



Mental Wellbeing

We continue our series of articles by Dr Libby Artingstall and Dr Sile McDaid, Co-Founders and Directors of Team Mental Health. This month they look at work-related stress, burn-out and the importance of self care...

Work-related stress, burn-out and the importance of self-care

In the May 2019 edition of The Messenger, we explored the impact of work-related stress on junior lawyers and the important role legal firms have to play when it comes to completing risk assessments and implementing change when required.

To recap, work-related stress has been defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work¹ Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it.²

Why is it important to effectively manage work-related stress?

If we are exposed to chronic periods of stress, we are at increased risk of developing physical health problems including increased blood pressure and weight gain³. In turn, these may increase the risk of heart attack, stroke, renal problems and diabetes. In terms of our mental health, exposure to prolonged periods of work-related stress can lead to anxiety disorders, depression and burn-out^{4&5}.

What is burn-out?

Recently, there have been reports in the media that burn-out is now considered a medical diagnosis. However, the World Health Organisation have clarified that burnout is not classified as a medical condition, rather it is considered an 'occupational phenomena' that could result in someone having to seek care from health care services.⁵

The International Classification of Diseases is a global "diagnostic classification standard for all clinical and research purposes"⁶. The 11th edition (ICD-11) will be reported from as of January 2022. Within ICD-11, burn-out is defined as follows:

"Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of 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.

Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life⁷."

Why is it important to recognise burn-out?

In a systematic review published in 2017, conclusions were drawn that several prospective and high-quality studies showed "cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal pain, depressive symptoms, psychotropic and antidepressant treatment, job dissatisfaction and absenteeism are consistent effects of burn-out"⁸."

Are you suffering from burn-out?

There are a number of burn-out questionnaires available online which can provide a sense of whether you are at risk of burn-out. One example can be accessed through this link:

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_08.htm

If burn-out is a potential issue, what can we do?

• Risk assessment and management

In the May edition of The Messenger we highlighted 6 key areas in the workplace, identified by the Health & Safety Executive, that if not managed appropriately can lead to work-related stress. These are demand, control, relationships, change, communication and role⁹. In order to understand and manage stress effectively in the workplace, it is important for firms to complete stress risk assessments which involves exploring each of these six areas and implementing change when required.

• Self-care

Self-care is a priority not a luxury. When working in highly stressful environments, to function to the best of our ability, it is essential that we do the best we can to maintain our physical and mental health. In order to effectively care for your clients, you must care for yourself first.

Last month we highlighted the importance of bringing the '5 ways to mental wellbeing' into our daily lives.¹⁰ Alongside these, there are other factors which have been shown to protect our mental and physical health. These include:

Have a healthy diet

A Mediterranean diet rich in fibre, fruit, leafy greens and omega 3 fish oils (found in fatty fish like salmon, tuna and mackerel) has been shown to support positive mental health and there is evidence to suggest that vitamin D (also found in fatty fish) and selenium (found in brazil nuts) are protective. It's also important to try to limit the intake of highly processed foods and sugary soft drinks. Healthy diet, healthy body, healthy mind!^{11,12}

Stay hydrated

As our body weight is comprised of almost 60% water it makes sense that dehydration will have a significant impact on our mental and physical health.¹³ "When dehydration reduces body mass by more than 2%, it has been consistently reported that mood is influenced, fatigue is greater, and alertness is lower"¹⁴.

Take time to relax

Deep breathing exercises, guided imagery, yoga and tai chi are examples of relaxation techniques which have been shown to counter the physiological response induced by stress.³ This can have a positive impact on our physical and mental health. There are many different and helpful ways to relax and feel a sense of calm. Take time



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to explore what works for you and try to build regular periods of relaxation into your weekly or daily schedule.

Establish a good sleep routine

On average adults need around 8 hours of sleep each night to support positive mental health. For many of us, busy working and family lives can lead to a poor sleep routine being established. Sleep deprivation can negatively impact our mental health. The good news is, no matter what your current sleep pattern, you can change this by implementing a sleep hygiene routine.^{15,16}

Good sleep hygiene includes several elements to be effective. Firstly, establishing a routine with a similar bedtime and wake up time is important. Caffeine should be avoided after 5pm and remember alcohol can act as a stimulant and impact on the quality of sleep. At least 1 hour before bedtime should be about starting to wind down and relax, avoid anything that stimulates the brain and try reading or relaxation exercises. Bedrooms should be comfortable, clutter free and screens with blue light should be switched off. A hot bath can help to relax muscles.^{15,16}

- **Seek support**

It's also important to seek support. If you are experiencing difficulties seek advice and guidance from a health care professional to ensure you get the right support, in the right place, at the right time.



Contact Team Mental Health
www.teammentalhealth.co.uk
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