

Stress and burnout in the workplace



We all know that no job or workplace is stress-free. It's part of working life, and there are pressures in every job. It's not always a bad thing.

“ There is a sweet spot in the way we perceive the level of challenge we're undergoing at work. When the challenge is matched by an equal balance of resources to manage those job challenges, this can see us engaged and motivated in our jobs.”

David Miller, Head of Consulting & Growth, Communicorp

The right amount of stress can motivate us to work to the best of our abilities, contributing to job satisfaction. Having a job you enjoy can greatly benefit your mental health by giving you a sense of purpose, fostering connections with others, and, most importantly, providing financial stability.

Unfortunately though, we've all probably experienced times when the work can get too stressful. Extended working hours, overwhelming workloads, tight deadlines, strained relationships with colleagues, conflicts, instances of bullying or sexual harassment, insufficient support from teammates, and feeling undervalued for your efforts are all frequent sources of stress in the workplace. Sometimes, this stress can be overwhelming.

This stress not only affects the health and wellbeing of the person, but it can also have a huge impact on the productivity of an organisation.

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In fact, according to the Victoria Government's Better Health service, work-related stress is the second most common compensated illness/injury in Australia, after musculoskeletal disorders, and is the reason for the longest periods of absenteeism.

"For Australian workplaces, there is now a different expectation on providing their workforces with an environment that minimises psychological harm to their people.

Leaders are now legally obligated to identify and address work factors that can contribute to psychological distress and injury," says David.



What stress looks like.

Everyone is different, and something one person finds mildly challenging can be stressful for another. It all depends on the job, a person's psychological makeup, and other factors like general health and life outside of work.

Signs of stress can be different for everyone, too. It can show up in a variety of ways - like panic attacks, feeling constantly tense or on edge, struggling to sleep or eat properly, or getting upset or angry more easily than usual.

People may notice more frequent headaches, persistent fatigue, or an increase in smoking or drinking habits.

Stress can also impact people's behaviours at work. They may start showing up late to work or stay home more than usual. Some people will actively avoid meetings or social events with co-workers. They're finding it hard to concentrate or stay focused, and completing their work might feel overwhelming to them. Often, this can be seen as people disconnecting from others and self-isolation if the stress response is severe.

For some, it can lead to burnout when things are left unchecked.

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Burnout is different from stress.

According to the World Health Organization, workplace burnout is a result of workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed. It's a combination of feeling depleted of energy or exhausted, feeling negative about or less connected to the work or job, and feeling like you're not performing as well as you should.



It's important to know that burnout and stress aren't the same. You can't fix burnout simply by taking a good holiday or working less.

A person experiencing stress is still struggling to manage pressures. Burnout, on the other hand, is when they've completely run out of energy. They are depleted and have immense difficulty overcoming challenges.

Burnout goes deeper than being tired. People can feel deep disillusionment and hopelessness with simple tasks seeming almost impossible. They can lose interest in the things they once cared about, and any motivation goes. Even the smallest obligations feel hard to meet.

It's not just the job. A person's individual life factors and their ability to access resources to manage prolonged periods of stress will impact their risk of burnout. Other things, like previous work experiences and life events, can also affect burnout risk. So, while two people may face similar issues at work, one might have burnout while the other doesn't.



When we think someone might be experiencing duress it's the small things that can matter. You don't need to be a mental health professional to help. A simple check-in with your co-worker or team member can play a big part in helping them put their hand up and ask for help."

How to help overcome burnout.

It goes without saying that burnout can seriously affect someone's health and wellbeing. Often, our co-workers and team members will undergo a change in behaviour that will indicate that they may be impacted and need support.

For example, job burnout in a co-worker may look like some of the following:

Shifts in their mood or attitude via increased irritability or negativity.

They may express cynical or critical views about their work or colleagues.

Decreased productivity.

A noticeable decline in their work performance or missing deadlines.

Physical symptoms.

They complain of headaches, fatigue, or changes in sleep patterns.

Withdrawal from work activities.

You notice they are avoiding social interactions, meetings, or collaborative projects.

Lack of motivation.

They show disinterest in tasks they previously found engaging.

Increased absenteeism.

There are frequent unexplained absences or arriving late and leaving early.

Cognitive performance and difficulty concentrating.

They are struggling to focus on tasks or making mistakes more often.

"When we think someone might be experiencing duress it's the small things that can matter. You don't need to be a mental health professional to help. A simple check-in with your co-worker or team member can play a big part in helping them put their hand up and ask for help" David said.

Recognising and addressing burnout is crucial for maintaining a healthy and productive work environment. But remember, it's not up to you to diagnose or be the only support a person has. There are many places you and your team members can go to for professional advice and support.

If you need support, call one of the following numbers:

- Contact your organisation to see if they have an EAP service you can access.
- Lifeline Australia | 13 11 14
- Lifeline New Zealand | 0800 543 354
- Kids Helpline | 1800 55 1800
- MensLine Australia | 1300 78 99 78
- Suicide Call Back Service | 1300 659 467
- Beyond Blue | 1300 22 4636
- Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling | 1800 011 046
- Qlife – anonymous and free LGBTI peer support | 1800 184 527 – (3 PM-Midnight every day)
- Thirrili 24/7 | 1800 805 801
- Brother to brother 24-hour crisis line | 1800 435 799

The information contained in this article is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as health, medical, or financial advice. Always consult a qualified health provider or independent financial, taxation or legal advice specific to your circumstances and objectives.

Sources

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Black Dog Institute - "Experiencing burnout? Here's what to do about it."
Headspace - "Work burnout and the effects on your mental health."
Better Health Victoria - "Work-related stress."
Australian Psychological Society - "Stress in the workplace."
Psychology Today - "The Surprising Difference Between Stress and Burnout."
American Psychological Association - "Burnout and stress are everywhere."