



# EMPLOYEE ADVISORY SERVICE NEWSLETTER

*The New Jersey Civil Service Commission's Employee Advisory Service (EAS) Newsletter contains useful articles and information for managing various well-being and work-life issues in order to create a healthier, happier, and more productive workplace. EAS is committed to improving the quality of life for all New Jersey Civil Service employees by encouraging a good work-life balance.*



## UPCOMING WEBINAR

### Stress & Its Impact on Your Health

#### *About the Webinar:*

A practical look at the effect stress has on individuals mentally and physically, along with helpful strategies for listening to internal alarm systems and proactively implementing stress management techniques that can improve health, productivity and life satisfaction.

**Date: June 22, 2023**  
**Time: 2:00 – 3:00 PM**

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# The Effects of Psychological Stressors in the Workplace

It's normal—even helpful—to experience some stress at work. The right level of stress can sharpen your thinking and motivate you to do good work. However, too much stress, endured for too long, can be draining. It can be bad for your health, your relationships, and the quality of your work. Also, your reactions to excess stress can have a negative effect on the people around you.

How can you deal with unhealthy and unproductive work stress? Here are some tips.

## Recognize the warning signs of excess stress.

The first step in dealing with stress is learning to recognize its warning signs. Excess stress affects your body and mind. Without knowing its signs, stress can build gradually to the point where you're paralyzed with anxiety, lash out in anger at coworkers, or feel like you can't succeed. So, pay attention to the signs of work stress. These may include physical signs, such as:

- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Trouble sleeping
- Low energy or fatigue
- Rapid heart rate

They can also include mental and emotional signs, such as:

- Apathy and loss of interest in work
- Trouble concentrating
- Anxiety, irritability, or feelings of depression
- Misuse of alcohol or drugs

As you become more attuned to the signs of stress, make an effort to identify what causes your stress level to rise. This might be obvious: a long stretch with extra work, worry about the possibility of layoffs, or tense relationships with coworkers or your manager. There may also be triggers to your stress that you haven't recognized, things that might bother you more than other people—perhaps because of your past experience or simply your particular personality.

As an exercise, keep notes for a week or two on when you feel an extra level of stress and what might be triggering those reactions:

- Where were you and what were you doing just before your stress level started to rise?
- Who were you interacting with?
- What were you thinking and feeling?



These notes, and your reflections on them, can help you identify your unique stress triggers.

Once you've identified your most important stressors at work, think about how you might deal with them. For each stressor you identify, write down steps you might take to address it in a positive way. That might mean getting a better handle on your workload to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Or it might mean learning to recognize and control negative thinking or irrational fears.

## Reduce work stress by taking care of yourself.

If stress from work is having a negative effect on your work output, your health, your relationships, or your life outside of work, it's time to step back and pay attention to your basic needs:

**Get moving.** Physical activity is important to your health and is one of the most effective stress reducers. Take a walk during a break in the workday—even if it's just for five minutes—to interrupt a feeling of rising tension. Build more physical activity into your daily and weekly schedule.

**Sleep well.** Adopt healthy sleep habits to get more rest. That means a regular bedtime and no work or electronic devices as you wind down for sleep.





**Build healthy eating habits.** Avoid stress-driven eating, which can lead to weight gain and swings in blood sugar and energy. A regular schedule of healthy meals and snacks can help keep your emotions on an even keel.

**Make time for fun and social connections.** Your emotional health is tied to your physical health, and it is important for sustained work performance. Include your own emotional needs in your priorities.

Learn to relax.

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned. When you feel tense from work stress, practice relaxation techniques that work for you. These might include:

- Deep breathing to restore a feeling of calm
- Progressive muscle relaxation to intentionally relax your body and mind
- Mindfulness or meditation to pull your thinking out of a cycle of worry and restore an ability to focus
- Listening to calming music

Take quick relaxation breaks at work or use a relaxation transition as you begin and end the workday.

### Sharpen your focus at work.

If your stress is coming from feelings of overwork or a lack of control over your work, think about ways you might regain control, confidence, and calm:

- **Work with your manager to set realistic goals and expectations.** If particular aspects of your work are causing more stress than others, it might be a sign that you need more training on those tasks. Or perhaps work on the team might be shifted so that you and other team members focus more on what you enjoy and are good at.
- **Prioritize to focus on the most important work**—the work that will have the biggest impact on your team’s and organization’s success and that will meet the most important needs of your customers. Work that seems urgent but is less important may need to wait.
- **Break big tasks into small steps**, and map out a schedule to get them done.
- **Use to-do lists** to stay on top of your tasks.
- **Protect your time** to minimize interruptions and enable concentrated focus. Schedule time for planning and work on bigger projects.
- **Delegate and collaborate.** Where possible, share responsibilities and enlist the help and ideas of others.

