Thriving from 9 to 5

5 surprising ways you can survive—and thrive—in your job
Verla Wallace

During my early years as a journalist, I was given the opportunity to work as a general assignment reporter for NBC's powerful 50,000-watt radio station in Chicago. The job catapulted me into broadcasting's big leagues, and I was determined to work hard, think smart, and wow everybody with my excellent reporting skills.

One of my first assignments was a "breaking" news story of a pleasure boat sinking in a storm on Lake Michigan. Several passengers drowned. The Coast Guard dramatically rescued the rest. I raced to the scene where a Coast Guard cutter was bringing survivors ashore, interviewed anyone who would talk to me, then hurried back to the station to get the story on the air as quickly as possible.

My editor, a crusty fellow with more than 20 years at NBC, had a reputation for making the lives of on-air staffers as miserable as possible—especially the women. Humiliation and intimidation were his weapons of choice.

As I scrambled to finish my report for the fast-approaching newscast, he seized on the fact I'd failed—in my rush to file the story—to get the Coast Guard spokesman's first name. It was a careless error on my part, but not one that merited what happened next.

The editor stood in the middle of the newsroom in front of about a dozen people and began to shout insults at me in the ugliest display of meanness I'd ever experienced. I stood facing him like a deer caught in the headlights and silently prayed, *Dear God, don't let me cry*. Finally, he turned and stalked out of the newsroom.

I was so stunned, I started to shake. As I walked into a side office to privately regain my composure, I thought, with deep resignation, *This is just part of the job. Guess I'll have to pray and "hang in there" until this passes*.

Now, with the hindsight of 35 years in the marketplace, I've learned no one has a "perfect" job. But I've also discovered—the hard way—that there are alternate ways to handle the inevitable workplace conflicts or stresses we all encounter. The surprising news is that the five problem-solving tips below don't depend on anyone's cooperation but your own!

1. Identify the Real Problem: Is It You?

Much as I hate to admit it, some job stress is self-inflicted. My first memory of this was a situation that began quite innocently.

I clipped out a business-related magazine article to give to my boss. I'd run across the article the night before while thumbing through a magazine for relaxation. He was delighted and urged me to continue to pass along anything I thought might be useful. His praise felt so good, I started

scanning magazines I never would have read, searching for more articles. They were such a hit, he decided the practice should be formalized into a daily briefing book distributed to senior staff.

What started as a casual gesture became a major project on top of my regular duties. No one offered to help, and I didn't ask for any. I relished the affirmation and couldn't bear the thought of handing it off to someone else. That didn't stop me, however, from harboring anger and resentment over the added work.

It wasn't until much later that I realized the problem wasn't the workload. The problem was me—my need for affirmation, my penchant for people pleasing, my reluctance to ask for help. When you clarify exactly what the issue is behind your workplace stress, it can lessen your sense of victimization, even if the revelation isn't particularly welcome.

SELF CHECK: What is the main source of my work-related stress? How am I contributing to the problem?

2. Take Charge of Your Attitude

How many times have you sat in the employee lunchroom with coworkers when a person starts to complain about a change in the office hours, the vacation schedule, or the telephone rotation? Within five minutes, everyone sitting around the table feels obliged to chime in with their own litany of job gripes. Complaining is contagious. It's hard not to become a carrier.

Complaining gives the appearance of offering relief—a chance to vent. But rehashing a stressful situation in a setting that offers no opportunity for correcting the problem takes emotional energy and doesn't change the problem. In fact, it can make a problem seem worse than it is.

The Bible says, in essence, to save your breath. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 12:36 that someday we'll have to answer for every careless word we've ever spoken. So vow instead to be a carrier of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). If you have a suggested solution, go to the person with the power to execute the solution, and make your case. Relish being part of the solution, not part of the problem.

SELF CHECK: Who is the appropriate person with whom to discuss this? Is there another way I can look at this situation? What can I do to help eliminate this stress rather than rehash it?

