

## Reducing Workplace Stress

Relaxing at work may sound like an oxymoron, but research shows you'll be healthier in the long run if you avoid letting your job stress you out.

Moreover, "practicing relaxation techniques can improve your ability to think clearly," says Warren L. Huberman, Ph.D., a New York psychologist. "When you're relaxed, the quality of your work will improve."

You can use the following techniques throughout your workday to manage your stress, feel better and get more done.

### **Breathe deeply**

Taking a few deep breaths is one of the most powerful techniques you can use to quickly lower your blood pressure and slow your pulse.

"Pick a number, say 25, and count backward on each breath until you get to one," suggests Dr. Huberman. Or teach yourself to relax on cue by picking a word such as "calm." Slow your breathing slightly while repeating the word.

"If you practice relaxation while repeating a word such as 'calm,' the word itself eventually becomes a cue to relax," says Dr. Huberman.

Another technique: While concentrating on your breathing, close your eyes and picture yourself bathed in a blue light," says David Edelberg, M.D., co-founder of American WholeHealth, a medical practice in Chicago that combines conventional and alternative medicine. "And to get even better at meditating when there's a lot of activity going on around you, listen to a guided meditation in your spare time."

### **Personalize your workspace**

Posting photos of loved ones, relaxing places, a vacation you've been on or destinations you want to go to also can provide a much-needed respite from stressful situations.

"It's easy to get lost in whatever is going on when you're at your desk. Looking at a pleasant picture temporarily takes you someplace else," says Dr. Huberman.

Fragrant fresh-cut flowers also can help you reduce stress, as can a memento from your childhood.

### **Go for a walk**

To physically break the stress cycle, "walk around the block or to a different part of the building," says Dr. Huberman. "People often make jokes about feeling like they're chained to their desks -- but very often, they're not."

If you can't leave your desk for long, you can at least visit the bathroom. "The bathroom is one of the few places where nobody will follow you, where you can actually get a few minutes to yourself," says Dr. Huberman.

### **Keep a stress journal**

Write in your journal for two weeks. Include what is causing your stress, the day of the week and time of the day it occurred and how you handled it. At the end of the two weeks, read your journal to determine if there's a pattern. Is your stress related to the type of work you're doing? Is the job too complicated? Do you need more training? Is your workload too much? Is the work boring with not enough challenge? Or does your stress come from people: managers, co-workers or complaining customers?

### **Listen**

Sometimes people are so anxious to tell their side of a problem that they forget to listen. Ask your co-workers their perspective of the situation, then listen.

### **Take a vacation day**

You don't function well at work when you're overly stressed, so take a day off to have some fun. This will recharge your batteries and keep things in perspective.

### **Take time to reflect**

Besides these short-term stress-reducing techniques, investigating the causes of your stress also can help. "It's vital to explore your life and the sources of your stress," says Dr. Edelberg.



Ask yourself: Am I doing with my life what I like? Are the decisions I've made in my life genuine, or am I living somebody else's expectations? What steps could I take to improve my life?

"You can be having the time of your life in a stressful job if it's genuinely what you want to do," says Dr. Edelberg. "The job doesn't affect your health adversely because you've made the decision and you have control. You start running into problems with stress-related issues when you relinquish control."

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## Dealing With Your Insurance Company: How to Protect Yourself



Insurance companies go out of the way to advertise how fast, neighborly, generous, kind, understanding, patient, and friendly they are -- especially when they are trying to sell you one of their policies. It continues to be true for as long as you make your insurance premium payments on time without asking for anything in return. However, policyholders forced to present a large claim often learn there are limits to insurer congeniality.

Here are some survival tips that you may find useful in dealing with your insurer about a homeowners', health care, or commercial insurance policy.

### **Before You Buy**

Always take careful notes when you buy an insurance policy. Write down what the insurance agent tells you about the coverage you are buying. Save your notes in a file with your policy. Also save any promotional material you are given or shown when you buy the policy.

