



## **You Are the Employer:**

*A Guide to Hiring and Managing Personal Assistant Services*



**Module Five**

*Stress Management*

# YOU ARE THE EMPLOYER

## A GUIDE TO HIRING AND MANAGING PERSONAL ASSISTANT SERVICES

Hiring personal assistants may seem overwhelming.

**It does not have to be!**

This guide was developed to provide you with the skills and resources you need to hire and manage your personal assistants.

**Module 1:** Identifying Your Needs and Wants

**Module 2:** Hiring a Personal Assistant

**Module 3:** Tax Considerations

**Module 4:** Employer Responsibilities

**Module 5:** Stress Management

**Module 6:** Communication Skills

**Module 7:** Additional Resources

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# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

## AFTER COMPLETING MODULE 5, YOU WILL:

- Define stress and identify two instinctive responses to stress.
- Describe at least three ways stress impacts on the ability to work.
- List at least two ways to communicate your needs under stress.
- List three ways to prevent burnout from occurring.
- Identify five ways to reduce stress.

# SECTION 1:

## INTRODUCTION

You may experience changes in your life that cause you to react in unusual physical and emotional ways. What you are feeling is stress and it is something we all experience in one way or another at various times in our lives. Being able to identify stress and to develop ways to manage it is important to maintain your health and well being.

Hiring and managing personal assistants can create stress. Juggling your day-to-day life along with the many things you need to think about around your personal care may cause you to feel overloaded. This is natural, whether you are new to the process or not. Eliminating the stress associated with hiring and managing personal assistants is not an option, because it is a necessity in your life. Although some stress may be unavoidable, there are ways to manage it so that it does not have a negative impact on your life and the people around you and this module will show you how.



## SECTION 2:

### IDENTIFY YOUR STRESS

#### WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them by others or by themselves. Stress occurs when a person feels like they can not cope with these pressures. People often associate stress with a negative event, but this is not always the case. Stress can also be a result of a positive change in your life, such as a new job or getting married. The intensity and physical or emotional reaction caused by stress varies from one person to the next. An event that creates as an excessive amount of stress in one person may only create a minimal amount of stress in another. It is how we address the situation that determines whether stress will impact our health and well-being. Once stress occurs, two instinctive responses take place:

#### **The Fight or Flight Response**

This is the short term response of the body when it perceives a change or threat. The response usually involves an increase in heart rate or blood pressure. This helps to bring more strength to the muscles. Our emotional state is also affected by the response to stress. We can become excitable, anxious, jumpy, or irritable. This reduces our ability to work effectively with others, impacts our ability to make good decisions, and places us at a greater risk for accidents to occur.

#### **The General Adaptation Syndrome**

While the **Fight or Flight Response** works in the short term, the **General Adaptation Syndrome** operates in response to longer term exposure to causes of stress, which is also known as burnout. In our everyday working life, much of the stress is subtle and occurs without obvious threat to survival. Most of this comes from work overload, conflicting priorities, inconsistent values, deadlines, conflict with co-workers, unpleasant environments, etc. Not only do these factors reduce our performance by distracting us and making it difficult to focus our attention on the task at hand, they can also cause unhappiness.

As a result of stress, particularly long-term stress, your health can be affected. The more severe you perceive the stress to be, the more your body will respond. Health issues caused by stress can include: a weak immune system (which leads to colds and the flu), intensifying symptoms in diseases that have an autoimmune component, headaches, ulcers, and many other serious health problems.

The first step in managing stress is to determine how much stress you are under. There are a number of different assessments that can help you determine your level of stress. At the end of this module is the “Social Readjustment Rating Scale,” a well known scale developed in 1967 by Dr. Thomas H. Holmes and Dr. Richard H. Rahe. Additional resources are located in the Additional Resources module.

## HOW DOES STRESS IMPACT ON WORK?

Although stress may come from a variety of areas in your life, it can impact your ability to work in the following ways:

- **Job performance begins to suffer**
- **You become easily distracted**
- **Interaction with co-workers may be negatively affected**
- **Anxiety and negative thinking may overcrowd the mind**
- **Decision-making and creativity may be impaired because the mind is focusing on the stress**
- **Absences are more frequent due to poor health**

## SECTION 3:

### COMMUNICATE YOUR NEEDS

Good communication is critical for both the employer and the personal assistant. The more positive communication occurs, the less likely it is that problems will exist. While the next module will focus on communication in more detail, this section will cover the need to communicate about stress you experience.

