How to Prevent & Manage STRESS in the Call Center
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How to Prevent and Manage Stress in the Call Center

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Call center agents encounter daily stressors from customers, coworkers, managers and the demands of the company.

They **WORK IN A DISTRACTING ENVIRONMENT**, face high consumer expectations and experience pressure to meet company standards.

This pressure is compounded by the continuous expectation to exceed performance metrics while their service quality is continuously scrutinized by managers. All of these factors contribute to **CALL CENTER AGENT STRESS**.

When these stressors become significant, they result in decreased productivity, job satisfaction and health; all of which have major effects on the call center.
The **average turnover rate** in the call center industry is approximately 40% and the estimated cost of turnover is $10,000 per agent (James, 1998). This surmounts to $2.4 million per year in a 1,000 seat call center.

Call center stress affects the well-being of the agent, the effectiveness of the call center and the bottom line of the company.

It is therefore a significant issue that warrants attention and immediate action.

This e-book will discuss the role of stress in the call center, how managers can identify stress in their workforce, sources of stress, how stress affects call center agents and the company and how call center managers can prevent stress in the call center.
Prevalence of Call Center Agent Stress
ACA Research (1998) reported that of the 433 call center agents surveyed:

- Requested training in stress management: 80%
- Reported experiencing at least one stress symptom: 70%
- Reported a medium amount of stress: 47%
- Stated that stress in their job is high or very high: 25%

Stress within the call center is a pervasive issue that impacts most agents.
Prevalence of Call Center Agent Stress

Findings from this study suggest that stress is prevalent in the call center environment and agents are interested in reducing stress.

Stress can have a huge impact on a call center agent’s mental health, productivity and wellbeing.

It is therefore imperative that practices be set in place to help identify and combat stress within the call center.
What is Stress?
Stress is the response of the body to any demand for change.

Both negative and positive stressors can lead to an experience of stress and the stressor can be external (e.g. job demands) or internal (e.g. high expectations) or both.

There are two types of stress:

**01 // ACUTE • short-term stress**

Acute (short-term) stress is the body’s immediate response to a situation that is demanding, dangerous or exciting.

**02 // CHRONIC • long-term stress**

Chronic (long-term) stress is caused by stressful situations or events that last a long period of time.
The intensity and duration of the experienced stressor can vary depending on personal and situational factors. These include physical health, emotional health, social support, social issues, job related issues, coping strategies, personality, temperament and previous experience with stress related issues.

// Stress is therefore a complex experience that varies for each individual. //
How Managers Can Identify Signs of Stress in Call Center Agents
However, it is imperative that managers looking to reduce stress in the call center environment first understand the signs of stress in order to identify its source.

Managers in a call centers must realize that every agent’s **EXPERIENCE OF STRESS** is different. Signs of stress will therefore vary for each individual. In order to identify call center agents who are experiencing stress, they must be aware of all of the possible signs of stress.

**Signs of stress** can be:

**COGNITIVE**

Memory problems, difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts, forgetfulness, confusion, difficulty making decisions and exhibiting poor judgment.
How to Prevent and Manage Stress in the Call Center

How Managers Can Identify Signs of Stress in Call Center Agents

**EMOTIONAL**

Exhaustion, mood liability, irritability, pessimism, frustration, anxiety, worry, feeling overwhelmed and depression.

**PHYSICAL**

Headaches, dizziness, backaches, neck pain, indigestion, sweating, tremors and nausea.

**BEHAVIORAL**

Changes in eating and sleeping, jaw clenching, stuttering, blushing, isolating oneself, procrastinating and substance use.

**CALL CENTER MANAGERS** should be aware of all of these signs of stress and should constantly assess each call center agent based on this knowledge.

Once managers identify which agents experience stress, they can look for the **source of stress**.
Sources of Stress
How to Prevent and Manage Stress in the Call Center

Sources of Stress

Stress within the call center environment can come from many different sources. Below is a list of possible sources of stress that call center agents can experience.

