Mark sat in his car, his right hand tight on the steering wheel, white knuckles showing prominently. “Is this traffic ever going to move,” he said to himself. “Every day, the same thing.” Mark was on his way to the hospital to see his father, who was struggling with lung cancer. When he asked his boss if he could leave a little early to get to the hospital, he got a cold “okay,” meaning, Mark thought, that he had better not ask again. Recently separated from his wife, Mark was tired from several sleepless nights. “I don’t know how much longer I can live like this,” he thought, as he edged the car forward a few more inches.

The sources of stress seem to be all around us. For Mark, it was the multiple stressors of an ill father, traffic congestion, an unsympathetic boss, and a pending divorce. Sometimes we can’t avoid stress. But sometimes the source of stress may be from within. Was Mark’s boss really unsympathetic, or was he just busy?

Problems that cause stress can be from several distinct aspects of life. For example:

- Environment – traffic, noise, inefficient office space
- Social – job, family, relationships
- Physical – chronic pain, insomnia
- Mental – interpreting what we see and hear negatively

How much stress a person has and how he or she deals with it is different for everybody. However, experts tend to recognize certain categories of stress that are likely to affect most people.

Common stressors have been identified as:

- Family problems
- Mental illness
- Elder care issues
- Retirement
- Marriage
- Pregnancy
- Child care issues

“How much stress a person has and how he or she deals with it is different for everybody.”
Stress can be caused by a traumatic accident, death, emergency situation, or a serious illness. Our daily lives at work and at home can also cause stress. We take on many roles: spouse, parent, caregiver, friend, and worker. All of these can lead to stressful situations. It is important to learn ways to cope with the stress that is inevitable. Your health depends on it.

Recognize the sources of your stress

The first step is to recognize the sources of your stress. Think about the example at the beginning of this document. If Mark had been in the same traffic congestion several times, then he could have expected it. He might have brought along some of his favorite music CDs, worked on positive self-talk, or chatted with a friend on his hands-free cell phone. The slow traffic, with a different attitude, might have been an opportunity to relax.

What are the sources of your stress? Do any of your current experiences match the categories below?

- Significant life adjustments: Critical life changes, both pleasant and unpleasant.
- Daily routines: Daily routines such as fighting traffic or meeting deadlines zap your energy. You become accustomed to your daily activities and overlook their cumulative effect on you.
- Unrealistic self-expectations: While positive self-expectations motivate you to realize your goals, unrealistic expectations may set you up for failure.
- Interpersonal relationships: Personal and professional relationships require effort to maintain. Poor communication leads to conflicts that may turn into open hostility.

“It is important to learn ways to cope with the stress that is inevitable.”
Is work a major stress point for you?

Let’s face it. They call it work for a reason. You probably don’t expect work to be as relaxing as watching a movie with a bowl of popcorn in your lap. Most jobs come with a certain amount of pressure to get things done quickly and get them done right.

A Yale University survey found that 29 percent of those surveyed considered work to be “quite a bit” or “extremely” stressful.

Not only is work considered stressful, many people believe it is getting worse. A Princeton survey found that three-fourths of the workers they surveyed said on-the-job stress is worse than a generation ago.

One government definition of on-the-job stress stated: “Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury.”

While some stress is likely to be present at your worksite, there are ways to cope. One Defense Department source provided the following problem-solving strategy for reducing stress:

Take action over stressors that you can control (your own habits, behavior, environment, and relationships) by using the problem-solving process:

- **Step 1:** Define the problem.
- **Step 2:** Set a goal (for example, what you would like to see happen).
- **Step 3:** Brainstorm possible solutions.
- **Step 4:** Evaluate the pros and cons of various possible solutions.
- **Step 5:** Choose the best solution (weigh the pros and cons).
- **Step 6:** Make a plan to implement the solution and try it.
- **Step 7:** Assess how well it went.
- **Step 8:** If the first solution doesn’t work, try another.

Whether your pressures are at home or at work, you should learn coping strategies to help reduce stress to healthy levels.

“Not only is work considered stressful, many people believe it is getting worse.”