

Relax or learn? Coping with stress at work

September 28 2017, by Greta Guest



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Work stress can lead to a whole host of problems for employees and organizations. While our own intuition and some studies suggest the value of relaxation techniques such as meditation or exercise, there's another alternative that could work even better.

University of Michigan researchers found that doing more on-the-job learning led to less counterproductive behavior in reaction to stress than

relaxation.

"When jobs are consistently stressful, managers may feel that they are rather constrained in trying to reduce transgressions in the workplace," said David Mayer, an associate professor of management and organizations at the Ross School of Business.

Workplace deviance refers to [employee](#) behavior such as taking company property, acting rudely, or discussing confidential information inappropriately that threatens the well-being of the organization.

In two studies with U.S. employees working in a variety of industries such as finance, healthcare and education, Mayer and his co-authors Chen Zhang and Eun Bit Hwang, both doctoral students, found that learning buffered the [work stress](#), while relaxation did not.

"When it comes to addressing negative emotions and actions in stressful work environments, building positive resources by learning something new at work could be more useful than relaxing," Zhang said. "When an individual comes out of relaxation activities at work and realizes the [stressful situation](#) hasn't changed, it may generate frustration and reverse the benefits of [relaxation](#)."

Relaxation is useful in helping employees reduce fatigue or to calm the mind. But when it comes to applying it to the workplace deviance issues, managers and employees may not find it useful.

"Managers may want to offer opportunities for employees to learn new things in their work. Similarly, employees who wish to prevent their own conduct from falling prey to stressful factors can also seek ways to learn something new in their everyday [work](#)," said Zhang.

Although our body may tell us to rest when under stress, this research

suggests that doing something positive such as learning may overcome some of the perils of stress.

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Relax or learn? Coping with stress at work (2017, September 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-coping-stress.html>

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