### Take time to recharge.

No one can run a marathon at a sprinter’s pace. To avoid burnout and succeed over the long term, you need to take breaks to recharge:

- **Take quick breaks.** A five-minute break for a walk or deep breathing can relax your body and restore your mind so that you can focus more efficiently and creatively on the problem at hand. The distraction of watching a funny video or having a quick conversation with a friend can have the same effect. The point is to get your mind off work so that you can come back to it with renewed energy.
- **Schedule time for your own needs**—for family, friends, exercise, and breaks to relax and restore your energy.
- **Use your vacation time to refresh and recharge yourself.** “Working vacations” tend not to be vacations at all and don’t have the same restorative effect.

### Talk it over.

When you endure your work worries alone, stress can build up. A conversation with a trusted coworker or friend can release that tension. It may also give you a fresh perspective and new ideas on ways you might respond. You might even get an offer of help—if not with the core work issue you’re facing, then with something else that can free you to focus on work with less distraction.

Be sure to return the favor when the opportunity arises. Helping, listening, and collaborating are keys to effective teamwork and a balanced, satisfying life.

If you need help prioritizing in a work crunch, talk it over with your manager. Knowing what’s critical and what can wait can reduce the pressure you’re feeling and help you regain a sense of control over your work.

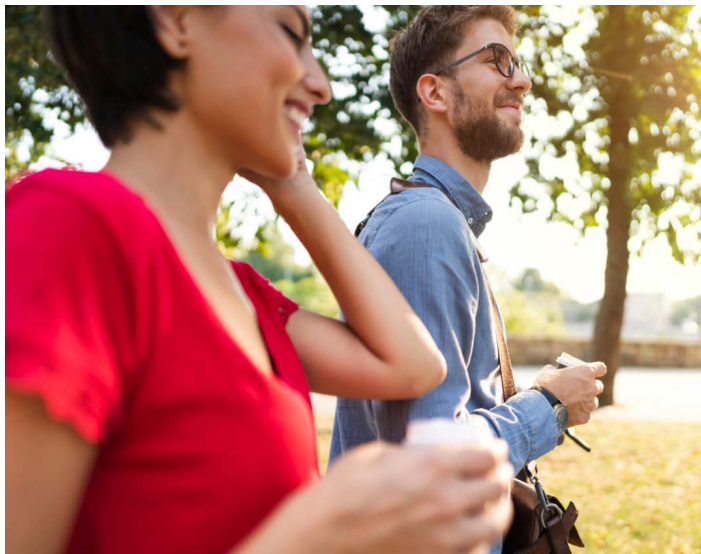




### Flip negative thinking.

Some work stress is caused by negative thinking and unnecessary worry:

- **Practice positive reframing.** When you find yourself looking too quickly and too often at the downside of work events and interactions, push yourself to imagine alternative and more positive outcomes. Then think about the steps you might take to make those positive outcomes happen.
- **Focus on achievements.** When you feel daunted by the work ahead, take a minute to consider the progress you've made. Think back to past achievements and other challenges you've overcome.
- **Challenge negative thoughts.** Is what you are worrying about really true? What might be a more positive and equally reasonable explanation?



### Avoid unproductive conflict and draining work interactions.

Some conflict with coworkers is healthy and productive. Talking through different opinions on the best solution to a work problem can get your team to a better solution than any one of you might come to on your own. However, some work conflicts and interactions are emotionally draining and should be avoided:

- **Steer clear of gossip.** It can lead to negative talk and undermine team morale.
- **Avoid people with consistently negative outlooks.** Complainers and doomsayers create stress for the people around them. If you're forced to work closely with a coworker who spreads negativity, talk to your manager about ways to handle these interactions.
- **Be cautious in sharing political and religious views at work.** If your views are not relevant to your work or the work of your team, they're probably best kept to yourself. If political or religious discussions are fueling conflict at work, talk with your manager or human resources (HR) representative for help in setting boundaries.
- **Strive to resolve conflict in positive ways.** Focus on the present and what you can agree on to move forward. Don't dwell on past hurts or resentments. If a conflict can't be resolved and isn't critical to work progress, agree to disagree and walk away from it.
- **Focus on what you can control, and let go of what you can't.** In working with other people, you may be able to influence the way they behave, but you can't control it.