01 // ROLE CONFLICT

Role conflict is defined as the simultaneous occurrence of two or more types of pressures such that compliance with one would make the compliance with the other more difficult. The conflicting demands between pressure to improve operational efficiency (e.g. response time, waiting time, productivity and service level), maximize customer satisfaction and achieve excellent information gathering all create stress within the call center environment.

02 // INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS AND EVALUATIONS

Stress can result from inconsistencies between job performance expectations and performance evaluation criteria. Agents who are asked to increase customer satisfaction but are being evaluated based only on KPIs such as service level will feel torn between meeting expectations and improving how they will be evaluated.
Role ambiguity results when the call center agent is uncertain about job requirements, supervisory expectations or when or how their performance will be evaluated. This creates stress as they lack concrete and helpful guidance in order to perform their job adequately.

Call center agents who are provided little training, feel that training was ineffective or have inadequate equipment experience more stress than those who feel more prepared to execute their job perfectly. This is likely because they feel their performance would be better and customers would be more satisfied if they had appropriate resources.
How to Prevent and Manage Stress in the Call Center

05 // EXCESSIVE MONITORING

When call monitoring practices are too frequent, too intrusive or feedback resulting from call monitoring is too harsh agents experience more stress (Aiello & Kolb, 1995). Some call center agents have reported that intensive control measures and rigid surveillance systems are oppressive and emotionally demanding. Additional research has suggested that high levels of monitoring and low levels of job control can be positively correlated with anxiety, depression, diminished job satisfaction and turnover rates.

06 // OVERWHELMING JOB DEMANDS (AKA OVERLOAD)

Working in a fast-paced environment with ambitious answer rate goals can put a lot of pressure on a call center agent. When the demands placed on the agent exceed their capacity, this creates stress for the agent.
**07 // LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Lack of social support from both supervisors and co-workers has an effect on burnout. Agents who perceive little social support within the workplace are more likely to experience stress.

**08 // LACK OF CONTROL**

Call center agents who are bound by strict rules to follow, a script, tight performance measures, regimented break schedules and ambitious individual targets will feel more confined and less capable to adequately perform their job (Hutchinson et al., 2000). This lack of perceived control increases stress in call center agents.

**09 // MONOTONOUS WORK TASKS**

In an attempt to ensure a higher degree of consistency in service level and reduce costs, call centers have shifted to oversimplify tasks, encourage the adherence to strict scripts and standardize processes for their agents (Batt, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). These shifts reduce the
amount of mental stimulation, creativity, autonomy and decision-making discretion that the agents are able to exercise (Paul and Huws, 2000; Holman, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). The result is a work environment that can be highly monotonous and unchallenging. This leads to frustration, disengagement, low sense of self-efficacy and stress.

10 // LACK OF APPROPRIATE AWARDS

Call center agents who feel they are not sufficiently rewarded for their work experience more stress than those who feel that they are. Insufficient financial rewards (e.g. incentives), lack of social rewards (e.g. acknowledgement) or lack of intrinsic rewards (e.g. lacking pride in doing something important and doing it well) can all contribute to the experience of stress.

11 // FEELING UNDervalued

Call center employees often feel undervalued in their role within the company (Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000).
They feel their contribution to the company is not acknowledged or appreciated and that their work has no impact on the company. This can lead to frustration and stress.

12 // LACK OF STATUS ASSOCIATED WITH POSITION

Call center agents often state that society fails to appreciate or recognize the interpersonal, communication and relational skills required for their work (URCOT 2000). These perceptions demoralize call center agents and diminish their attachment to their job.

