

Burnout, much more than just stress

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What is it?

The topic of burnout is receiving increased attention globally because it can have a significant negative effect on a person's well-being and productivity. Are you at risk?

The body of research on burnout has grown exponentially over the last 40 years providing greater insight into how burnout develops. It's clear that resilience or 'mental toughness' alone isn't enough to combat burnout. A multifaceted approach is required.

According to Dr Michael Leiter, professor of psychology at Deakin University, burnout is so much more than just about being stressed or over-worked. It has three key dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy.¹

Exhaustion is feeling emotionally and physically drained. It is a sense of being completely over-extended to the point where it's difficult or impossible to face another day.

Cynicism, or depersonalisation, is the loss of idealism and the development of a negative, callous disregard or detached response to other people.

Inefficacy is a reduced sense of productivity and effectiveness. It coincides with feelings of failure or lack of control.

Speaking at the 2018 Australian Psychological Society Congress in September, Dr Leiter said the drivers of stress typically manifested in the work environment, not in individual weaknesses, therefore it was critical to consider the quality of the workplace and "not just tell people to toughen up".

He attributed the rising prevalence of burnout partly to the intensity of work environments which often required people to work at unrealistically high levels to succeed.

This, coupled with the 24/7 nature of technology, made people feel they need to be on-call all the time which blurred the lines between work and home.

Are you at risk?

Take this short questionnaire to find out if you are at risk of burnout. Keep in mind that other conditions such as depression² or thyroid disorders feature similar symptoms so it's best to speak to your doctor or a mental health practitioner.

- Do you have to drag yourself to work and have trouble focusing when you arrive?
- Are you disillusioned with your job?
- Have you become more cynical, critical or impatient with colleagues?
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements?
- Are you using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or numb your feelings?
- Has your appetite or sleep habits changed?
- Are you experiencing unexplained headaches, backaches or other physical issues?

What can you do?

Burnout is not something you should dismiss or take lightly as it is associated with a number of serious health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes, obesity and depression.²

Addressing burnout requires both personal and workplace solutions. At an individual level there are the basics: good quality sleep, eating well, exercise and hobbies.

Try and identify the source of your particular experience of burnout and seek support. Evaluate your options, assess your attitude and consider ways to improve your outlook.

Businesses also need to be willing to be part of the solution.

According to Dr Leiter, employers and employees should work together to develop a framework that aims to reduce the incidence of burnout.³

“Employees need to be inspired to contribute but at the same time employers need to do things that are meaningful to improve the way employees work,” he said.

Making the workplace a friendlier and more civil place to work is a simple, yet effective tactic and can be a good place to start.

On the radar

Burnout is a topic to consider in terms of your own well-being and your clients'. It's a topic many people can relate to and given the link between burnout, mental health and other medical conditions, it is a relevant conversation to have with clients. With the growing prevalence of burnout, the financial health risks should definitely be considered. ClearView has a range of insurance solutions that can help.

For more information a guide to burnout is available here:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm>

Sources:

1 APS: <https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/news-and-media/Media-releases/2018/Resilience-isn't-enough-to-combat-the-effects-of-b>

2 Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642?p=1>

3 AFR BOSS: www.afr.com/brand/boss/want-to-reduce-workplace-burnout-follow-these-steps-20180926-h15w5s

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