

AOTA DECISION GUIDES

Practitioner Well-Being



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Establishing strong habits and routines are important to combating stress and anxiety. This resource provides specific considerations to address the signs of acute stress and anxiety.

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Occupational therapy practitioners may experience stress related to work-life balance and exposure to traumatic events. It is first important to recognize the signs of burn-out and acute stress to improve your own quality of life to best support those for whom you care. Use this checklist to identify areas you may need to address. While you may not identify as experiencing a significant disorder, early intervention is necessary to prevent long-term impact.

ACKNOWLEDGE SIGNS OF BURN-OUT AND ACUTE STRESS. CHECK THE BOXES IF THEY APPLY.

- FATIGUE
- POOR FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE
- PHYSICAL AND/OR EMOTIONAL FATIGUE
- INCREASED ANXIETY
- MUSCLE TENSION
- ISOLATING ONESELF/DECREASED SOCIAL INTERACTION
- CHANGES IN YOUR SLEEPING HABITS
- DIETARY CHANGES
- INCREASED ILLNESS
- FREQUENT LOSS OF CONCENTRATION/FORGETFULNESS
- DEPRESSION/FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS
- DECREASED PRODUCTIVITY

Depression Feelings of Hopelessness Social Isolation

Acute stress and exposure to trauma can have short-term and lasting effects. Trauma-informed approaches can provide intervention for workplace burnout and trauma exposure. Consider the following:

- Identify a safe space where you can speak freely to someone about your emotions**
- Utilize your Employee Assistance Program for counseling or cost-friendly opportunities such as helplines**
- Address feelings of grief, shame, and guilt through journaling, making gratitude lists, or narrative therapy**
- Advocate to open lines of communication with employers, such as suggesting town hall meetings**
- Join peer groups such as online communities (e.g., AOTA's CommunOT)**
- Suggest trauma-informed trainings for your organization at the various levels (i.e. leadership, staff, and community)**

Sleep Deprivation Physical and Emotional Fatigue

The brain needs time to regenerate and to consolidate memories from the day. Lack of sleep can lead to micro sleep modes throughout the day. This results in increased stress, can affect your physical health, and increases the risk of making crucial mistakes or medical errors, or not following protocols.

- Reduce screen time during the day and avoid before bedtime**
- Change light settings on electronics or consider a blue light filter**
- Reduce intake of stimulates, such as caffeine**
- Develop a bedtime and wake up routine**
- Have quiet time in the morning when stress hormones are low**
- Set up your sleeping environment by keeping it tidy and making the room dark during rest**
- Consult a medical professional in the case of persistent insomnia**

Increased Anxiety Poor Frustration Tolerance

Due to the activation of the fight-flight system (sympathetic nervous system), stress can lead to increased anxiety and poor emotional regulation. Consider the following self-regulation techniques:

- Do deep breathing exercises throughout the day to activate the regulatory system for rest and digestion (parasympathetic nervous system)**
- Be mindful (be present and non-judgemental) through mindful walks, mindful eating, driving without music, meditation**
- Establish peer support: Debrief with peers after work, or at the end of your day at home, establish a peer group to discuss shared experiences**
- Share your feelings with others verbally or through non-verbal signals (e.g., thumbs down when needing time alone)**

Poor Diet

Stress can lead to poor eating habits. Inversely, your diet can contribute to your stress. Here are some things to consider to improve your dietary habits.

- **Schedule mealtime throughout the day**
- **Use a scheduling assistant, such as your smart phone, to identify mealtimes**
- **Avoid simple carbohydrates such as sugar or caffeine**
- **Consider complex carbohydrates to decrease stress hormones and stabilize blood sugar**

Increased Illness Muscle Tension

Increased stress on the body, and release of stress hormones, can lead to decreased immunity. This may lead to increased illness, fatigue, and strain on the body. Respiratory illness can also result from a lack of physical activity during times of stress.