13 // LACK OF PRIDE ASSOCIATED WITH POSITION

One study suggests that for the majority of call center agents, their occupation was not part of their career strategy (Watson et al., 2000). Most of the call center agents surveyed stated they sought employment as a call center agent due to financial hardship, lack of available alternatives and lack of skills or qualification for other lines of work. As a result, there was little personal identification with call center work or attachment to the call center industry. This lack of pride associated with their position can lead to an experience of stress while on the job.
Sources of Stress

14 // INFLEXIBLE OR DIFFICULT WORKING HOURS

The shifting trend to provide 24/7 phone support to customers has resulted in more rigid or difficult (e.g. graveyard shift) shift hours for call center employees. Call center agents are asked to work extended hours and are increasingly bound by inflexible shifts systems (Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000; Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer, and Scholarios, 2000). These conditions are conducive to stress and burnout.

15 // UNFAIRNESS

Unfairness in the workplace such as unequal workload, lack of appropriate pay, cheating or when evaluations and promotions are handled inappropriately leads to stress within call center agents.

16 // HIGH CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS

Customers are becoming more savvy consumers and as a result their expectations for customer service are increasing. This pressure is compounded by the pressure placed on the call center agents by...
increasingly high managerial expectations and performance targets. Agents feel compelled to meet the demands of the customer as well as their company and management expectations.

17 // ANGRY CUSTOMERS

The majority of call center agents report receiving calls from verbally aggressive customers daily (Crome, 1998). As a result, call center agents handle emotionally demanding calls with little or no time to recuperate because of the constant pressure to continue to make or receive calls. The consequence of continual verbal aggression is increased experience of stress, emotional exhaustion and absences.

18 // OUT OF DATE COMPUTERS OR SOFTWARE

Call center agents who are ill-equipped to effectively handle customer interactions due to out of date equipment are more stressed than those who are not. Slow boot and processing times,
Sources of Stress

inefficient call center software or working from too many different office systems can frustrate call center agents. They feel that their level of efficiency is not optimized and their productivity suffers. If they are under additional pressure to perform due to unrealistic evaluative measures, they may feel added stress as their performance is restricted due to being ill equipped.

19 // LOW OR QUESTIONABLE JOB SECURITY

Call center agents who feel their job security is questionable or compromised may experience the constant stress of not knowing when they will be let go. This lack of perceived control over their job security can lead to the experience of anxiety and stress.

20 // NO OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

Call center agents often report limited and inadequate opportunities for training and career development (Crome, 1998; Richardson et al, 2000; URCOT, 2000). The lack of opportunities for advancement may decrease their motivation to perform their job well, to feel a sense of pride in their work and to feel attached to their position, all of which result in the experience of stress.
Sources of Stress

21 // LACK OF TRAINING OR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Call center agents complain that the repetitive and monotonous nature of their work offers little opportunity to expand their capabilities and skills base. Additionally, the training and feedback they receive based on their performance can be minimal or ineffective. As a result, career development is hindered given the lack of transferable skills (Richardson et al, 2000; Deery and Kinnie, 2002).

22 // PHYSICAL DEMANDS

The restrictive and repetitive nature of tasks that call center agents engage in, coupled with the requirement that they remain seated and take breaks only when scheduled can be very physically demanding. As a result, call center agents have been found to experience eye sight difficulties, occupational voice loss, sleeplessness, back and neck pain, postural problems as well as headaches (Richardson, 1998; URCOT, 2000).
Sources of Stress

23 // UNPREDICTABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The unpredictable nature of call traffic contributes to stress by creating uncertainty for workers (ACA, 1998; Batt and Moynihan, 2002). They must maintain a constant level of alertness in anticipation of the next call and often worry that they might miss an important call while on break. In addition to the unpredictable nature of call traffic, the call center agent can never predict how the next call will proceed, its level of complexity or how much effort will be required to successfully engage with the customer. All of the aforementioned factors contribute to stress.

24 // POOR ERGONOMICS

In a recent report by the workplace technology foundation (2003), poor ergonomics such as poor posture, the use of excessive force when hitting keys and inappropriate computer monitor distances all contributed to workplace stress within a call center.

