

# What is workplace burnout?

by Jennifer Hynes

Before burnout can even begin, we need to experience stress. Since stress is explored by an array of different fields including sociology, psychology, medicine and even economics, it has a variety of meanings (Sonnetag & Frese, 2003 Feeling stressed from time to time is quite normal.

In fact, some stress is good as it motivates us to continue what we are doing. However, it becomes problematic when we no longer feel that we can cope. More precisely, stress is a concern when it starts to interrupt day-to-day functioning (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Exposure to chronic job stress or prolonged job stress can lead to burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). Burnout is a gradual process encompassing 1) feelings of self-doubt, 2) low professional efficacy, 3) emotional exhaustion, 4) cynicism, and 5) depersonalisation (Cordes &

Dougherty, 1993; Freudenberger,1975; Hetland et al., 2007; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). And burnout is a symptom of exceeding one's limit on a regular basis (Leiter & Maslach,1999).

## What are the causes of burnout?

To feel stress, a stressor is required. They can be biological, environmental or an event (ILO, 2016). So, in the workplace, a climate, a culture, a relationship or indeed situations can be perceived as stressors.

According to an array of research across several fields, stressors within the workplace can include:

1. Having difficulties in work including abusive supervision, leader psychological distress, lacking control over your work life, lacking ability, lacking knowledge, or lacking support
2. Feeling like you are losing control
3. Failure to gain valued resources
4. Verbal or physical abuse
5. Time pressure and long working hours
6. Failure to meet career goals

As humans our lives are a far more complex interconnected social system extending far beyond the workplace. As such, other stressors such as chronic illness, relationship breakdown, getting married, having marital problems, being a parent and even the conditions of where we live can impact us (Agnew, 2009; Crawford et al., 2010; ESRI, 2018; Hobfoll, 2002, 2001; Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993; Hooley et al., 2017; Lal & Mackinnon, 2012; Li et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2013; National Health Service (NHS), 2020; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2018). Within the accountancy field stressors could include pressure to work long hours, pressure to meet strict deadlines, difficulties working on a team project or even trying to balance family life with a busy career. How we handle the stressors we face is deeply rooted in individual differences.

We all have a pool of resources available at our disposal. At the job level, resources can include autonomy, job control, feedback, access to information, development opportunities, a positive work climate, recognition, support, job variety, recovery time and participation in decision making (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001; Freaney & Fellenz, 2013). On an individual level, personal resources can be viewed as psychological capital. Psychological capital (PsyCap) varies from person to person depending on the levels of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO) a person has. This psychological capital, along with job resources helps to protect you against stress and burnout. However, there are times when the demands we face exceed our resource pool.

The burnout process first begins as the individual becomes overextended due to a resource demand imbalance. For example, an accountant is working in a busy practice and suffering from work overload, poor office climate, lack of support and limited development opportunities. They have a big quarterly deadline approaching and in reaction, they expend effort. This gradually depletes their already limited resources. They complete the work on time but receive no bonus or recognition for their work. When an individual fails to replenish what they have spent (i.e., resources), the body reacts

through a process of burnout (Van Wijhe, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2014). The accountant becomes psychologically drained and begins to detach. The indifference towards work leads to reductions in competence which result in low professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

### What are the implications for me, my colleagues, and my organisation?

Burnout, as you can see, is a domino effect impacting your emotional and physical health. Some of the physical manifestations of burnout are:

- Headaches
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Cardiovascular problems
- Endocrine problems
- Gastrointestinal problems

In response to a stress stimulus, our bodies trigger the flight or fight response (American Psychological Association, 2018b,d; Cleveland Clinic, 2019; General Practitioners in Wales (NHS), 2018; ILO, 2020b). This creates a cascade of biological events such as sending distress signals to the brain, increased adrenaline in the bloodstream, changes in breathing, increased blood pressure and heartbeat, and the production of stress hormones such as cortisol (American Psychological Association, 2018d; Harvard Medical School, 2018). Again, it is important to highlight that repeated stress events are dangerous because they increase the chance of hypertension, heart attack, stroke, inflammation in the circulatory system and high cholesterol levels (American Psychological Association, 2018d).

Burnout also has the capacity to impact the financial wellbeing of organisations. The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personal Development) health and wellbeing at work report 2021 found that 79% of respondents reported some form of stress-related absence in the last year with workload at 59% being the main driver of stress followed by management style at 32%. Eurofound (2010) estimate that the cost of absence

is approximately 2.5% of GDP in Europe. And in the US, the Society for Human Resource management (SHRM) (2014) estimate that the total cost of productivity loss as a percentage of payroll due to unplanned absences stands at 6.7%. Moreover, their study sheds light on how unplanned absences impact colleagues. In the study of 512 workers, unplanned absences were said to add to the workload (69%), increase stress (61%), disrupt the work of others (59%), hurt morale (48%) and reduce quality of work 40%. This demonstrates that burnout not only damages your health but also has the capacity to crossover to colleagues.

### How can I protect myself against burnout?

Whilst you cannot eliminate all stressors, you can try to reduce them by asking yourself questions as recommended by the American Psychological Association (2019). For example, is there any way you can change your situation? Can you drop some of the responsibilities you have? Do you say yes too often? Are your standards too high and causing unnecessary stress? Is help available? It is important to remember that burnout is a known outcome of a demand resource imbalance and therefore attempts to identify resources and reduce demands are likely to have a positive impact on your wellbeing.

