How to survive and thrive during change at work

Change is a constant in life—and in work. At the office, that often means reorganization. In a recent Fidelity Investments survey, about one-third of people said they had gone through a “reorg” at work within the previous year.* That means you can expect to be reshuffled about every three years. Does that sound about right to you?

For most people, a reorg means stress—57% of those who experienced a reorg in the past year said they had a lot of job stress, 15 percentage points higher than those who did not go through that kind of upheaval.* This is true regardless of age, gender, education, income level, or marital status.

The symptoms of stress are well known and can range from headaches and anxiety to fatigue and lack of motivation or focus.

There are many ways to try to combat stress—some big, some small. But try as you might, navigating change will never be all sunshine and roses.

“Expect some negative feelings and be okay with them,” advises Tamara Sims, director of behavioral science for Fidelity Investments. “Managing your expectations about how you feel and giving yourself permission to feel stressed or not happy all the time is actually good for well-being in the long run.”

Remember, reorganizations by design are going to influence your relationships and how you do your job at work. Understanding how to manage the stress of change at work can help you survive—and thrive—in your new work environment.
Take control where you can

It’s easy to become so consumed with work that you neglect to take care of yourself, whether that means getting up from your desk to stretch your legs, going for a walk, or eating healthy snacks. People who have experienced a reorg are significantly more likely to be sedentary. They are also slightly less likely to eat a healthy diet and get a flu shot.

It may be difficult to focus on yourself when you want to focus on your new situation at work. So try to take care of yourself in small ways:

• Exercise can be a great stress reliever, but you may not feel you have time for it when your job is especially demanding. So try carving out time to do something active and productive at the same time. “Get up from your desk and invite a colleague to a walk-and-talk meeting,” suggests Kate Van Hulzen, senior vice president, Fidelity Workplace Consulting. “It’s a great way to get to know colleagues or brainstorm new ideas while doing something good for your health. If you’re a manager, set a good example for others. If you’re always chained to your desk, your team will feel pressure to do the same—and that’s not healthy for anyone.”

• Be mindful of your choices. It’s almost too easy to stop for takeout on the way home from work, or to skip getting that flu shot because you just can’t find the time. Taking a minute to pause and be aware of the choices you make at stressful times can help you take better care of yourself.

• Learn something new. “Invest in yourself by learning new skills that will help you improve your performance in your current job or position you for the next one,” says Van Hulzen. “Making yourself more marketable is a great confidence booster and stress reducer.”

• Whenever work stresses you out, it can help you feel more in control if you think about exactly what it is that is so stressful. It could be too many demands on you with too little time to get the job done, or a new schedule that creates a challenge for you to take care of home responsibilities. Or perhaps it’s your colleagues at work who you don’t know as well. In any case, figure out what is most difficult and make a list. Tackle one thing at a time—and consider doing this with others. Each small step gives you a sense of accomplishment.

• Play music or hang out with others during a break. Sometimes it’s alone time that you need, sometimes it’s being social. Listen to what you need.
Be cool, calm, collected

People who are emotionally resilient are less likely to be highly stressed at work—and this is especially true after a reorganization. Resilient people tend to be optimistic and calm and have a sense of purpose in their life. If these qualities don’t come naturally to you, you may be able to nurture them or seek out people and places where it’s easier to do:

• Remind yourself of what matters most to you. Practice gratitude for all the good stuff.

• Breathe. Yes, it can be that simple. Inhale and exhale slowly, focusing on your breath. If you have more time, consider trying mindfulness meditation.

• Lower your standards! Yes, you’ll make mistakes. You’ll miss deadlines. Everyone does. If you expect perfection, you will never be satisfied—and will always be stressed. So give yourself a break.

• Avoid negativity. We all know those people who brood and complain. That can be contagious, so limit how much time you spend swimming in other people’s stress.

• Nurture your interests outside of work—whether that means spending time with family or friends, or pursuing a passion. Having goals and interests away from the office can give you fulfillment when work is stressful.
Reach out to others

Maintaining relationships at work can be the difference between stress you can manage and stress that leaves you feeling overwhelmed. Strong social ties at the office can take the edge off stressful times—and give you something to look forward to on Monday mornings.

- Consider meeting with others in your work group and discussing ways to design your jobs to reduce what you find most stressful.
- Include your boss in the conversation. Sometimes finding a way to reduce stress involves communicating with others about what you find challenging and then developing ways your new team can work better together.
- Talk to someone who’s been around the block. As people get older, they focus more keenly on what is important in life, like their personal relationships. Older adults also feel more mixed emotions; that is, experiencing the good with the bad, which leads to better health in the long run.
- If you find work and life becoming unbalanced, bring your family into the conversation. Talk to them about what’s going on, and enlist their help to bring work and life back into balance.

When to seek help

Remember, a reorganization is real—it’s not all in your head. Often, you’re managing new relationships, new job demands, changes in your work schedule, and job insecurity. But if stress is impacting your health or relationships, or you’ve tried to tamp it down without success, consider seeing your doctor, or contact your Employee Assistance Program for help.

Unless otherwise noted, all data is from the Fidelity Investments Total Well-Being Research online survey of 9,315 active Fidelity 401(k) and 403(b) participants from across the United States. The survey was conducted by Greenwald and Associates, an independent third-party research firm, on behalf of Fidelity in September 2017.