25 // INEFFECTIVE OR POOR MANAGEMENT

Call center agents are increasingly quitting or refusing jobs at call centers where there is a deficiency of people management skills.
Sources of Stress

The work environment in call centers can also be conducive to stress. Many call centers are loud, cramped and agents are often “wired to the desk” by telephony and computer equipment (ACA, 1998; URCOT, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002). These work environmental factors can cause significant emotional and physical strain.
Call center agents often express dissatisfaction with their relatively low salaries (Richardson, 1998; Kinnie et al, 2000; Paul and Huws, 2002) which result in financial strain.

All of the aforementioned factors can be sources of stress on call center agents.

The sheer number of stressors implies that call center agents likely experience constant stress from many different sources and that this has an impact on their performance and well-being.
The Effects of Stress on Call Center Agents
STRESS HAS A PERVERSIVE EFFECT ON CALL CENTER AGENTS, their performance and their attitude towards their job.

Below are **10 effects of stress** in call center agents.

**01 // POOR HEALTH**

**Stress significantly impacts** the immune system, nervous system, musculoskeletal system, respiratory system, cardiovascular system, endocrine system and gastrointestinal system. More stress is correlated with more frequent and severe illnesses, longer recovery time from illness, headaches, panic attacks, upset stomach and back pain. There is also evidence that 30-40% of the employees working in call centers suffer eye soreness, blurred vision, light sensitivity and headaches (Sudhashree et al., 2005).

**02 // DECREASE IN PERFORMANCE**

The presence of stress **reduces** an employee’s ability to adequately **perform their job** as energy is diverted away from work related activities and towards coping with the stress.
The Effects of Stress on Call Center Agents

03 // DECREASE IN JOB SATISFACTION

Call center agents who experience more stress at work are less satisfied with their job.

04 // DECREASE IN PROFESSIONALISM

Call center agents who are stressed at work, are less devoted to the company and their position resulting in a decrease in professionalism.

05 // INCREASE IN CONFLICT AT WORK

When call center agents experience more stress, they also tend to engage in more at-work conflict with co-workers and managers.
Burnout is an individual’s response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors within the workplace (Maslach et al., 2001).

Exhaustion results from stressful events depleting the emotional resources necessary to cope with the current work environment.

Cynicism, an individual’s distant attitude toward the job, results from feeling stress at work.

Inefficacy is a reduction in personal accomplishment. Call center agents will feel less efficacious when they experience a significant amount of stress at work.
The Effects of Stress on Call Center Agents

10 // ABSENTEEISM

Stress affects an employee’s voluntary decision to engage in the stressful work environment. Stress causes half of all absenteeism and one-fourth of all voluntary turnover within call centers (Mattenson and Ivancevich, 1987).

The aforementioned factors all impact the well-being, productivity and effectiveness of the call center agent.

The effects of stress within the call center are not limited to the agent. Stress within the call center can have detrimental effects on the company as well.
Effects of Call Center Agent Stress on the Company
STRESS WITHIN A CALL CENTER not only affects the agent, but has a huge impact on the call center itself as well as the company. Below are 5 effects of call center agent stress on a company.

01 // LOWER CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Agents who experience a significant amount of stress at work are less effective, professional and efficient. All have effect on customer satisfaction.

02 // HIGHER AGENT TURNOVER RATE

Agents who experience more stress at work are less satisfied with their work environment and are more inclined to quit. One study reported a turnover rate of 40% for call centers (James, 1998) and more than a third of agents surveyed reported they left their job due to stress related factors.
03 // INCREASED COST ASSOCIATED WITH TURNOVER

The **average cost** of turnover is $10,000 per agent (James, 1998), an enormous cost associated with **losing talented agents** due to stressful work.

04 // DECREASED WORKPLACE EFFICIENCY

Call centers that are more **conducive to stress** have higher agent turnover rates, agents who are less effective and teams that are less harmonious. This all translates into **decreased workplace efficiency**.