Insist on reading the completed application form yourself instead of allowing the agent to read it to you. Be certain that your answers are truthful, thorough, and complete. If they're not, it could come back to haunt you. The insurance company can rescind your policy entirely -- after you make a large claim -- if it finds some basis for asserting that you misrepresented a significant fact on the application.

Before you buy the policy, insist on seeing it. Make sure that you really understand key points -- things like deductibles, exclusions, and limitations.

### **When You Have a Claim**

Now is the time to get out all those papers you saved so carefully. Review your policy and notes before you speak with a company representative. Make sure you understand the complex coverage, exclusion, and limitations provisions to lessen the likelihood of saying something that the company could twist into a basis for denying the claim.

### **Gather Evidence**

Start gathering materials to help you prove your claim. Photograph your loss and keep records of it. For example, if you are making a claim based on fire and smoke damage to your business or residence, you should photograph the fire-damaged areas and items before they are repaired or discarded.

### **What Not to Do**

A policyholder should never do any of the following:

- exaggerate any aspect of a claim
- accept the insurance company's expert's evaluations of the losses without getting an independent expert's estimates
- submit to an "examination under oath" by the company without first obtaining legal advice, or
- sign an insurance company release or check without verifying that the amount is full and correct.

### **Keep a Log**

It's good to start a log concerning your claim. Write down the date, the time, and a summary of every telephone or written communication with company representatives. Note the name, title, and direct telephone number of every person with whom you have contact.

This is important because insurance companies often switch adjusters on claims, sometimes more than once. You'll need evidence of what was said or done when, and by whom, throughout the handling of the claim. Among other things, keeping such notes can make it more difficult for the insurer to blame any delay on you.

### **If a Dispute Arises**

A few legal rules are on your side when it comes to deciphering a policy. If a dispute over what should be covered goes to court, the coverage provisions will be construed broadly (in your favor), whereas the limitations and exclusions will be interpreted narrowly (in your favor). And because the company wrote the policy, any ambiguities in it will be interpreted in your favor and against the company. The goal of a court will be to honor your reasonable expectations.

# Joining an Investment Club



Investment clubs are groups that meet regularly to learn about investing, analyze investment options, and, in many cases, buy and sell investments as a unit. Though members certainly welcome profits, the real focus of investment clubs is education.

Particularly for novices, the club environment can provide the support and structure they need to get started in investing. And clubs can make the stock market accessible for those who can't afford to make a large initial investment.

More than 10,000 investment clubs exist across the country. How do you decide whether or not to join one of these groups, start your own club, or go it alone?

## How Investment Clubs Operate

Before you can decide if joining or starting an investment club is right for you, you have to know something about how they operate.

According to statistics from BetterInvesting (also known as the National Association of Investors Corporation [NAIC]), a Michigan-based nonprofit that provides information, education, tools, and support for member clubs and individuals, the average investment club has 11 members. A group of that size is big enough to spread the club duties around so the time commitment is manageable, yet small enough to allow all members to actively participate.

Clubs can meet as often as they like, but once a month is typical. Meetings usually last a couple of hours. A typical agenda includes a treasurer's report, a performance review of current holdings, the presentation of one or more new investment opportunities that meet the club's predetermined criteria, a buy-sell vote, and sometimes an educational component. There's usually a little time for socializing, too.

Some clubs buy and sell investments as a group. In others, members invest independently.

## Investment Clubs That Buy and Sell Together

Traditional investment clubs buy and sell investments -- stocks, mutual funds, real estate investment trusts, and so on -- as a group. Members of clubs that invest in a single portfolio often form a legal partnership or a limited liability company (LLC) or partnership (LLP). Any tax liability that is generated by club activities is passed through to the club's individual members.

Clubs that invest together set an amount for members to contribute to the investment pool each month. According to BetterInvesting statistics, the average club member invests \$84 per month, though the required amount varies from group to group and may be much lower. In addition, each member may be required to pay a nominal fee for club and individual dues.