3. Sort Out What Can and Can't Change

If you're a person who loves clear instructions and an even flow of work, then working in an advertising agency or a sales office full of hard-charging free spirits is definitely migraine material. Since it's doubtful that your environment's going to change, any change must take place in you.

I was totally clueless about this concept of "job fit" until as a young adult, I temped for three months in an office where the median age of the employees was 55 and the office mantra was, "We've always done it this way."

My boss held a brainstorming session to discuss ways to "fast track" a particular project. I'm a big-picture idea person and joyfully showered him with suggestions. He didn't like any of them. In fact, he thought I was a little too innovative for my own good.

I eventually learned he really didn't want to improve things or use this project as an opportunity to implement permanent change. That might expose the reality that his time-honored procedures had been ineffectual all along. Rather, he chose a temporary maneuver to get us through the project, after which things could return to "normal."

I had two choices—neither of which I liked. I could stay—and stuff down all the gifts and talents God wrote on my DNA so I wouldn't be seen as a troublemaker. Or I could leave and find a more compatible job. We always have choices. The question is whether we like the choices we're given. I didn't want to leave; I wasn't the problem. The reality, however, was that they weren't going to change.

SELF CHECK: What's within my power to change about my situation? If nothing changes, can I stay and still be true to myself, as God created me? If I should leave, what needs to happen for me to be prepared?

4. Detach from the Problem

I once worked for a large corporation in a job that required me to prepare month-end reports with input from other people. Every month, despite clearly defined deadlines, the information came to me at the last minute. I always ended up staying late on Friday night to complete the report while everyone else was off enjoying their weekend. I was certain my colleagues' failure to meet the deadline was a form of thoughtlessness toward me and carelessness toward their job. It felt personal.

One day a coworker said to me in frustration, "You know, the reason this information is always late is because the cycle for capturing this data is totally out of sync with the deadline for the report. Is there any reason why the report can't be due the 5th of the month instead of the 1st? Then, meeting your deadline would be no problem."

It turned out my boss didn't care if it was the 5th or even the 10th of the month, as long as it came in on time every 30 days. I sheepishly abandoned my paranoia and feelings of rejection. It wasn't personal after all.

Is your reaction to a stressful situation disproportionate to the circumstances? Maybe it's a sign something else is going on. In this particular situation, I realized my job responsibilities had nearly doubled over the last 18 months. It wasn't just the monthly reports—it felt as though my whole job had run amok! I couldn't see the real problem until I was forced to step back and look at the situation as a detached observer.

SELF CHECK: If I stepped outside myself and observed this situation, would I see it differently? What mental "prompts" can I give myself to stop taking problems too personally?

5. Live in the Present

Stress is more manageable if it doesn't also carry the weight of all past and future problems that bear any resemblance to it: "My boss always waits until the last minute to do these mailings." "My team leader never asks my opinion."

Such "kitchen sink" thinking—piling onto the present problem "everything but the kitchen sink"—sabotages solutions by sheer pound weight. Jesus reminded us in Matthew 6:34 to live in the present because "Each day has enough trouble of its own." The current moment may be tough. But soon it will pass and, chances are, a better moment will take its place.

SELF CHECK: Has "piling on" problems ever solved anything? Whom can I ask to hold me accountable for changing this behavior pattern? Am I willing to deal with my present situation without attaching baggage to it?

The Bottom Line

If you're waiting for your job to behave, expect a long wait. We live in a fallen world. Instead, over and over I remind myself, *How much of this will matter in 5, 10, or 100 years?* In the midst of the ups and downs of work, if our life is anchored to the One who doesn't move—Christ, the solid Rock—then we can survive … and even thrive. He promised.

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Thought Provokers

—Are you waiting for your job to "behave" or change? How? How is it true that no one has the "perfect" job?

—Which of the author's "Self Checks" was most helpful to you and why? How can making personal changes solve many work- and ministry-related problems?