



## TDCJ Risk Management's *Training Circular*

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# **ANGER AND STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE**



Workplace violence is becoming increasingly commonplace. Seldom does a week go by that workplace violence doesn't make the headlines. Studies attribute this trend, in part, to today's workforce being so much more stressful than it was a decade ago. And, the added stress causes people to become more easily angered.

### **Stress and Anger**

Stress and anger in the workplace? This isn't 'late breaking news' to TDCJ. The Agency has a great deal of experience in dealing with these workplace phenomena. They're underlying factors that come with the job of offender management. With a large portion of the agency's work being time sensitive and deadline driven, stress levels can be high. Also, offenders may often feel these emotions and sometimes attempt to project them onto staff. How an employee processes stress

and anger has a significant impact on their physical and emotional well being. An individual must first understand the causes of these emotions in order to successfully process anger and stress.

### **What's behind the anger**

When people get angry about a particular situation, there are often three beliefs underlying the emotion.

**Belief One:** The event is absolutely unfair. "No one else has to stay late. It's not my fault they have to commute so far to get home."

**Belief Two:** It's happening to me only. "Why are my suggestions in shift turnout being ignored?"

**Belief Three:** It is out of my control. "The system is so complex that it takes forever to get a policy or procedure changed."

Another trigger is when an employee feels that his or her territory has been invaded. He or she may resent someone else using the desk, taking the stapler, or working 'their' picket. Some hard-driving employees are also irritated when coworkers drop by to chat. Territory can include personal space, physical possessions, privacy, and time. Anger is destructive when it festers or takes the form of personal attacks. The underlying cause of anger is often hidden fear. That can be fear of making a mistake or potentially losing a job or a promotion opportunity. Financial difficulties are very stressful, and worry takes its toll. Feeling inadequate when faced with new procedures or technology can also turn previously serene employees into highly touchy, emotional people.

### What you can do

Anger is an uncomfortable emotion, and it is tempting to ignore it in the hope that "everything will settle down soon." Supervisors need to face the situation and recognize that no problem is going to go away simply because you ignore it. Blow-ups at the office or on the Unit halt work, and work stoppages must be prevented.

Acknowledge the anger -- the feelings may be legitimate. Often the anger is about a real difficulty at work that can be remedied. Attempt to see the employee's point of view. After the issue is out in the open, choose a time to discuss what happened and what sorts of strategies can address the problems. Waiting until the crisis has passed is better than trying to solve it while in the middle of the fire. Similarly, if an angry employee just blew up, it is difficult to go from anger to problem-solving immediately. Allowing some time to pass will help the person to calm down and regain the ability to reason and think clearly.

Develop an action plan with specific steps for behavior modification or system change. An employee who lashes out against his co-workers must learn other ways of expressing anger or disappointment. For procedural changes, making a plan with

clear time lines for implementation will help defuse the situation and help keep things calm.

There are times when intervention by a third party is necessary. That might be another supervisor, a higher ranking supervisor, or in extreme cases, the warden. Before it gets to this point, identify the issues causing anger and be willing to face the situation directly. This will help you form a more effective intervention strategy. These strategies will hopefully get the "red" out of your workplace.

### Stress

Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The nervous system is aroused and hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen respiration, and tense the muscles. This response (sometimes called the fight or flight response) is important because it helps us defend against threatening situations. The response is preprogrammed biologically. Everyone responds in much the same way, regardless of whether the stressful situation is at work or home.

Short-lived or infrequent episodes of stress pose little risk. But when stressful situations go unresolved, the body is kept in a constant state of activation, which increases the rate

of wear and tear to biological systems. Ultimately, fatigue or damage results, and the ability of the body to repair and defend itself can become seriously compromised. As a result, the risk of injury or disease escalates.

In the past 20 years, many studies have looked at the relationship between job stress and a variety of ailments. Mood and sleep disturbances, upset stomach and headache, and disturbed relationships with family and friends are examples of stress-related problems that are quick to develop and are commonly seen in these studies. These early signs of job stress are usually easy to recognize. But the effects of job stress on chronic diseases are more difficult to see because chronic diseases take a long time to develop and can be influenced by many factors other than stress. Nonetheless, evidence is rapidly accumulating to suggest that stress plays an important role in several types of chronic health problems-especially cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and psychological disorders.

### Good stress ?

Stress isn't necessarily a bad thing for you. Studies seem to agree that most individuals actually perform better when placed under a little stress. The reason for this is the body pro-

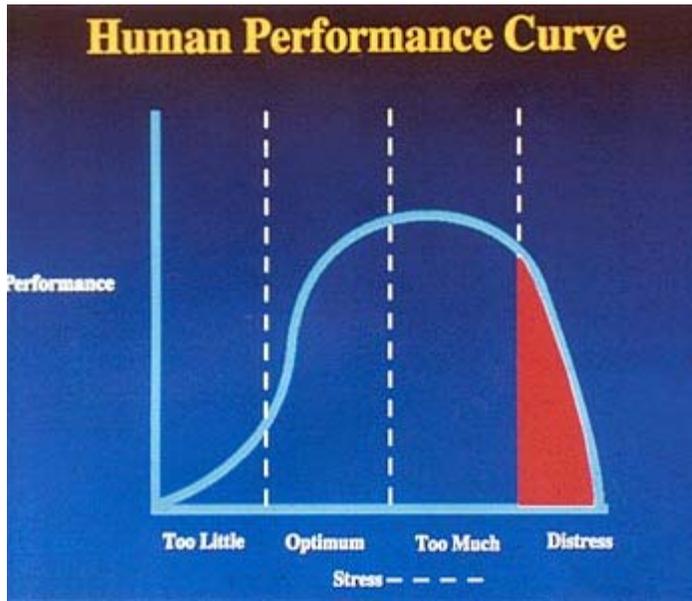
duces certain chemicals when placed in stressful situations. This is where the fight or flight

course, quitting bad habits such as smoking also help!

These physical changes will

logically lead to emotional im-

ashamed of. You wouldn't hesitate to seek medical treatment for a physical injury so why hesitate to seek assistance with an emotional injury? Free and confidential help is available through the Employee Assistance Program by calling (866) 832-5927.



emotions come into play. When experiencing stress, the body produces adrenaline, endorphin, serotonin and dopamine. These chemicals have positive effects on the body. They provide short bursts of energy and heightened awareness. However, these are short lived.

### Other ways of dealing with anger and stress

Other ways to help deal with stress is to develop and maintain healthy eating and exercise habits. Eating foods low in cholesterol and saturated fat will not only help keep the weight down, but will also pave the way for healthier attitudes toward exercise. Of

provements. Dealing with stress and anger is much easier when the mind and body are operating in peak condition.

### You're never alone!

It's been said that to understand TDCJ you have to work for TDCJ. There are many stressors that are unique to the correctional environment.

Sometimes it can be difficult to convey feelings or emotions when discussing your job with family and friends who work in the 'free world.' If you find yourself having trouble coping with anger or stress, or feel that nobody is listening — seek help at the next level.

This may involve professional counseling. It's nothing to be

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