- Identify time to exercise, stretch throughout the day, or perform yoga. Aim for 15-20 minutes daily, avoiding guilt when time doesn't allow.**
- Spend time outside**
- Utilize body mapping to recognize signs of stress and anxiety**
- Utilize your senses (e.g., play music, use a personal massager, explore aromatherapy)**

**Forgetfulness
Loss of
Concentration
Decreased
Productivity**

Due to over activation of the emotional brain centers, stress and anxiety can compromise executive functioning. Forgetfulness and loss of concentration may also be a result of lack of sleep.

- **Establish a daily routine**
- **Prioritize your time**

The next few pages provide tools to assist in time management.

Agreeing to commitments taking away from areas of importance

Busy work

Fill in the blank:

Social Media

Meetings and appointments that can be delayed or postponed

Fill in the blank:

AVOID

LIMIT

NOT IMPORTANT

IMPORTANT & NOT URGENT

MANAGING TIME

URGENT & IMPORTANT

NOT URGENT & IMPORTANT

ADDRESS

PLAN

Immediate commitments and crises for self, family, friends, work

Deadlines

Fill in the blank:

Meals

Personal time

Fill in the blank:

Working From Home: Tips for Structuring Your Day

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Setting a Schedule or Routine

Getting Organized

- Identify a "start time" and an "end time" to your day
- Identify a list of tasks to be completed
 - Tasks included can be both work and personal
 - This can be done the morning of or the night before
 - The list can be made daily or for a week at a time
- Prioritize tasks to identify those that should be completed first
 - A helpful tool is categorizing by: Have to do, Need to do, and Want to do
 - This list is flexible and will change throughout the week as things are completed or deadlines are reached

Example:

Have to do <i>Not negotiable, must be done today</i>	Need to do <i>Important, but OK if it doesn't happen today</i>	Want to do <i>Would like to have done but OK to wait</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Sign forms to send to bank<input type="checkbox"/> Work on presentation<input type="checkbox"/> Call Ryan<input type="checkbox"/> Finish documentation<input type="checkbox"/> Refill prescription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Email finance about reimbursement<input type="checkbox"/> Call doctor about upcoming appointment<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up kitchen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Clean out fridge<input type="checkbox"/> Send birthday cards<input type="checkbox"/> Bake bread?<input type="checkbox"/> Organize email folders

Developing a Schedule and Routine

- Set a daily schedule incorporating identified tasks
 - Enter in scheduled and "have to do" tasks first
 - You don't have to go hour by hour—tasks can be spread into "morning, afternoon, evening" to give more flexibility
- Set aside time for socialization
 - Instead of responding to texts while working, schedule a break to actively have the conversation, whether it's through text, messenger, phone call, etc.
- Incorporate personal tasks if needed
- Keep the schedule somewhere visible

Self-Care

- ❑ Be patient with yourself
 - You likely aren't productive for a full 8 hours at work either.
 - Break up your day with small, enjoyable activities
 - Take a real lunch break—even if you eat while working, take a walk, nap, meditate, watch a show... just make sure to transition back to the workday!
- ❑ It's OK to set boundaries between work and personal life
 - If you are feeling anxious about taking breaks or stopping work, make appropriate notifications, such as setting an away email, notifying your supervisor/team you are ending your day or stepping away, turning off your work phone

Strategies to Help With Focus

- ❑ Set a timer to focus on one task for a period of time
 - Be realistic! If it is hard to focus on typing a document for 60 minutes, set the timer for 15 minutes with small breaks
 - Set timers for breaks to limit becoming distracted and help go back to the task
- ❑ If not necessary for work, set your phone out of your sight while focusing, to limit distractions from notifications, apps, scrolling, etc.
- ❑ Set-up a workspace where it is easy to focus—even if you have to be in the center of the home, having 2 feet of clear space just for work can help
- ❑ Limit strong distractions
 - Keep the TV off
 - Find background noise that works—music, opening windows, silence...
- ❑ If you become distracted by other things that you feel like you should do—refer back to your schedule and list.
 - It's helpful to tell yourself, "It's ok to work on this now, I set aside time for that later."
 - If you notice you really can't focus unless certain things are done (such as breakfast dishes), modify your schedule so that is done first in your day



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