Communicating your needs and developing techniques to reduce stress are critical. How do you communicate your needs when you are stressed? It is helpful to remember that everyone has a bad day every now and then. However, having a bad day does not give you permission to yell at your assistant or treat him or her poorly. Always remember to be respectful towards your assistant and to be aware of your feelings and how you are interacting with each other. If you are having a bad day, tell your assistant. You may think your personal assistant knows why you are having a bad day, but you can not be sure unless you communicate with him or her. Going to a separate space can also be helpful. You may want to watch TV or go on the computer while your assistant does some other household tasks. Remember, do not make decisions or react spontaneously when you are under stress.

While we have addressed ways to make your assistants aware that you are having a bad day, the same is true for them. A healthy relationship is based on being able to communicate your feelings and needs clearly. If an assistant is having a bad day, be aware of this. You may also want to ask if there is anything you can do to help reduce the stress. It is important that you do not take advantage of having a bad day as an excuse for treating each other poorly or not communicating effectively.

## SECTION 4:

### PREVENT BURNOUT

*“Burnout is used to describe a syndrome that goes beyond physical fatigue from overwork. Stress and emotional exhaustion are part of it, but the hallmark of burnout is the distancing that goes on in response to the overload.”*

Maslach, Christina. Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2000). An introductory packet on understanding and minimizing staff burnout. Los Angeles, CA. Rev. June 2002.

### BURNOUT SYMPTOMS

Stress is a natural part of everyone’s life at one time or another. When stress becomes more serious, however, burnout begins to occur. A clear sign of burnout is when a person loses interest and motivation in things they normally enjoy. Burnout usually occurs over a period of time, and can affect someone both physically and mentally. Some clear symptoms of burnout may include:

- **A feeling of lack of control over commitments**
- **An incorrect belief that you are accomplishing less**
- **A growing tendency to think negatively**
- **Loss of purpose and energy**
- **Increasing detachment from relationships that can lead to further conflict and stress, adding to the problem**

If you are working a lot, or leading a very active life, it is important to focus on preventing burnout. If you are under stress or are in a stage of burnout, this may carry over into your work with your assistants. If you begin to notice signs of burnout in yourself or your assistant, talk to your assistant about it. Be conscientious about his or her work time, and be careful to spread out the tasks you need completed among all of your assistants. Remember that they also have a life outside of work, and you should be sensitive to this.

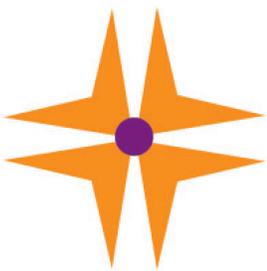
At the same time, it is important you receive the support you need. If problems occur, such as your assistant coming to work late more frequently, address the issue right away. This will help to reduce your stress level. Keep in mind that when one of you is under stress, this can create problems if not dealt with properly.

## BURNOUT PREVENTION

If you feel that you are in danger of burning out here are some suggestions:

- **Re-evaluate your goals and prioritize them.**
- **Evaluate the demands placed on you and see how they fit in with your goals.**
- **Identify your ability to comfortably meet these demands.**
- **Reduce excessive commitments if you are overwhelmed.**
- **Involve other people in a supportive role if people demand too much emotional energy.**
- **Learn stress management skills.**

- **Examine other areas in your life that are generating stress, such as work or family, and try to solve problems to reduce the stress**
- **Get the support of your friends and family in reducing stress**
- **Ensure that you are following a healthy lifestyle:**
  - Get adequate sleep and rest to maintain your energy levels**
  - Ensure that you are eating a healthy, balanced diet**
  - Get adequate exercise**
  - Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake**
- **Develop alternative activities such as a relaxing hobby to take your mind off problems**
- **Acknowledge your own humanity: remember that you have a right to pleasure and a right to relaxation**



It is important for you to recognize stress before it turns into burnout and becomes an issue that can impact on your ability to work with others. If your assistant has signs of stress that are leading to burnout and he or she has not communicated this to you, the best support you can give as an employer is to bring it up on your own. Resolve this before it becomes so much of an issue that it can not be worked out and your assistant can no longer work with you. Awareness is essential.

## SECTION 5:

### WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

#### COPING WITH STRESS

Find ways that can help to reduce stress before it reaches the stage of burnout. Remember that you should spend time doing things that make you happy or help you relax. These activities are different for each person. Try making a list of activities or circumstances that bring you joy and relaxation, and take the time to make these a regular part of your life.

