell (www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/kickoffform.html)

Handling subject matter experts

"Meet with the SME *before* assigning anything and find out if (a) they are interested, (b) how to get them interested and (c) if they have the time." Rebecca Downey

Since technical communicators depend on subject matter experts (SMEs) for obtaining information and for timely reviews, problems with SMEs can cause stress and affect your ability to perform your job.

- Establish a friendly working relationship with the SME, based on mutual respect. Take the time to introduce yourself informally and pop in occasionally to say hello and ask how a project is going. Ask about his hobbies, interests and loved ones; spend a "working" lunch together occasionally; help the SME with other tasks (such as formatting a letter or CV or providing links to subjects of interest to her). Complement an SME or engineer on the hard work she has put into a product or in reviewing the document.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

- Clarify expectations and roles. This should be done regularly with new SMEs, during your first formal meeting. Discuss review procedures, responsibilities and what to do in the event that review deadlines are missed. Write down and distribute any agreements, listing responsibilities and commitments, for later reference. If problems occur, then set up a second meeting, to reemphasize or clarify what was agreed upon.
- Prepare before meetings with SMEs. Read all relevant email communications and notes. Review existing specifications or other documents written by the SME, so that you arrive at the interview as informed as possible.
- Break down reviews into easily manageable and clearly defined parts. Rather than expecting the reviewer to read through an entire document each time you send material for review, indicate the pages or sections that need to be reviewed.
- Ask the reviewer how she would prefer to provide comments: as email notes, written on a hard copy of the document, with revision marks and notes in the document itself, or face-to-face. You may also want to provide guidelines how to provide review that is specific and usable (as opposed to vague and ambiguous). Go over the comments with the SME.
- Respect an SMEs time constraints; sometimes they really are too busy to respond immediately. If a review date has been missed, remind the SME of her commitment and ask her if she has a problem finding the time.
- Handling critical reviewers: Always thank an SME for reviewing a document and address each of his comments carefully. Never dismiss or become offended with a comment, but deal with the issue professionally. Always communicate positively.
- If the SME finds it difficult to explain concepts clearly or review information, use gentle prompts for more information, suggest what type of information would be useful to you and listen carefully to responses. Encourage communicative attempts by nodding, summarizing a description in your own words, or asking follow-up questions. Ask the SME to illustrate concepts graphically, by drawing a flow diagram or system diagram to explain the relationship between components or procedures.
- If an SME is uncooperative, try another source. Companies usually have some level of redundancy built into them, so that no one person is the only source of information on a project.
- If all else fails, notify your supervisor. This should always be done in a positive manner, focusing on the problem and not the person.

See Also
- Conducting Effective Team Technical Reviews, by Katherine Brown (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/effectivetechreviews.html)
- Establishing and Building Mutual Respect with Technical Team Members, by Eric J. Ray (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/gettingalongindevelopmentgroups.html)
- Inspiring Reviewers to Review Your Document, by Geoffrey Hart (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/inspiringreviews.html)
- The Inspection Method: An Approach to Planning and Managing a Successful Team Document Review, by Donn Le Jr. (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/inspectionmethod.html)
- Conquering Cubicle Syndrome, by Geoffrey Hart (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/trenches_cubiclesyndrome.html)
- Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People, 1982, still remains one of the best books on dealing with human relationships.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

Managing your manager

"I'm very clear with my boss about what I can and cannot do with the given time constraints. I ask him what his priorities are. We come up with a work strategy. I get the job done on time. Everyone is usually very happy." Lauren Gotlieb Barr

Good managers provide adequate support and show respect for their team members, while at the same time allowing enough room for independence and initiative. Problems may occur when your manager strays either towards micro-management or provides no real support (or a combination of both – like Dr Jeckel and Mr. Hyde).

