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The equal opportunity destroyer: stress and burnout on the job

By Dr. Nancy O'Reilly

Jane has years of experience as a marketing executive, a demanding position that requires her to travel and manage multiple projects and deadlines. These challenges often leave Jane feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. She admits that she is not handling the job pressures well, and is calling in sick and missing days on the job. In fact, going to work is increasingly hard and her stress has become a chronic issue. She feels tired all the time. Her acute stress is painful and she has not found ways to discharge it. Jane is in danger of burning out.

For many people, the phenomenon called "burnout" is a typical stress reaction. Simply put, burnout means a worker has lost motivation and job performance has declined; it can lead to termination or leaving the job. Its effects need to be dealt with immediately to prevent valuable, well-trained, experienced workers from walking out the door. This can and does affect the company's bottom line.

Stress has been called an equal opportunity destroyer. No one is immune from its effects. Some workers may express their stress openly, but others may suppress and ignore stressor signals until they are desperately ill. Stress can cause physical symptoms such as headache, stomach problems and ulcers, and can leave employees vulnerable to disease. Emotional and behavioral stressors can also impact the overall productivity of the workplace. A worker who does not manage his or her stress may find that job performance declines and sick days increase.

Acute stress is painful but brief, and fortunately most employees readily find ways to discharge it. Chronic stress takes a terrible toll on the productivity of the workplace when it goes on for days, weeks, months or even years without being processed or discharged.

Employers need to know how stress is affecting workers and offer solutions for stressors to ensure their employees' wellbeing and continued fitness for duty. Various experts even say that 80 percent -- even up to 100 percent of illness -- is stress-related.

In the workplace, many workers even become addicted to their own adrenaline. They love the rush they feel when they are stressed to the max and pumping hard. This can apply to home or work or even exercise. These workers may crash and burn before they'll seek help for their addiction and drive at work.

Checking workers' stress

A wise employer or supervisor will monitor employees and notice if they are in danger of experiencing burnout. Is their job satisfaction and job performance declining? Does work seem harder to manage?



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A symptom checklist can help workers identify if they are experiencing burnout and are at risk for illness and other severe consequences. Workers who check four or more symptoms need to act fast to keep from breaking down completely.

Workers may be burning out if they:

- Often forget things. (What 10 a.m. appointment?)
 - Feel unusual fatigue. (Can't I go home yet?)
 - Suffer from insomnia. (Watching old movies at 3 a.m.)
 - Experience changes in appetite. (Ravenous or nothing looks good.)
- This can be associated with weight changes as well.
- Experience changes in behavior and mood. (Leave me alone or I'll kill you!)
 - Often feel grumpy and crabby. (Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.)
 - Get sick a lot. (My third cold this month.)
 - Want to withdraw from others. (Go away!)
 - Feel anxiety and worry. (Now what's wrong?)

Stoking the fires of enthusiasm

Workers who check four or more of the symptoms above are probably in the process of burning out. Managers and supervisors will need to intervene now, before it's too late! Encourage workers to tailor these three simple steps to their own style and personality and they'll be well on their way to recovering vibrant energy and zest for life.

First, balance your lifestyle!

- Nobody's perfect - why expect or demand that of yourself? For that matter, why expect or demand perfection from someone else?
- Draw upon your unique strengths to cope. Do the things that help you feel calm and centered. If you've forgotten what those are, you need to invest more in yourself so you can reconnect with what you know.
- Don't let one aspect of life dominate the others. Do you have a hobby or other activity you enjoy? If not, things are getting out of balance.
- Do you constantly feel you are out of time? Then it's time to cross off something you don't enjoy. Let someone else do it! Who knows, they just might enjoy it.

Second, create support systems.

- It's tough feeling alone, especially in the middle of a group of busy people. So find people you can talk to at work, at home or in the community. Find a place or activity that's stress-free.
- Share something with someone. Join a professional organization or socialize with people in your field who work for different employers. Everyone needs to be able to talk over work problems.
- Become a mentor or resource for someone else, perhaps in your own workplace, or your church or other organization. Realizing how much you have to offer to others can be a great antidote to frustration and burnout.

Third, gain control over what you can and let go of what you can't.

- Remember that no one is indispensable. Find a better way to get the job done rather than just doing more of the same.
- Try to see opportunities instead of problems. It may be time to review your career goals if you are working just to earn money. Many people find that if they can do what they love, they love what they do.
- Schedule your days (weeks, months and years) and work your plan. Investigate ways to adjust your schedule with flex-time, job-sharing or taking a new job.

- Find a mentor you respect. You are not the first person to struggle with work-life balance, and other people, (even your boss), might have a lot of suggestions to offer.

Regaining one's zest for living and working

Most important of all, workers (and employers and supervisors!) need to remember that life is really much too short to waste it feeling freaked out and frazzled. By restoring some balance between the demands of the workplace and personal life, people can douse burnout and prevent stress from taking its terrible toll. Every person needs to take time to manage their stress so they can enjoy life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy O'Reilly, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist, researcher and founder of the WomenSpeak Project, an online resource based on a decade of research about aging in a youth-driven society. O'Reilly has more than 25 years of experience counseling others on women's issues, aging, mental health, victimization, workplace violence and stress. A member of the American Psychological Association, she is the author of, "You Can't Scare Me: Courageous Women Speak About Growing Older in a Youth Oriented Society." For more information, please visit the [WomenSpeak Project](#) or call (417) 860-5834.

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