There are ways that can help you reduce the effects of stress before it affects your health and relationships with others. This is especially important as you encounter stress that affects your ability to communicate with your personal assistants. Suggestions for Coping with Stress:



## SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH STRESS

- **Practice deep breathing – exhale slowly as far as you can and then slowly fill your lungs up from the diaphragm.**
- **Close your eyes as you breathe. Visualize yourself at a favorite place that brings you happiness and relaxation.**
- **Visualize how you would like the stressful situation to change. This may help you to come up with ideas that can help to reduce the stress in the situation.**
- **Take a break – go for a walk or get away from the situation for a few minutes and come back in a calmer frame of mind.**
- **Ask yourself if the stress you are experiencing is really something that should bother you so much. If not, let it go.**
- **Confront the stress directly when possible. Talk to the person (your personal assistant) about it if the stress you are experiencing involves something they may have said or done.**
- **Talk about the problem with a friend, family member or professional or write it out in a letter and throw it away.**

## EXAMPLES OF STRESS

A good way to reduce stress is to be aware of the common areas that create stress for employers of personal assistants. Some common types of stress experienced by employers include:

 **“I feel like I am doing everything.”**

One of the most important things any supervisor or employer needs to learn is how to delegate. We may believe that because it concerns our own personal care, we need to do everything ourselves. This is not the case. Learn to delegate specific tasks to other people. This will prevent you from becoming overwhelmed, and enable you to handle what is important. Sometimes we may not even realize that we are attempting to do too much. Talking about your feelings with other people in your life and asking for advice may help you recognize that you are taking on too much.

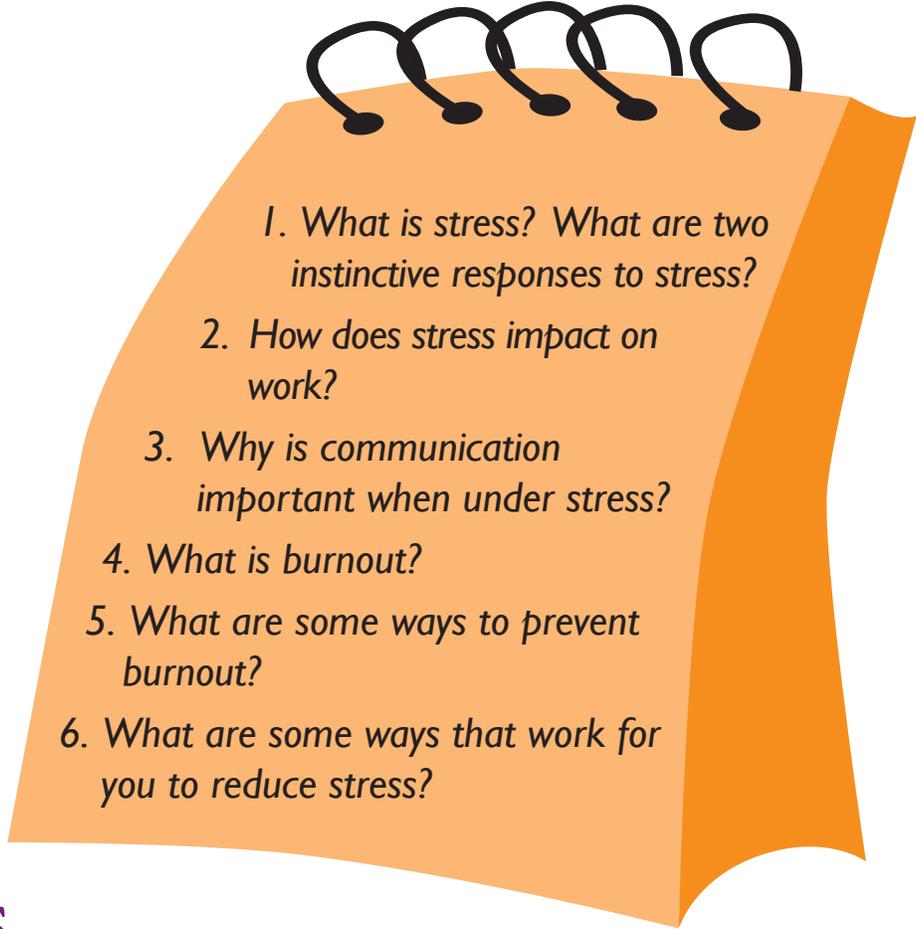
 **“I want to trust my personal assistants, but I am afraid I will hire someone who will take advantage of me.”**

There is never a guarantee that everything will go well with all of your personal assistants, but at the same time it is important you develop a level of trust with them. You may want to talk to them about how difficult it can be to have people coming in and out of your house. This may help your assistant understand why you do the things you sometimes do. Your level of trust should grow as you get to know your assistant more. If trust does not develop, you may want to view this as a “red flag” that there may be something that is causing you to feel like you can not trust them.

 **“I want to avoid additional stress by simplifying my personal care, but I don’t know how.”**

Go back to the needs assessment you completed at the beginning of this guide. Look to see which tasks you said were essential, and which tasks may be negotiable. Sometimes too many tasks may cause you to feel stressed. Think about what is important, and do not let yourself worry about things you can not accomplish unless they are essential.

