

Distress at DES

Your friend Diane works at the Department of Economic Security (DES) as a child protective service worker. You have known Diane personally and professionally for a number of years, and she has asked you to advise her on managing stress. She told you that she admires the way in which you seem to handle stress in your own job at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and she wants advice and counsel for reducing stress where possible and coping with the rest.

Because you are such a good friend, you have decided to set aside an afternoon to talk to Diane. You begin by asking her to simply talk about the sources of stress in her life. She tells you the following:

"First let me say, I love my job. I really think I am making a difference in the lives of children and their families. It's not that it isn't frustrating—it is. Sometimes the system just won't let me do what I think is best. I do care about my work and want to stay in the job, but I guess the stress is getting to me. I can't figure out what the problem is. After all, I've been on the job for 3 years. But I feel terrible, I can't sleep, I'm anxious, my stomach hurts, and my blood pressure is up. I even have this annoying rash that seems to appear on my neck when things get tense."

"I have a new supervisor. She's part of what is making me crazy. According to my training and what I have been taught here, I am a social worker. I am supposed to help families and kids the best I can. By law, my first priority is preserving families, which means that sometimes I have to make some pretty tough judgments between protecting the kids and keeping the family intact. This new supervisor says we're just supposed to investigate, not do social work. As she puts it, 'we don't have time to babysit or be neighborhood do-gooders.' This, she says, will free us up to increase our workload by a third."

"My husband has been so supportive. But he has gone back to school, you know. That means I have to be at the day care at exactly 6 o'clock every day of the week. Morgan, our 4-year-old, can't seem to shake the ear infections. The doctor has suggested surgery. I don't know when we're supposed to fit that in, but I guess we have to get it done."

"But back to the job, I am in the car half the day, going from case to case. I can't even tell you how often I have incomplete information. Sometimes it's a wrong address, but the bigger problem is that I just don't know what I'm walking into. We don't routinely share information with the police. Sometimes I walk into dangerous situations; sometimes it's just a nuisance call from a crazy neighbor. But I can't predict. Three weeks ago, an angry father threatened me. It normally wouldn't have bothered me so much, but I just have felt vulnerable lately.

"When I get back to my office, I have a mountain of paperwork, and of course the phone rings constantly. I used to try to have lunch sometimes with some of the other workers—talk about cases and let off some steam—but I have felt too pressured to do that in the last several months. I've got to catch up on the paperwork!

"So, I've been doing this job for a while. Why am I feeling so stressed all of a sudden? What's wrong with me? What should I do?"

Respond to the following questions.

1. What will you say to Diane? Are there additional questions you would like to ask?
2. What advice will you give her? What do you think are some of the sources of her stress? How will you work with her to develop strategies for reducing her stress?
3. What are your recommendations for coping with the stress that Diane is experiencing? What will you caution her not to do?
4. What actions have you taken in the past that have helped you to cope successfully with stressful circumstances? Could any of these approaches be useful to Diane?