05 // INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH CARE COSTS

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers who must take time off work because of **stress** or **anxiety** will be **off the job for an average of 20 days**. This agent absenteeism can have a huge effect on the company’s bottom line.

The effects of stress on a company are significant and necessitate importance of addressing stress related issues in the workplace.
How to Prevent and Manage Stress in the Call Center Environment

How to Combat Stress in the Call Center Environment
Below are 25 techniques to help combat stress within a call center environment.

01 // EVALUATE THE STRESS LEVELS WITHIN YOUR CALL CENTER AGENTS

The first step in combatting stress in the workplace, is identifying it. Continually assess the level of stress of your call center agents, within your call center and your company. This should include walking the call center floor, interviewing agents about stress and analyzing stress surveys.

02 // UNDERSTAND THE CAUSES OF STRESS

Once you have evaluated stress levels, identify the causes of stress. This will help you develop an action plan that most effectively addresses the most prevalent issues.
03 // DEVELOP A STRESS REDUCTION ACTION PLAN

Make your stress fighting strategy concrete by forming a list or action plan with concrete steps and measurable goals.

5 STEPS
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

MANAGER

AGENT

04 // EVALUATE YOUR STRESS REDUCTION ACTION PLAN

Periodically measure the effectiveness of your stress reduction plan by analyzing relevant stress related data (from surveys, interviews and agent observation).
05 // CLARIFY ROLES, GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Employees who feel that organizational goals and objectives, their role within the company and what is expected of them is clear will be more actively involved in their work and satisfied with their work than those who do not. This will decrease work-related tension and stress.

06 // ELIMINATE INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN JOB PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION CRITERIA

This will help reduce role stress experienced by employees. For example, don’t demand that your employees comprehensively resolve customer complaints using as much time as needed and also evaluate their performance strictly on the number of calls they have taken or made.
Allow agents to **view metrics on their own dashboard**. Call center agents who can review their own performance can continually make adjustments and feel more in control of their **performance statistics**. This increased control will decrease stress for the call center agent. Engage them in collaborative decision making processes, policy changes and **performance evaluations**.

**DASHBOARD**

**INBOUND SERVICE LEVEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Available</th>
<th>Busy</th>
<th>Away</th>
<th>Offline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>82%</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**AGENTS STATUS**

- 90%
- 1%
- 1%
- 3%

**REALTIME METRICS**

- **1** waiting queue
- **00:05** longest waiting time
- **00:00** average abandonment time
- **00:01** average waiting time
A rule of thumb for call center agents is: the greater the perceived empowerment, the less perceived stress. Allow agents to make decisions, personalize their interactions and customize their approach with customers in order to be more effective.

Increase your team’s capability to perform their job well. Equip them with the right tools, train them effectively and provide them with comprehensive information about customers and the product. Call center agents that experience more competence within the workplace are more likely to assume an active role and experience lower levels of stress (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).
10 // INCREASE AGENT AUTHORITY

Increase the opportunity for agents to initiate work behavior and processes as well as engage in management practices. Call center agents that feel they have the power and responsibility to progress and change the workplace will feel more satisfied with their work and as a result experience less stress.

11 // INCREASE AGENT AUTONOMY

Autonomous agents are often more capable of effectively addressing customers’ needs by being flexible, responsive and personal (Oldham, 1996). This leads to higher customer satisfaction, resulting in increased agent satisfaction with work related tasks.

12 // REWARD COMPETENCE

Agents who are rewarded for excellent or effective call center interactions will feel more appreciated at their work and as a result, experience less stress. Rewards should include prizes, praise, recognition, monetary rewards and advancement.
13 // EQUIP YOUR AGENTS WELL

Providing your call center agents with software that displays the entire history of a customer by integrating CRM, helpdesk systems and social media can be invaluable. This will reduce the stress associated with having to learn multiple systems and continually opening and updating several systems while on the phone with the customer.