Behaviour plays a critical role in how stress can impact you. When you become stressed, you are faced with an array of behavioural choices. That is, we can respond to stress through positive or negative behaviours. Poor health behaviours brought on by stress such as smoking, overeating of physical activity and an unhealthy diet are linked to increased risk for heart disease and stroke (American Heart Association, 2010).

Critically, this demonstrates that we can engage in positive behaviours which promote wellbeing. Firstly, we can identify the patterns of stress and reflect on which situations have created the most stress for ourselves. This requires asking yourself a set of questions examining:

1. How you felt at the time?
2. What were the circumstances of the stressful event?
3. Who was there?

After you have reflected on this, you should then examine your behaviour after the stressful event. Again, you should ask yourself some questions. For example, 1) if I felt threatened or unhappy did I speak up? 2) what were my eating patterns afterwards? and 3) how did I destress? Did I go for a walk, run, or engage in some physical activity? Did I discuss how I was feeling with friends or family? Did I ruminate? Did I find it hard to get to sleep? By reflecting on what happened and how you behaved you can learn about your thoughts and feelings. This helps you to gain perspective which can be beneficial in reducing stress (Harvard Medical School, 2020). It also worth noting that this is not a once off activity, you should proactively monitor how you feel by regularly checking in with yourself (American Psychological Association, 2019). Learning how stress impacts you is a vital step to deal with it (American Heart Association, 2010). By identifying patterns of stress in your life, how you feel about them and how you typically behave you can put plans in place to promote positive behaviours.

Nutrition and exercise are two essential elements of wellbeing within your power. However, when feeling stressed there is a tendency to neglect them. Exercise need not cost the earth, nor should it require huge chunks of your time. Any form of physical activity is beneficial (Government of Victoria Department of Health, 2015b; Mental Health Foundation, 2021). Exercise has been shown to improve mood, self-esteem, sleep, heart health and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020; American Medical Association, 2020; NHS, 2020; Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2020; Harvard Medical School, 2020; University of Michigan, 2019; University of Rochester Medical Centre, 2019; WHO, 2020b). Furthermore, taking exercise outdoors into green space improves mood and reduces feelings of stress (De Keijzer, 2020). Whilst stress does not disappear when we exercise, it can help to reduce

the intensity of the emotions you feel (NHS, 2021b).

So, you might ask yourself what exercise should I do and how much? The NHS (2018a) recommends adults to engage in the following:

1. **On at least 2 days a week: Strengthening activities that work all the major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms)**

Carrying heavy shopping bags
Yoga
Pilates
Weightlifting
Resistance bands
Push-ups and sit-ups
Heavy gardening (e.g., digging and shovelling)
Lifting and carrying children

2. **Do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity a week**

Moderate intensity activities:	Vigorous activities:	Very vigorous activities e.g., High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT).
Brisk walking	Running	Heavy weightlifting
Water aerobics	Swimming	Circuit training
Riding a bike	Riding a bike fast or on hills	Sprinting up hills
Dancing	Walking up the stairs	Interval running
Doubles tennis	Football	Running up stairs
Pushing a lawn mower	Skipping	Spinning classes
Hiking	Aerobics	
Rollerblading	Martial arts	

They also recommend that exercise is spread evenly over 4 to 5 days a week, or every day. As you can see, there are many ways for you to integrate exercise into your daily life. Importantly, you should always take a sustainable approach with realistic and timely goals.

As mentioned previously, good nutrition plays a critical role in wellbeing. Stronger immune systems, lower risk of diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and a longer life are associated with better nutrition (WHO, 2019). Behavioural responses to stress can often lead to poor nutritional decisions. Through planning and education, you can improve how you respond to stress. You can learn to develop healthy responses to stress (The NHS, 2018b) and eat a healthy diet (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Again, reflecting on how you eat, what you eat, when you eat and how you feel when you eat can help you to uncover patterns in your diet (Government of Canada, 2018a). In fact, The Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute (INDI) (2020) recommends keeping a food diary. Food diaries can help you to understand your eating habits which can help you to change your behaviour (McManus, 2019).

To gain control over your nutrition you should try to cook at home more often (Government of Canada, 2018c) and gain awareness of your shopping behaviours. This should include reading labels so that you can make informed choices about what you eat and drink.

In addition, the cooking method also has implications for your health. The Department of Health for the Government of Victoria (2011) recommend baking, grilling, broiling, roasting, steaming, sautéing, using cooking liquids such as stock or water instead of oil, using low-fat yoghurt



or milk instead of cream in sauces or soups, swapping buttery and creamy sauces for pesto, salsas, chutneys and vinegars, scrub vegetables instead of peeling them to retain the nutrients close to the skin and finally investing in non-stick cookware. It is important to note that chronic stress has a significant effect on food cravings (Chao et al., 2015). For instance, a study found that sugar cravings reduce feelings of stress (Tryon et al., 2015). Therefore, having a plan in place can help you to avoid poor choices.

According to the WHO (2021), a healthy diet consists of:

- Cereals and roots such as wheat, barley, rye, maize, rice, and potato
- Legumes (lentils and beans)
- Fruit and vegetables

- Foods from animal sources (meat, fish, eggs, and milk)

In addition, you should avoid or limit the following (Harvard University School of Public Health, 2019; NHS, 2018b; WHO, 2021):

- Sugar, sugary drinks, and juice
- Salt
- Partially hydrogenated oils
- Binge drinking
- Smoking

### What should I take from this article?

The most important thing you need to do is reflect on stress and identify how you respond to it. From that you should construct a resource building

plan which is achievable and includes exercise and good nutrition at its foundation.



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