You can control your own behavior and how you react to what others do and say. Put your focus there.

### Know when to seek help.

If you've tried the steps above and you're still feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or discouraged, you might benefit from talking with a mental health professional. The New Jersey Employee Advisory Service (EAS) is one source for this help. An expert at the program can listen and offer practical suggestions in a phone consultation and can refer you to a mental health counselor for additional support.

You might also find a psychologist or mental health counselor on your own. An expert can help you understand the source of your stress and help you take steps to address it. That might be by changing ingrained habits of thought and behavior, by forming a strategy for better communication with your manager and coworkers, or by treating a clinical problem such as depression or anxiety disorder that could be contributing to your feelings of stress.

# Overcoming Parental Guilt

## What is parental guilt?

Parental guilt is the feeling that you're not doing enough for your children—that you're letting them down in some way, even though you're trying hard to be a good parent. Working parents can also feel parental guilt when they sense that their family priorities are keeping them from doing their best at work. Parental guilt can make you feel that you aren't being successful as either a parent or a worker.

## What causes parental guilt?

Parental guilt is based on your love for your children and your efforts to be the best parent you can be for them. It often arises when you have competing priorities in life—as a parent, as a worker, or as a supporter of a friend or family member who needs your help. You might feel parental guilt over:

- Not spending more time with your children, perhaps because of other responsibilities, such as holding a job or caring for an aging parent
- Not earning more money to provide for your children, perhaps because you've chosen to work less and spend more time with them
- Being irritable or short-tempered at times with your children
- The less-than-ideal meals you serve your children when you're rushed for time or when money is short
- The amount of screen time you allow your children
- Not being able to do it all—not being the perfect parent, partner, worker, friend, and family member



Guilt can be a useful emotion when you've really done something wrong. It can motivate you to correct your behavior, apologize, or make amends— but parental guilt is often unproductive. When it's driven by unreasonable self-criticism and unrealistic expectations, it can make you feel like a failure when you're doing the best you can.



## How to Overcome Parental Guilt

- **Understand that you are not alone.** They may not talk about it, but many parents have similar feelings of parental guilt. It can be hard to be a parent, and you aren't alone in feeling that you sometimes fall short of your ideals.
- **Notice what triggers your feelings of guilt.** Pay attention to situations that make you feel parental guilt more strongly. Is it when you're with certain people? When you're looking at certain social media accounts? When you have certain thoughts that cause you to judge yourself in negative ways? Noticing the triggers of parental guilt can help you take steps to avoid or move past them.
- **Challenge negative and self-critical thinking.** Often, feelings of parental guilt are caused by automatic thoughts and habits of self-critical thinking. When you have self-critical thoughts, challenge them. Is what happened really because of some shortcoming of yours? Use positive reframing to look at a situation or thought pattern in new ways. Consider what you can learn from this and what it shows about your strengths. Positive reframing is the simple and powerful act of changing your point of view.
- **Practice self-compassion.** When you find yourself being self-critical and sinking into parental guilt, imagine how you would talk to a good friend facing the same challenges. Practice talking to yourself with that same compassion. "You are doing your very best." "Just take a few deep breaths, calm down, and you can handle this."
- **Make space for your own needs.** As you make sure your kids have what they need, pay attention to your own needs, too. Coordinate with your partner or with friends or family members to make time for occasional breaks to recharge. Take a nap when your child is napping. When you're able to attend to your own needs, you'll be happier, calmer, and more present for your children when you're with them.