14 // TEACH AND ENCOURAGE TIME MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Call center agents who maximize their use of time will be more effective and feel more capable. This results in decreased stress.

15 // CREATE GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CALL CENTER AGENTS

When managers form good relationships with call center agents, there will be more mutual respect and agents will be less hesitant about addressing questions or concerns with managers. They will feel that the environment is more supportive and collaborative.
16 // ENCOURAGE PEER SUPPORT AND SOCIALIZATION

Research in call centers has revealed that team bonding activities (e.g. social events and fun activities) result in improvements in **employee morale and satisfaction, lower turnover rates**, and **higher quality customer service** (Kinnie et al., 2000).

17 // ENCOURAGE FLEXIBILITY IN BREAK SCHEDULING

Agents should be allowed to **take a break** after a stressful interaction. This will empower them with a **greater of a sense of control** over their experience of stress.

18 // ENCOURAGE HEALTHY HABITS

Discuss with your call center employees the importance of **taking a walk**, **taking regular breaks**, **socializing**, **rehydrating**, **sleeping well** and **eating well**. All will help to reduce the experience of stress.
19 // IMPROVE ERGONOMICS

Provide **comfortable chairs** that allow for good posture, **desk space** that is uncluttered and ensure agents get enough **natural light** within their workspace. Consider using standing workspace, balance balls in place of chairs and other **ergonomically effective solutions** to combat sitting in the same position all day.

20 // OPTIMIZE OFFICE LAYOUT

Create a **low-noise, low-distraction environment**. This could mean rearranging cubicles, making better use of office space and de-cluttering desks.

21 // ENCOURAGE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS WORK

A **positive attitude** towards one’s job facilitates performance (Shahu & Gole, 2008). Encourage a positive attitude by incorporating **games, incentives** and **friendly competitions** between departments or agents in the workplace.
How to Combat Stress in the Call Center Environment

22 // INCREASE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Communicate values of the company and ensure that practices and policy are in line with the values. Encourage employees to strongly identify with the company by giving branded gifts (e.g. T-shirts, mugs, bags, etc.), hosting team-building activities and circulating monthly newsletters. Employees who are more committed to their organization will perform their job with the company’s best interest in mind.

23 // TRAIN WELL

Effective training increases agent competency and effectiveness. Ensure that your agents feel competent before they take a live call. Continually enhance their skills using effective monitoring and immediate feedback. Provide access to continuing training opportunities in order for agents to develop new skills. This will reduce workplace stress.
24 // OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

Agents who feel that they have **opportunities for advancement** will be more **motivated** and **encouraged** to engage in their work. Talk about these possibilities, but also make sure that their **expectations for advancement are realistic**.

25 // ENGAGE IN EFFECTIVE CALL MONITORING PRACTICES

By engaging in **systematic, standardized call monitoring practices**, managers will ensure that their team is delivering consistently **excellent service** without “over monitoring” their performance. This will **increase agent effectiveness** and **customer satisfaction** which will result in a decreased level of stress experienced by the call center agent.

Any call center manager looking to reduce workplace stress should consider employing the aforementioned techniques. If implemented properly and consistently, they will have a huge effect on the level of perceived stress of call center agents, their **effectiveness** and the **professionalism** of your workforce.
Conclusion
Conclusion

Stress within a call center is multifaceted and complex.

It results from contradictory tensions, conflicting role requirements, intensity of the work, ambitious performance targets, scrutinizing management, customer centered stress, working in a distracting environment and having lack of social support.

All can negatively impact the agent, call center and company. Stress in the call center environment can result in increased agent absenteeism, turnover and costs while decreasing customer service quality, team morale and effectiveness.

If not properly addressed, workplace stress can result in losing a significant amount customers, employees and revenue.

It is therefore imperative that call center managers take appropriate and immediate action to combat stress in the workplace.
Works Cited


Works Cited


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