Handling Workplace Stress—Individual level

Stress is a common and necessary part of life. However, excessive stress causes many human service problems. Since social work concerns people’s problems which are often very stressful and are delivered by under funded government and nonprofit organizations, social workers often experience excessive stress. Much can be done at the organization level to prevent stress, e.g., clear definitions of goals and boundaries, congruence between responsibility and authority, etc. The suggestions below focus on what an individual can do to handle excessive stress rather than what an organization can do to handle excessive stress. These individual measures are important because most social workers have little or no control over organizational stress reduction measures.

1) Understanding
   a) Knowing why you build up stress
      i) Role demands, overwork, and perfectionistic tendencies
      ii) Need to be in control and reaction to loss of control
      iii) Genetic predisposition (examine your family tree)
      iv) Procrastination because you work better under a certain level of stress
      v) Reaction to change in life (do not make too many major life changes at once)
      vi) Interpersonal conflict, ethical conflicts, etc.
      vii) Role ambiguity at home or due to a lack of guidance at work on what constitutes success
      viii) Danger on the job, physical and psychological harassment, physical danger,
   b) Knowing how your body and mind handle stress
      i) Aggression and hostility at self or co-workers
      ii) Physical problems, headaches, stomach problems, etc.
   c) Knowing what level of stress works best for you
   d) Analyzing your support network
   e) Analyzing your stress release mechanisms

2) Preventive
   a) Structured exercise routing, the equivalent of 30 minutes per day
   b) Structured relaxation, meditation, quiet time with self
   c) Learned optimism vs. pessimism
      i) Understanding yourself
      ii) Type A (in a hurry, success=# of achievements, insecure, anger follows frustration/conflict)
   d) Handling perfectionist tendencies
   e) Letting go of anger, hate, revenge
   f) Building social support networks and team building
   g) Maintaining a healthy diet, regular meals, avoid too much sugar/alcohol, etc

3) Intervention
   a) Charting and monitoring your symptoms
   b) Increase breaks and vacations
   c) Increased delegation
   d) Setting up a support system at work, e.g., Monitor and help each other during bad times
   e) Consultation with supervisor
   f) Calling on your non-work support network (friends, spiritual, family, clubs, etc)
   g) Counseling