The following suggestions apply not only to managers, but also to SMEs, colleagues and other employees with whom you need to work on a day-to-day basis:

- View your manager as the first and primary customer for your services. Ask your boss: "How do you know when I'm doing a good job?" Don't assume that you know the answer.
- Be clear about your job expectations. 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. If your boss knows that you are interested in developing in a specific area, she is more likely to pass on work related to this area.
- Build up a good working relationship and rapport with your supervisor. By listening carefully to requests and being willing to assist, where needed, you show that you are a reliable and dedicated employee, who can follow through on tasks without having to be asked twice or checked up on.
- Be up-front about problems and assertive about your needs – don't brood on this, out of fear of a confrontation. Provide your manager with the information she needs to make informed decisions. For example, if you need a specific tool to do your job, then provide the information to back up your request – such as increased productivity, which will save the company money in the long run. If your manager isn't convinced first time round, or didn't really hear you, try again, on another day, and provide extra information. Ask someone else to back you up and approach her with the request.
- Accept criticism, even if you feel it is undeserved. Always tackle the issue or problem and don't take it personally. Often complaints about specific employees are channeled through their managers, making it important for you to listen carefully to any criticism from your manager.
- It helps to talk over problems about managers with your colleagues, who can provide support and suggestions, and share similar experiences. If you feel uncomfortable about directly confronting a manager over an issue, a third person may be able to approach him.
- Employees work best when they feel they are part of a team with a common goal, rather than a group of competing individuals. Take the initiative in becoming involved in team efforts.
- Remember that your manager needs you as much as you need him. By doing your job well, you make him look good and it is in his best interests to support you.

See Also
- The Boss Question (www.dovico.com/thebossquestion.html)

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

Minimizing computer problems

"Put the problem aside for a few hours, despite your deadline. If something's bugging you, it's going to continue to bug you until you can rationally think through it. Put it aside and work on something else, and then come back to it later. The solution to what's stressing you out might be obvious." Bill Swallow

Technical communicators use various software tools to complete their tasks. Problems often occur with computer systems, transfer of information or production in various formats.

- Join online forums for PDF, FrameMaker or online help production. These forums provide tips and resources for using a specific tool and a network of other writers who can be referred to for suggestions or solutions to problems. Refer to online web sites for troubleshooting tips.
- Cultivate a professional support network. Besides colleagues or your manager, the support network could also include an outside mentor or a group forum (such as Techwr-l), with professionals who can advise you on how to handle work-related problems. The best way to build and maintain a support network is by also being willing to reciprocate, and offer your support and assistance to others, when it is requested.
- Take a course appropriate to your level in a tool that you use daily, to increase your efficiency at using the tool.
- Set up a backup system, which can be used if all else fails. This could be the computer of a colleague, with all the required software, or a computer in the helpdesk or lab that is currently being used for another purpose. Redundancy and failure planning is an important part of ensuring that downtime (in which you won't be able to work) is kept to a minimum. Most responsible managers should go along with this request, if phrased in terms of redundancy. Your company should also have a backup location for all your data files, updated daily and at a location on the network, so that no vital information is lost due to computer problems.
- Put aside a seemingly insoluble problem for later, when you are refreshed and have had time to think of a strategy for tackling it.
- Explain to your boss why it is important to have the basic tools you need to do your job. Investing in software may cost your company in the short term, but pays off in the long term benefits of increased productivity. For example, a professional desktop publishing program, such as FrameMaker or PageMaker, a graphics program such as Visio, for drawing technical diagrams, an online help compiler, such as RoboHelp, and Adobe Acrobat for producing PDF (portable document format) versions.
- Hold off buying the latest version of a software application until it has been out on the market for some time. This will enable you to evaluate feedback from other users, learn about problems and benefit from software fixes before you buy it.
- Install and configure new software during quieter periods and not during mission-critical periods, when you need the software to work without problems.
- Use standards-based or widely used applications (e.g., MS Word, Adobe Acrobat) rather than proprietary solutions that make you dependent on a single vendor. Request that the same operating system and software versions be installed throughout the department, to ensure uniformity.
- Clarify your helpdesk's computer support policy. Although system administrators may be familiar troubleshooting Windows, network setup and computer problems, most will not be familiar with the ins-and-outs of PDF production, postscript drivers, conversions or online help compilation. In this case, ask your helpdesk to agree to bring in an expert to solve a problem that cannot be resolved in-house.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