- **Connect with supportive people.** Build a support network of people you can talk with about your experiences as a parent. Cultivate relationships with people who make you feel better—calmer, more confident, and happier. Spend more time with those people (and less with people who leave you feeling judged and not heard). Build relationships in which kindness, attention, and help are shared in both directions.
- **Notice the good.** When people are feeling parental guilt, they tend to focus on what’s going wrong. Turn that around by thinking about what’s going well. Consider your whole day, not just the most difficult moments, remembering the good parts. Think about what your child can do now that they couldn’t do six months or a year ago, what you’ve done well, and what you’re grateful for.
- **Stop comparing yourself to others.** Much of parental guilt comes from false comparisons, and comparing yourself to others on social media is one of the biggest traps. Social media tends to present a sunny fiction, not the way life really is. When was the last time you saw a post from someone about the meal they overcooked or the afternoon their child cried for two hours?
- **Adjust your expectations.** Parental guilt is often rooted in unrealistic expectations. There’s no such thing as a perfect parent. Accept that you are human and do the best you can.
- **Accept that you are continually learning as a parent.** Just as there’s no such thing as a perfect parent, there’s no one right way to parent. Every child has a unique personality and unique needs, and those needs change over time. Approach parenting as a learning process, one in which you’re constantly exploring what works best for you and your family. As with any learning process, you’re bound to make mistakes. Accept them as lessons to learn from, rather than unforgivable failures. Learn how to parent through your own and your child’s ups and downs. If you’re not feeling as calm or even-tempered as you’d like, take a quick break to compose yourself. If you make a mistake or have a lapse that warrants an apology, apologize, acknowledge your child’s feelings, and move on.



- **Get support if you need it.** Sometimes talking with supportive friends or family members isn’t enough. If low mood or feelings of guilt or overload are making it difficult to cope, seek professional help. Your doctor or the New Jersey Employee Advisory Service (EAS) can offer guidance and direct you to appropriate support. That might be a mental health counselor, a parenting specialist, or both.



# Benefits of Generosity: The Gift of Giving to Others

It gives to give. Research has shown that there is much more to be gained than there is to be lost from acts of generosity. Of course, being generous does come at a cost, requiring you to sacrifice something of your own—whether your time, money, talents, or resources—for the sake of someone else. But despite these losses, studies have proven that giving significantly improves your physical and mental health and strengthens your relationships with others.

During times of stress, it can be a challenge to show up for yourself, let alone others. But one study reports that simply making a pledge to be generous can inspire higher levels of happiness and promote a better outlook on life. This astonishing truth speaks to the transformative power of generosity, a power that can be credited to its ability to reduce stress. While some may seek the generosity of others during hard times, it is important to consider the benefits that come from being generous as well.

## Physical health benefits of generosity

It is universally understood that when you do good, you feel good. This good feeling is most easily recognized as a psychological one: happiness. But overlooked are the ways in which generosity improves how your body feels, not just your mind. Growing research has shown that charitable acts can impact your physical health in the following ways:

- **It improves your heart health.** A 2016 study of prosocial spending among older adults with high blood pressure found that spending money on others lowered their blood pressure to such an extent that it was likened to traditional interventions including hypertensive medications and exercise. Another study of sophomore students in Canada reported that after 10 weeks of volunteer service, students had lower levels of inflammation and cholesterol.



- **It decreases your risk of mortality.** After observing a group of older couples to examine the health benefits of giving, Dr. Stephanie Brown, author of “Giving to Others and the Association Between Stress and Mortality,” found that adults who reported providing tangible forms of help to family, friends, and neighbors reduced their risk of dying by almost half compared to those who did not provide help. Even those who reported providing emotional services like listening still reduced their risk of death by 50 percent. Interestingly, Brown also observed that receiving help had no influence on mortality whatsoever.
- **It strengthens your immune system.** Gratitude, a coping response to generosity, can be felt by the benefactor just as much as the recipient. One study found that experiencing gratitude reduced the risk of physical illnesses, including headaches, nausea, dizziness, shortness of breath, fever, congestion, coughing, aches, and joint pain.
- **It increases energy levels.** During a presentation at the Greater Good Science Center, Dr. Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at UC Davis, shared that there was a 10 to 30 percent increase in exercise among individuals who practiced gratitude, and a 10 percent increase in their sleep cycle, allowing them to wake up more refreshed and alert.
- **It decreases adrenaline and cortisol levels in the brain.** Researchers studying the neurological effects of generosity found that donating led to diminished brain activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain that triggers a stress response. Additionally, research has shown that acting generously releases chemicals into the brain, including dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins, further reducing stress and stabilizing blood pressure, sleep cycles, appetite, and mood.

