

Ombuds Office Columbia University

Dealing with Really Stressful or Unstable Workplace Situations

THE SHORT TERM: The Current Workplace

- Assert control over the aspects of your job you can control.
- Make plans to support reasonable productivity: identify ways to manage your time to balance various aspects of your responsibilities, define tasks in "bite-size" portions and accomplish something each day, keep a list of your accomplishments, reward yourself for meeting modest goals.
- Consider all possible options for improving the day-to-day work situation: enhance communication, build bridges, negotiate priorities in duties, explore possible changes to job description or reporting relationships
- Explore whatever complaint channels or grievance procedures may be available
- Consider time off, vacation days, a "cooling off period" or stress-relief holiday

THE LONG TERM: Career Planning

- Consider a wait-and-see approach to aspects of the work situation you cannot control. A focus on your values and future objectives can help to put present difficulties into perspective.
- Begin to plan for possible alternatives (even if you will not have to implement your back-up plans): revise your resume, line up positive references, check job postings, attend conferences, explore training programs, and network.
- Engage in self-exploration: what are your strengths and weaknesses? What parts of present and past jobs did you like most and least? What kinds of work are you best suited for? Where would you like to be 5 or 10 years from now? What steps might you take to achieve these long-term goals?
- Consider other aspects of your work-life balance: what activities or pastimes would you like to have more time for? What new challenges would you like to take on? What is the "silver lining" of change for you?
- Consider working with a career coach or joining a career-counseling program.

THE PERSONAL: Taking Care of Yourself

- When people are under stress, or feeling uncertain, or impacted by changes beyond their control, they need lots of support.
- Spend quality time with your family, phone an old friend who lives far away, arrange pleasant outings with people who care about you, ask for support, be open to receiving caring gestures from others.
- Consider seeing a psychotherapist, or talking confidentially with a clergy person.
- The pleasure principle: Get a massage, eat your favorite foods, take a weekend trip to a beautiful place, get some exercise you enjoy.
- There's more to life than your job: start a new hobby, register for a film series or go to a free concert, plant a garden or a window box, take a kid to the zoo, sign up for a community service project, plan a birthday party for a good friend, paint your bedroom a lovely color, adopt a pet, donate blood, sign up for a yoga class, plan a vacation trip, learn to cook ethnic food.
- Remember you are a person with many talents and strengths and much to give.