



Stress Awareness Month– April 2022

The impact of the pandemic has been difficult for many people, a lot has changed in the last year.

We're no longer in lockdown and the large-scale health hazards of Covid-19 are, hopefully, in retreat. And yet, there is still plenty to occupy our attention. Many of us are returning to our workplaces, transitioning from the quasi-offices we were forced to make for ourselves at short notice in March 2020.

After two years of worry and strain, many people are stressed and at risk of burnout.

There is, of course, a difference between the two and employers still hold a responsibility for the wellbeing of their staff, even when working from home, and there are a number of steps they can take to improve employee wellbeing.

Stress comes in a variety of forms. It's something we can all experience, occurring when the pressures placed on us outpace our ability to cope. Stress isn't always a negative thing. In small measures, it can motivate us and power our ability to meet deadlines in work or life. Higher levels of stress, however, can lead to more serious issues.

Good or bad, stress affects our behaviour and how we feel physically and mentally.

Burnout, on the other hand, happens when we feel emotionally drained, overwhelmed, and unable to meet constant demands.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has labelled this a workplace-based 'phenomena' and not a medical condition, defining it as 'a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.'

The WHO describes three characteristics of burnout: energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 'reduced professional efficacy'.

In essence, burnout corrodes employee productivity, depletes their energy and leads to their becoming resigned and emotionally distanced from roles and objectives. People might feel stressed in particular instances but burnout occurs over a longer period of time, with detachment and disengagement being particularly prevalent markers. Other signs to watch out for include:

- Frequent headaches or muscle pain
- Procrastination
- Often feeling tired or drained
- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Loss of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating and lack of creativity
- Withdrawal from responsibilities and isolating yourself

There are some fairly easy steps you can take to get ahead of burnout:

Connect with others

We maintain our wellbeing by developing and maintaining positive, healthy connections with those around us. This creates a sense of belonging and self-worth.

We should always make time to speak with family, friends and even colleagues. Even a phone call or a text message can carry a great deal of weight.

Make time for yourself

There is never a bad time to consider your priorities and looking out for your own happiness or health doesn't make you selfish. Work should never trump either of these things. Saying "No" is perfectly acceptable. Whatever you do, make time for you, not others. Also, remember to put down the phone: disconnect from work e-mails, texts and social media.

Change your thinking

If you are finding yourself disconnected from your job and lacking in motivation, it might be time to focus on the parts of your role that you enjoy, thus illustrating its valuable, rewarding elements. Pursuing fulfilling activities outside of the workplace – such as a new hobby or volunteering opportunity – is also worthwhile. New interests expand your horizons.

Prioritise your health

If you want to clear your mind, induce a sense of calm and reduce stress, regular exercise and maintaining a balanced diet are absolutely crucial. Get out into the open air and go jogging, ride a bike or take a stroll around the park. If you can't exercise, you can get a lot of emotional and physical benefits out of volunteering. You should also do your best to avoid sugary snacks and processed food, which can leave you feeling tired. Alcohol, too, might seem like a good idea when you're stressed but its curative effects are fleeting. In the longer term, too much alcohol can make you feel worse than before.

Spot the signs

Lots of people experience bad days but that doesn't mean they're on the brink of burning out. We should all look out for the warning signals: delaying tasks or work altogether; feeling tired, empty and detached; muscle pain and poor sleep patterns. Our bodies and minds tell us a great deal about each other. We need to listen.

If you are worried that any of the issues referenced above are impacting your performance or wellbeing, you should discuss matters with your manager or you can access our counselling and helpline services.

If you are concerned about your health, speak to a GP or other medical professional.