Each club sets its own guidelines for when to buy and sell. That could mean relying on a stock's P/E (price-to-earnings) ratio or recommendations from outside experts, or employing some other approach.

## Self-Directed Investment Clubs

Self-directed investment clubs meet regularly to do many of the same things traditional clubs do -- learn about investing, discuss specific investment opportunities, and develop a network with similar interests and goals. But the members of these groups do not contribute to a single portfolio; each member invests independently.

## Are You a Candidate for Investment Club Membership?

You may find great benefits in joining an investment club if:

- you're interested in investing but just can't seem to get started, or you can't stay on track
- you want to invest in the market but you don't have enough money to build a diverse portfolio of individual stocks on your own
- you have enough free time to be actively involved (reading publications, researching investment options, and attending meetings could require five hours or more per month; if you're a club officer, plan on devoting significantly more time), and
- you enjoy the idea of investing in a social setting, and you would not have a problem seeing your money put into an investment you voted against.

If you are not able to make a long-term commitment or you don't have the time to make a meaningful contribution, then membership in an investment club isn't right for you.

## Finding and Choosing an Investment Club

Before you can join a club, you need to find one that is accepting new members. This can be a bigger challenge than you might expect. One reason is that SEC (Securities & Exchange Commission) rules effectively prohibit clubs from publicly soliciting for new members, making them difficult to learn about.

Also, most investment clubs are close-knit groups, made up of people with a common connection -- coworkers, members of the same church, old college friends, or neighbors, for example. Many clubs are not open to new members who do not share the same connection.

Despite these challenges, there are ways to improve your chances of finding a club to join.

**Visit a model club meeting.** Check the BetterInvesting website, at [www.betterinvesting.org](http://www.betterinvesting.org), to learn about "model clubs" that meet regularly across the country. The meetings, which are sponsored by local BetterInvesting chapters, are open to the public, allowing prospective members to experience a typical club meeting. You may be able to get information about local clubs while you're there. Or, you might meet others who would be interested in starting a club with you. While at the BetterInvesting site, you also can click the Local Chapters tab to get contact and event information.

**Search the Web.** Do an online search for "investment clubs in or near [your town or city]." Or check online directories, like the one offered by Yahoo. Many investment clubs have their own website.

Before you begin your hunt for a club, answer these questions:

- Do I want to meet in person or online? (Some clubs communicate strictly via computer.)
- Do I want to contribute money and invest as a group, or invest on my own?
- What types of investments do I want to learn about and buy? (Many groups focus on a particular type of investment -- stocks, mutual funds, bonds, or real estate, for example.)
- Do I have any restrictions regarding the kinds of companies I'm willing to invest in? For example, if you would have a problem investing in a company whose practices were not socially responsible or eco-friendly, you should not join a club that doesn't share your philosophy.

Don't join any club until you have attended at least a couple of meetings and are sure you are compatible. If one club isn't a fit, keep looking.

### **Starting an Investment Club**

If you can't find a club to join, you can always form your own -- you only need a handful of dedicated members to make it work. But don't underestimate the amount of time and effort it takes to launch a new club. Before you can make your first investment, you'll need to take care of things like writing the by-laws and mission statement, creating a legal partnership or LLC, and setting up the accounting software.

If you're willing to make the commitment, here are some resources to help you get your club off the ground:

- [www.BetterInvesting.org](http://www.BetterInvesting.org). Click the Clubs tab, then click "Learn More," then click "Start a Club." From here you can download information or watch a video about starting your own club.
- [www.bivio.com](http://www.bivio.com). This website walks you through the steps of starting a new club, and provides samples, forms, and tools along the way.
- [www.iClub.com](http://www.iClub.com). At this site led by Doug Gerlach, author of *Investment Clubs for Dummies*, you can access articles, a newsletter, a forum, tools, and support.

If you do the research and make a good choice, starting your own investment club or joining an existing club can provide you with both challenges and personal rewards.

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