See Also

- Knowing When to Upgrade Software, by Deborah and Eric Ray (www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/knowingwhentoupgrade.html)
- Backing up Doesn't Mean Retreating, by Geoff Hart (www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/technologies.html)
- Essential Resources for FrameMaker Users, by Keith Saltys (www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/frameresources.html)
- Essential Resources for Word Users, by Keith Saltys (www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/wordresources.html)
- Information on Adobe products: Adobe Web Site (www.adobe.com)
- Information on Microsoft products: Microsoft Web site (www.support.microsoft.com); Microsoft Word MVSP FAQ web site (www.mvps.org/word/index.html)
- Information on FrameMaker and PDF production: Frame Users (www.frameusers.com); Shlomo Peretz's Microtype web site (www.microtype.com)
- List servers: Professional Communities in Cyberspace, by Raymond K. Archee, in the December 1998 edition of Intercom.

Making the best use of your workspace and desktop equipment

"Take a 30 minute walk at noon (weather permitting) or at least a short walk." Rebecca Downey

Technical communicators are at greater risk from stress disorders resulting from repetitive movements of the fingers and wrists or poorly organized workspace.

The following suggestion may help reduce the risks of repetitive stress disorders:

- Request to bring in a consultant to examine your workspace and work activities, or read up on this subject: Is your chair adjusted to the correct height for your desk? Are your monitor and keyboard placed in a comfortable position, so that you don't have to constantly reach or bend?
- Invest in equipment that reduces the risk of repetitive stress injuries, such as an ergonomic keyboard, roll ball mouse, UVR-protected monitor and adjustable chair with a hard back. Explain to your manager that the long-term benefits of a healthy employee far outweigh the cost of such equipment or the risk of injury, ensuing legal claims and hefty insurance payments to employees that may be faced when companies avoid their health needs.
- Take a course in correct typing, to reduce injuries resulting from incorrect wrist or hand movements.
- Use a palm pilot, or voice recognition software, to reduce the amount of repetitive typing.
- Learn the use of shortcut keys for various applications, which can significantly reduce the use of the mouse (for example CTRL+O to open a file, CTR + S to save, CTRL + P to print). Programs such as MS Word allow you to develop macros that can perform many of the routine manual keyboard tasks at a single click.
- Use a squeeze ball to strengthen your wrists and fingers, and perform stretching exercises for your wrists and fingers to warm them up before you start typing. Take constant breaks from your desk to rest your eyes, back muscles and wrist tendons and increase your blood circulation.
- Create a pleasant and relaxing workspace: keep your desktop free of clutter; put a few favorite pictures on the wall and a pot plant as a source of oxygen. If possible, ask for a desk with a window, for fresh air.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

See Also

- Speech Recognition and Dictation Software: http://shop.store.yahoo.com. Try Dr. Bottt iListen.
- A Patient's Guide to Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (http://www.medicalmultimediagroup.com/pated/ctd/cts/cts.html)
- Prevention of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (http://www.carpal-tunnel.com/prev.htm)
- Treating Carpal Tunnel and Other Repetitive Strain Injuries Without Drugs or Surgery, by Rick Allen (http://home.teleport.com/~drrick/sports/rsi.html)

Enhancing your job security

"Breathe deeply. Remember that this is just the day job. Even bad things come to an end. Most importantly - remember that I like my job and that I am good at what I do." Rebecca Downey

Constant changes and readjustments in the work environment, plus fear of losing one's job create stress. The following suggestions may help to increase your sense of job security:

