

Dear Dr. Mazie,

**My job is really stressing me out. I once heard you speak at a chapter meeting on the topic of stress in the right of way profession. While I took notes, I wasn't able to write down all the information quickly enough. Would you mind giving a review?**



- Donnie in Pennsylvania

I'm sorry to hear of your high stress level. I feel your pain, as does anyone who is serious about doing a good job as a right of way professional. I am pleased that you remembered my chapter presentation. Speaking and teaching on the stress response and how to deal with it is one of my favorite topics.

Much like other industries, right of way workload demands can create a very pressurized, stressful environment. This stress can make you feel overwhelmed and ultimately lead to angry outbursts and being hypersensitive, fearful and easily fatigued.

The fact is, stress is both a physical and a psychological phenomenon that our society is experiencing in epidemic proportions. Our lives have become more demanding as the workplace expects more work in less time, and family time often involves a fever pitch of activities. Simply put, we are all doing way too much, and right of way professionals are not exempt from this dilemma. For both working adults and their children, the end result is an abundance of stress-related symptoms that effect job and school performance, relationships and home life.

To help alleviate stress, it helps to understand how it affects your attitude, behavior and thinking. The stress response triggers over 1,000 changes in your body, changes that are meant to help you for the short haul of a stressful situation, but can bring about debilitating and lasting negative effects on your body and emotional health when it becomes unrelenting and invades your life. Do you often feel keyed-up, irritable or have trouble sleeping?

Do you have headaches, stomach aches or persistent pain in your neck or lower back? Do you worry about work when you are at home and worry about home and relationships when you are at work? These are some of the tell-tale signs of stress.

How many of the physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms listed below can you identify as a problem for you? The more you answer yes, the higher your stress level.

- High blood pressure
- Chronic pain
- Frequent colds, viruses
- Digestive upsets
- Recurring headaches
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco and/or caffeine
- Overeating or no appetite
- Crying spells
- Mood swings
- Anxiety or tension
- Procrastination
- Irritability, angry outbursts
- Fatigue/lack of stamina
- Perfectionism or inflexibility
- Poor memory or concentration
- Circular thinking or brooding
- Always rushing or can't relax
- Lack of creativity
- Emptiness or boredom
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Decreased sex drive
- Loneliness, isolation, withdrawal

Obviously, these symptoms can be caused by other problems, including depression, diabetes, anxiety and hormonal problems (both in men and women). But if you can identify with several of these as ongoing

and disruptive in your life, you may need to visit with a physician or counselor for a professional evaluation.

I've often commented that, with all its unpredictable ups and downs, this industry reminds me a bit of a roller coaster. Coping with the increasing work demands, along with political and environmental factors affecting funding and public opinion, will continue to add stress to our lives. Unrelieved stress can be seen by a decline in employee productivity and absenteeism at school. This can quickly lead to a chaotic family life, and if basic personal needs are not being met at home, divorces and abuses of all types can follow.

It is no wonder that the American Medical Association estimates that up to 70 percent of all patients seen by family physicians come with symptoms directly related to unrelieved stress (although treatment will usually focus on symptoms like muscle pain, headaches and insomnia).

It isn't so much about whether or not we have stress, but rather how we identify and cope with it so that we can have a balanced work and home life. Since this is such an important topic, I will follow up in the next issue with a comprehensive checklist, along with some tips to decrease your stress level.

*A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.*