## REVIEW

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1. *What is stress? What are two instinctive responses to stress?*
  2. *How does stress impact on work?*
  3. *Why is communication important when under stress?*
  4. *What is burnout?*
  5. *What are some ways to prevent burnout?*
  6. *What are some ways that work for you to reduce stress?*

## DEFINITIONS



**Stress** - the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them. Stress occurs when a person feels like they can not cope with the pressure.

**Fight-or-Flight Response** - the short term response of the body when it perceives a change or threat.

**Burnout** - A lack of physical and/or emotional strength caused by stress. Burnout usually occurs over a period of time, and can affect someone both physically and mentally.

# HOLMES SOCIAL READJUSTMENT RATING SCALE

**Mark each life event that has occurred within the past 12 months.**

**Sum the LCU values you marked**

**If your total score falls in the following areas:**

150 points and below: It implies you are less likely to experience a health breakdown.

151-300 points: It implies you have a 50% chance of a major health breakdown in the next two years.

301 points and above: It implies you have an 80% chance of a major health breakdown in the next two years.

The effects of consistently high stress (distress) are “undesirable”. It has been accepted by researchers that “stress” can have both short-and-long term adverse effects on an individual’s mental and physical health. There is much debate as to the nature and probabilities of the causal relationships involved.

Some psychological ill-effects of stress are: Anxiety, Depression, Complete Mental Breakdown, Lowered Self-Esteem, and Exacerbation of Chronic Pain

Some physical ill-effects of stress are: Backaches, Headaches, Heart Attacks, Colds, Ulcers, Diarrhea, Constipation, and Angina

Stress is acknowledged as a study topic of vital importance not only because of the mental and physical suffering it can cause individuals, but also because it may well make a substantial, if indirect, contribution to the social and economic problems of today’s society. It is obvious that the economic cost of stress in terms of absenteeism, sick leave pay, and hospital bills is considerable.

The Holmes Social Readjustment Rating Scale is only one of many stress test indicators. You should be able to obtain some indication as to your level of stress. Although individuals may react to a similar situation differently, most of us are affected by an event at approximately the same level. For example, according to Holmes and Rahe, most individuals feel the “death of a spouse” is the most upsetting event in their lives. Therefore, the authors rank this life event as Number 1. There are 43 ranking life events that are common to most of us. These are ranked in order of severity, with Number 1 being the most stressful event to Number 43 being the least stressful event.

Please feel free to consult with a mental health practitioner if your results indicate a major health breakdown in your near future. They may be able to supply you with more effective coping mechanisms and assist in the reduction of your stress through numerous interventions.

| <b>Rank</b> | <b>Life Event</b>                         | <b>LCU Value</b> |
|-------------|---|------------------|
| 1           | Death of spouse                           | 100              |
| 2           | Divorce                                   | 73               |
| 3           | Marital separation                        | 65               |
| 4           | Jail term                                 | 63               |
| 5           | Death of close family member              | 63               |
| 6           | Personal injury or illness                | 53               |
| 7           | Marriage                                  | 50               |
| 8           | Fired from job                            | 47               |
| 9           | Marital reconciliation                    | 45               |
| 10          | Retirement                                | 45               |
| 11          | Change in health of family member         | 44               |
| 12          | Pregnancy                                 | 40               |
| 13          | Sex difficulties                          | 39               |
| 14          | Gain of new family member                 | 39               |
| 15          | Business readjustment                     | 39               |
| 16          | Change in financial state                 | 38               |
| 17          | Death of a close friend                   | 37               |
| 18          | Change in different line of work          | 36               |
| 19          | Change in number of arguments with spouse | 35               |
| 20          | Mortgage over \$10,000                    | 31               |
| 21          | Foreclosure of mortgage or loan           | 30               |
| 22          | Change in responsibilities at work        | 29               |
| 23          | Son or daughter leaving home              | 29               |
| 24          | Trouble with in-laws                      | 29               |
| 25          | Outstanding personal achievement          | 28               |
| 26          | Spouse begins or stops work               | 26               |
| 27          | Begin or end school                       | 26               |
| 28          | Change in living conditions               | 25               |
| 29          | Revision of personal habits               | 24               |
| 30          | Trouble with boss                         | 23               |
| 31          | Change in work hours or conditions        | 20               |
| 32          | Change in residence                       | 20               |
| 33          | Change in schools                         | 20               |
| 34          | Change in recreation                      | 19               |
| 35          | Change in church activities               | 19               |
| 36          | Change in social activities               | 18               |
| 37          | Mortgage or loan less than \$10,000       | 17               |
| 38          | Change in sleeping habits                 | 16               |
| 39          | Change in number of family get-togethers  | 15               |
| 40          | Change in eating habits                   | 15               |
| 41          | Vacation                                  | 13               |
| 42          | Christmas                                 | 12               |
| 43          | Minor Violations                          | 11               |



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