- Use change as an opportunity to learn new skills and try new things.
- Prepare yourself in advance for change. Don't wait for it to happen: take any skill enhancement courses you can; keep your eye on the job market, subscribe to online job servers and apply for interviews to hone your interviewing skills.
- Make use of your network of contacts and friends. Keep up to date with them and remind them that you are out there, through emails, postcards or on the phone. Someone you know may be the source of your next job.
- Take an active part in your local STC chapter activities and contribute to your STC chapter. This increases your professional status and visibility, and offers the opportunity to learn new skills and to build up your network of contacts.
- Seek opportunities to widen your responsibilities at work, making yourself hard to replace. Use restructuring as an opportunity to request more responsibility – but don't wait for this to happen, put yourself forward, by either volunteering or asking for these tasks to be assigned to you.
- Plan the future direction of your career and invest in continued education. Here are two suggestions: 1) Specialize. Become an expert in a specific field (such as PDF production or XML) that will make your skills in high demand. 2) Generalize. Learn a wide range of skills that could be applied to many different jobs, to increase your employability.
- If you are laid off, this could be an opportunity to recharge your batteries, focus on other priorities in your life or continue your education.

You can take comfort in the fact that whatever the current economic situation, technical communications has been rated as a career with good prospects and long-term growth opportunity.

See Also

- Who moved my cheese? Published in 1999 by Dr Spenser Johnson, provides a light-hearted look at job and life changes, using the parable of a mouse looking for cheese in a maze.
- The Jobs Rated Almanac 2001, by L. Krantz, gives technical communications a very high rating for job security and future prospects.
- The Networking Game, by Patricia L. Cornett, in the June 2000 edition of Intercom.
- Continuing Education: The key to Your Career, by Raymond P. Janicko, in the July/August 2000 edition of Intercom.
- Don't Wait to Be Downsized! by Geoffrey G.S Hart, in the July/August 1999 edition of Intercom.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

- Focusing Your Career, by Cindy C. Bailey, in the July/August 1999 edition of Intercom.
- Dealing with Job Loss, by Theresa A. Leonard-Wilkinson, in the November 2001 edition of Intercom.
- Create Your Personal Training Plan, by Rob E. Houser, in the December 1998 edition of Intercom.

Coping with poorly defined and managed projects

"Stay on top of deadlines and documentation expectations in the team meetings. If necessary, keep a running list of the deadline with your meeting notes. When a deadline changes, the TW may not be the first person notified. Therefore, I have found that keeping a list based on meeting notes and conversations is helpful, even if the date doesn't slip. That's the easiest way to maintain control of the deadline." Laura MacLemale

A contribution to stress for many writers is the poorly defined and managed product. Try the following strategies for coping with such projects:

- Accept that a certain amount of ambiguity and uncertainty may be unavoidable. Sometimes it takes time for engineers or product managers to sort out the design of a product and for features to become stable. Budget this into your schedule. Clarify the maturity of the product (is this a demo version, beta or first customer release?) and base your estimate of the time it will take to complete it accordingly. Ask the following questions:
  - Is this release under controlled availability to specific customers, or general availability to all customers? A general availability release has gone through quality control procedures and is more stable and mature.
  - How long before the product must be shipped? The longer the time to ship, the larger the amount of potential changes.
  - How many engineers are devoted to this project? The fewer the engineers, usually the less extensive the changes.
  - What types of changes are required? a) cosmetic – related to interface names or text only b) functional – introduces new features and tasks c) fundamental – major changes to work flows, the interface and the product functionality
- Clarify who will be responsible for providing information, reviewing and approving the documentation, and define realistic deadlines for this. Try also to find out the following:
  - How important is the project and its documentation to the SME?
  - What resources (time and staff) does the SME have available to handle the documentation review for this project? If the documentation isn't a priority or insufficient manpower is budgeted for this project, then don't expect to receive timely reviews.
- Look out for red flags that indicate a project is heading for disaster: changes in project owners or SMEs in the middle of a project; project managers who fail to get back to you after repeated requests; and sudden changes in expectations or demands. In this case, clarify your expectations and reach an acceptable compromise on how to proceed, or if this fails, explain why you are unable to continue with the project.

