

# Dealing with workplace stress



THIS WEEK, the Equal Opportunity Commission features a guest column by one of our commissioners, Dr Krystal-Jane Verasammy, who is also a counselling psychologist. The Equal Opportunity Act covers employment as a category under which a person can lodge a complaint, if they have been discriminated based on their sex, race, ethnicity, origin including geographical origin, marital status, disability or religion. We take a moment in commemoration of Stress Awareness Month to address workplace stress.

Discrimination at the workplace is a stressful situation and the EOC offers redress for those people. To lodge a complaint at the EOC, you can send an e-mail to [complaints@eoc.gov.tt](mailto:complaints@eoc.gov.tt) or visit our website: [www.equalopportunity.gov.tt](http://www.equalopportunity.gov.tt). However, there are other factors that can lead to stress and with dynamic workplace situations due to the pandemic, recognising and managing workplace stress is crucial to your well-being.

## DR KRISTAL-JANE VERASAMMY

**“Ahh! I’m so stressed!” “This is so stressful!” “Work stressing meh!” We may be all too familiar with such phrases. But what is stress really, and how does it affect us?**

When we make such comments, what we’re really referring to is a situation, event or person that puts pressure on us, or our reaction to being placed under such pressure.

April is Stress Awareness Month and this year the theme is “Community.” A community is more than just a group of people. It’s about having a sense of belonging and connection to others, and feeling supported and accepted by them. In many instances this community may be the workplace.

### Recognising stress

A useful analogy to explain stress is that

of a bridge. When a bridge is carrying too much weight it may eventually collapse. However, before this happens it is possible to see early warning signs such as bowing, buckling or creaking. This same principle can be applied to humans and work stress. It is usually possible to identify early warning signs of excessive pressure that can lead to a mental health breakdown.

Some signs of a bowing and buckling bridge at work may be:

- \* More accidents at work
- \* Increased absenteeism (sick leave)
- \* Presenteeism (attending work when sick)
- \* Irritability or short-temperedness
- \* Indecisiveness and poor judgment
- \* Working late and not taking breaks
- \* Arguments and disputes with colleagues
- \* Feeling exhausted most of the time
- \* Showing negative changes in mood or mood fluctuations
- \* Headaches, nausea, aches and pains, sleep difficulties

### Stress and mental health

Note that stress is not a mental health problem, but it is closely linked to your mental health in two different ways.

One, stress can lead to mental health problems, or make existing problems worse.

For example, if you struggle to manage work stress, you might develop anxiety or depression. Two, mental health problems can lead to stress.

For instance, managing medication, keeping therapy appointments or treatment can become stressful.

To help reduce workplace stress the following are a few tips:

1. Talk to your line manager about your workload. Ask if things can be delegated or reprioritised to help you.

2. Make sure you are physically comfortable. Sitting in an uncomfortable chair or working in a hot room can make us feel more stressed.

3. Be clear on expectations. Not knowing what’s expected of us can make us feel anxious or confused. Clarify expectations and deadlines.

4. Take breaks. Get out for a walk at lunchtime, have a cup of tea, and/or remember to stretch to reduce muscle tension.

5. Take your vacation. Book-in annual leave and make sure you use your leave allowance, or make the most of your contract break. We all need regular breaks from work to help us feel refreshed.

### Staying on top of stress

Indeed, life is stressful, but learning how to manage stress can be helpful for our wellbeing.

While we may not be able to eliminate all the stressors in our lives, there are a few things we can do to help reduce the impact of stress.

1. Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Make time for things that you enjoy and reward yourself for your small achievements.

2. Try to find time to relax. This can be hard if you feel you can’t escape a situation that is stressing you, but even a short walk in nature can help.

3. Look after your health. While this may be hard to do when stressed, try to get adequate sleep, eat on time and exercise as this helps us to cope better with stress.

4. Seek a mental health professional. Your therapist can help you identify stressors, warning signs and teach you emotion-focused and problem-solving techniques to cope with stress.