## Mental health benefits of generosity

Just as lower stress levels have a positive impact on a person's cardiovascular and physiological health, they also play a key role in promoting and maintaining mental wellbeing. The chemicals that generous acts stimulate in the brain, also known as "happy" chemicals, are what allow you to experience feelings of pleasure, satisfaction and purpose, love, and connection, which all strengthen generosity's psychological benefits, which include:

- **An elevated mood.** When endorphins are released into the brain, they produce a rush of euphoria sometimes referred to as the "helper's high." This rush, along with increased feelings of satisfaction, creates what scientists call a "warm glow" effect that can improve a person's mood. A recent study published in *Nature Communications* found that when participants committed to spending money on other people and behaving more generously, they were more likely to self-report feelings of happiness compared to participants who spent money on themselves.
- **A better perspective on life.** After conducting an experimental investigation on the benefits of gratitude, Dr. Emmons, along with Dr. Michael McCullough, a professor of psychology at UCSD, found that practicing gratitude boosted participants' self-esteem, encouraged them to be more optimistic, and helped them to feel better about their lives.
- **Lowered risks of depression, anxiety, and other related illnesses.** When people even simply think about helping others, they activate a part of their brain called the mesolimbic pathway, a system responsible for inducing motivation, recognizing rewarding stimuli, blocking pain signals, and triggering the placebo effect, all which decrease symptoms of depression or anxiety.
- **Increased prosocial behavior.** In another study of gratitude led by Dr. McCullough, the co-authors observed how gratitude functions as an important emotional resource essential to social stability, as it evokes other human emotions including empathy and compassion. During his presentation, Dr. Emmons also defined gratitude as a "relationship strengthening emotion," inspiring sympathy, alleviating loneliness, and discouraging isolation.

## Social benefits of generosity

While research has shown that higher levels of positivity are reported among individuals who exhibit prosocial behavior compared to those who do not, the essence of prosocial behavior is that it benefits the wellbeing of its recipients and satisfies their needs first, if only. As a prosocial behavior, generosity benefits both its benefactors and recipients in the following ways:

- **It promotes trust and cooperation.** A Dutch study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* showed that adopting generous, other-regarding strategies in the workplace led to increased levels of trust and cooperation among employees compared to strictly reciprocal strategies like tit for tat.
- **It strengthens your relationships.** In her study on the benefits of generosity in older couples, Dr. Brown also reported that high-cost giving plays a key role in establishing tight-knit social connections and special bonds with others.

## Practicing generosity in the workplace

As generosity is key to fostering trust, cooperation, and strong interpersonal relationships, both employees and their employers can benefit from acting more generously in the workplace. Without having to make any big sacrifices, some small steps that people can take toward becoming a more generous colleague include:

- Lending time and talents to a coworker that has fallen behind on a task or project.
- Taking the time to endorse or write a positive review for a coworker on LinkedIn.
- Giving someone else the opportunity to talk and providing a space to be heard.
- Complimenting coworkers on their achievements in the workplace.
- Providing resources, services, or training to coworkers who are stuck or confused.
- Buying a coffee for a colleague or providing lunch for the whole staff.
- Networking on behalf of shy or modest colleagues.

Regardless of the scale of the act, being generous is guaranteed to make you feel better about yourself, encourage others to feel good themselves and in return think positively of you, and create a friendly, inclusive space where all feel welcomed and inspired to do good.



# Your Employee Advisory Service

Employee Advisory Service (EAS) is a program designed to help employees and their immediate family members with personal, family or work-related issues that may adversely impact the employee's work performance.

EAS provides confidential assessment, counseling, and referral services and helps to restore the health and productivity of employees and the workplace as a whole. Problems are addressed in the quickest, least restrictive, and most convenient manner, while maximizing confidentiality and quality.

## EAS can assist with:

- Work life Balance
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Grief Counseling
- Anger Management
- Critical Incident Stress
- Stress Management
- Substance Abuse
- Family Issues
- Job Performance Issues

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*Your confidentiality is protected by state and federal law and regulations. All of the services offered are guided by professional and ethical standards. EAS staff may not release details of your need for services without your prior written consent. Information concerning the date and time of your appointments and referrals can be released to your Human Resource Office.*



## Employee Advisory Service

Support - Empowerment - Growth

How Can  
We Help  
You?

### Number:

1-866-327-9133

### Email:

EAS\_Help@csc.nj.gov

### Website:

[www.csc.nj.gov/csc/employees/programs/advisory/eas.html](http://www.csc.nj.gov/csc/employees/programs/advisory/eas.html)

### 24 hours a day 7 days a week

(Emergency Mental Health Services)

