



Professional Quality Of Life - Tools for better work-related well-being

“Tuning Out” and “Tuning In”

The human brain is designed to pay special attention to unpleasant parts of our environment. This is because these unpleasant sensations are often warnings of danger and we need to pay attention to stay safe. Of course, there are many unpleasant sensations in our workplaces that are not actual danger signals, they are merely constant unpleasant irritations – irritating noises, bad smells, overly bright lights, a nagging pain in our back. These unpleasant aspects of our work environments add a great deal of stress to our day and unfortunately our brains are still drawn to give them extra attention. As a result, these small irritations can end up taking up much more space in our experience of the world than they deserve.

However, because of our special ability to think about our own thinking, it is possible to make ourselves more aware of these patterns and to change them. To do this, try the following steps:



Make a list of the unpleasant sensations in your work environment that add to your daily stress



There might be some things on that list that you can fix, in which case do so and cross them off the list



But there will be some things that you just cannot change, so start to pay attention when one of those irritating things is constantly drawing your attention and adding to your stress



When you notice this happening, intentionally work on focusing your attention away from the unpleasant sensation (tuning out) and towards something that is associated with good feelings (tuning in)



As you practice this you will find that you can take more and more control over some of the stressful aspects in your work environment



Note

Make sure that you never tune out actual warning signals like those from medical monitors.

Individual Practices:

Self-care practices as well as social support are essential elements in preventing the development of STS. It is therefore recommended to identify and engage in replenishing self-care strategies that promote physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing with intentionality. Once you begin to routinely practice healthy self-care habits, they become part of your overall prevention plan. Not only do self-care practices strengthen your ability to cope while in the moment, but they can also help your body remember how to bounce back to a healthier state.

By focusing on building your strengths and carrying out self-care activities, you contribute to your behavioral, cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional resilience. The following strategies are helpful with building resilience:

 Behavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Focus on the four core components of resilience: adequate sleep, good nutrition, regular physical activity, and active relaxation (e.g., yoga, meditation, relaxation exercises).Get enough sleep or at least rest. This is of great importance, as it affects all other aspects of your work—your physical strength, your decision making, your temperament.Take regular breaks or leave away from work to allow your mind to rest.Create individual ceremonies or rituals. For example, write down something that bothers you and then burn it as a symbolic goodbye. Focus your thoughts on letting go of stress or anger or on honoring the memory, depending on the situation. These rituals can also help you set a boundary between work and home, for example changing clothes as soon as you get home, having a shower, or putting on a specific song just before work and when you leave.Be open to learning new skills to enhance personal and professional wellbeing. Brainstorm these with colleagues to learn what others are doing to take care of themselves.Seek professional support if you recognize that you are feeling overwhelmed or your symptoms are interfering with your ability to work or do your daily activities.
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 Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create positive perceptions of the supportiveness of your work environment and compassion satisfaction, the perception that your work is effective and valued. This has been associated with lower levels STS.³ • Try to find things to look forward to even if they are small. • Challenge any negative internal dialogue and focus on changing negative automatic thoughts and beliefs to reflect a more positive outlook. • Pay attention to your body and mind. What are the signs that you are beginning to struggle with a patient or a patient's story?
 Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink enough fluids to stay hydrated throughout the day and eat the good quality food. • Ensure you take time to exercise and look after your physical health and wellbeing.
 Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to be alone so you can think, reflect, practice grounding, and rest. • Try to spend time in nature regularly. • Build self-awareness capacities (e.g., through mindfulness, reflection practices) • Practice your spiritual beliefs or reach out to a faith leader for support.
 Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek a mentor, supervisor, or experienced healthcare colleague who understands the norms and expectations of your work and may assist in identifying strategies that will help you cope. • Nurture positive personal and professional relationships and develop social support. Make time to communicate and spend time with friends and family. • Practice self-compassion. • Know what STS is and how to recognize symptoms in yourself. • Avoid avoidance. Ignoring or suppressing your feelings/symptoms only works in the short term. This can be necessary sometimes: If you need to put your feelings away to get through the day, do it. But make sure to create space for yourself to revisit your reactions and to deal with them regularly. If you ignore or suppress these feelings for too long, they will build up and overwhelm your capacity to cope.