See Also
- What to Do While You're Waiting, by S. Bruce Carruthers, in the December 2000 edition of Intercom.
- Knowing When to Bail Out, by Lori M. Lathrop, in the June 2000 edition of Intercom.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

Increasing your control over the work environment

"Make friends at work - people you can share your general frustrations with."
"Leave it at work. If you are having a stressful day, leave it at work." Bill Swallow

"Always try to avoid being in the office a minute more than the required 8-9 hours, try to maintain a healthy family life and approach your work with a sense of humor." Shimon Frais

We chose our careers for some intrinsic reason or purpose of controlling our environment, others or ourselves. When employees don't get what they need at a company, the result is burnout and eventual resignation.

To enhance your control over your work environment, try the following:

- Always adopt a friendly and polite approach to your colleagues and a positive attitude to your work. Be willing to listen and offer assistance, where relevant. This will earn you their respect and cooperation.
- Team up with your colleagues to pool resources, discuss problems and find ways to increase your control at work (as a group you have much more influence on your company's policies than as isolated individuals)
- Be proactive and assertive about obtaining your needs. If you need something, ask for it.
- 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.

See Also
- The Block to Employee Productivity
  (www.dovico.com/TheBlockstoEmployeesProductivity.html)
- Five Ways Not to Get Promoted (www.dovico.com/5waystonotgetpromoted.html)
- Seven Deadly Sins of Tech Writing Burnout, by Liz Russell.
- Underutilized: What You can Do, by Barbara M. Block, in the June 2000 edition of Intercom.

General Strategies for Coping with Stress

"Close your eyes, take a long, slow, deep breath, and picture yourself kneeling in a sylvan forest glade, every translucent green leaf glowing in the sun, the clean forest air around you, water from a recent rainfall dripping from every leaf…" Geoff Hart

In addition to the suggestions and resources for handling specific stressors discussed above, you can implement the following suggestions for improving your general sense of wellbeing, physical health and ability to cope:

- **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. For those with busy schedules, try to set aside a half an hour per day for physical activity. For example, you could take a walk or cycle in the park before work, after lunch, or in the evenings, or attend the local gym or swimming pool.
- **Control your diet**. A balanced diet, providing essential vitamins and minerals, ensures that you have the energy to face day-to-day tasks and stress. Avoid skipping meals or rushing your mealtimes because of work or time pressures.
- **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.

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?

- **Have a regular time-to-yourself period**. During the week, or once each day, set aside a regular 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.

In addition to the above, the following advice is perhaps the most important. Take a close look at your lifestyle and your ways of coping with stressful situations. How effective are your current coping strategies? Are you prone to periods of procrastination or outbursts of frustration? Are you prone to denial, claiming that there is no stress in your workplace? Do you have other stressors in your personal or family life? For some, this may require seeking professional guidance. Dealing effectively with "personal" issues is a vital component of long-term stress management.

See Also
- IVillage Diet and Fitness Web site (http://www.ivillage.com/diet/)
- Exercise , Fitness and Leisure (http://www.exercise.co.uk/articles/)
- Health and Fitness (http://www.health-fitness-tips.com) has several useful articles plus links to resources on health, exercise and diet. See:
    - 10 Essential Health Tips (The Basics to Practice Every Day) http://www.health-fitness-tips.com/features/10-essential-health-tips.htm
    - Daily Exercise Suggestions (http://www.health-fitness-tips.com/features/daily-excercise-suggestions.htm)

Conclusion

There is no magical wand that can dismiss all forms of stress in the work environment. A certain level of stress will always be present, if not beneficial to our functioning. This article has suggested a few basic strategies for handling specific stressors and for increasing our coping capacity.

By adopting a proactive and assertive approach to identifying sources of stress and searching for solutions, rather than waiting for problems to happen, we can help minimize some of the more damaging effects of long-term stress on our health and wellbeing.

Above all, approach your work with perspective and a sense of humor, and team up with colleagues, to pool your resources and find solutions.

Additional Reading on Stress Management

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

Part 2 - What Strategies can Technical Communicators use for Coping with Stress?