

# STRESS AND BURNOUT

## A learning guide for all UN staff members

Prepared by

Francis de Riba - OHCHR Stress Counsellor  
Ave. Giuseppe Motta 48 - Office 3-19  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 928 96 21  
E-mail: fderiba@ohchr.org

### INTRODUCTION

Stress has long been associated with the work people do. It's not just the idea of physical labour, but also the wear and tear of work on people's mental health. Stress on the job, in fact, is something that almost every person experiences. Job stress may be caused by a complex set of reasons. Some of the most visible causes of workplace stress are:

- Heavy workload, long work hours, unreasonable deadlines
- Investing a great deal of personal energy with little positive feedback
- Setting unrealistic goals for yourself or having them imposed upon you
- Intense pressure to perform at peak levels all the time
- Job insecurity, feeling uncertain about the future
- Having to follow changing, confusing or unclear instructions
- Poor communication, lack of recognition, inadequate leadership
- Lack of appropriate resources and support
- Unresolved personal conflicts beyond the job situation

### WHAT IS BURNOUT?

When job stress is prolonged and severe, the risk of experiencing burnout increases. Burnout is the condition where unrelieved stress and frustration, often caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations, creates a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion for the individual. Burnout is a process that progresses through stages of stress overload. It is a good idea to become familiar with its stages, as well as its more common symptoms, in order to take steps to stop the process at any stage.

### 3 STAGES OF BURNOUT

**Stage 1** - Characterized by job dissatisfaction, work inefficiency, fatigue, irritability, frustration, anxiety, headaches, gastrointestinal symptoms and sleep disturbances.

**Stage 2** - Marked by an intensification of some of the same symptoms cited in Stage 1, including lack of interest in work, resentment, anger, cynicism, apathy, avoiding decisions, social withdrawal and increased substance use.

**Stage 3** - Physical symptoms intensify (e.g., chronic stomach problems, chronic headaches or migraines, chronic mental/physical fatigue). Actual illness can develop (e.g., high blood pressure, depression). Relationships may suffer. Pessimism and self-doubt dominate thinking. A desire to quit work is expressed. It is in this stage where most people finally get a clear sense that something is seriously wrong.

## 6 TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

Look back over the past six months of your life. Have things changed? Do you feel different? Ask yourself the questions listed below, then circle a Yes or No for the appropriate response.

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1) Irritability and a general distrust of others' intentions.           | Yes | No |
| 2) No new ideas in the past six months.                                 | Yes | No |
| 3) Lack of energy physical and/or emotional.                            | Yes | No |
| 4) Feelings of isolation and lack of personal support.                  | Yes | No |
| 5) Urge to get out of my present situation.                             | Yes | No |
| 6) An attempt to feel good about myself by focusing on "how much" I do. | Yes | No |

### INTERPRETING YOUR SCORE

- If you answer yes to two of these symptoms, it suggests a possible problem.
- If you answer yes to four of these symptoms, it suggests a definite problem with work and attitude.
- If you answer yes to all six symptoms, it may indicate that you are burning out and treatment is recommended.

Keep in mind that your score is merely an approximation of where you are. Don't let a high score alarm you, but pay attention to it. Burnout is reversible no matter how far along it is.

### TIPS FOR PREVENTING AND TREATING BURNOUT

**Recognize burnout as a process that is ongoing.** Burnout happens over time and encompasses insidious changes in attitude, mood, and behaviour that may have negative consequences on our work performance. Many traits identified as being characteristics of competent and effective staff members, ironically, can also play a major role in the stress that leads to emotional exhaustion, which leads to burnout. Characteristics that increase risk for burnout include:

- Perfectionism
- Need for control
- Difficulty asking for help
- Suppression of emotions
- Compulsiveness
- Exaggerated sense of responsibility
- Excessive, unrealistic guilt
- Difficulty taking vacations

Try to identify the reason you have for adopting these behaviours or personality traits.

**Listen to your body.** Become conscious of the warning signals your body is sending. Increase your degree of self-awareness and become more observant of your reactions to stress. When you don't feel good, there is always a reason. Take pain seriously. Are you often tired, irritated, bothered by aches, pains, cold hands, ringing in the ears, rapid breathing, trembling of lips, hands? This could be your body's way of telling you that you need to slow down, take some time off, or deal with whatever's bothering you.

**Develop positive attitudes towards stressful situations.** Give up negative mental traits such as fear, anger and revengeful attitudes, which actually produce stress.

**Try to stay flexible to handle unexpected problems.** Don't get upset. When something unforeseen comes up, adjust your schedule realistically to take care of it. When you get stuck somewhere, plan what you will do to take care of the situation and put your schedule back in order.

**Every time you become stressed, mentally investigate your state of mind.** Ask yourself, "What would it take to eliminate the stress in this situation?" and next, ask yourself, "If I can't change the people or circumstances, how can I change my attitude?" Examining how you can change your attitude reminds you that you have power in the situation.

**Understand and accept your limits.** It's important to test your boundaries, to stretch and grow. It's also essential to stop short sometimes rather than always pushing just beyond your limits.

**Use relaxation skills.** Relaxation skills provide a sense of well-being. Relaxation techniques can give you renewed energy for the rest of the day.

**Know what you can and what you cannot change.** Every organization has unfortunate hazards and uncooperative people. If the problem is something you can change with reasonable effort, go for it. But if heroic struggle is called for, or if the problem is unsolvable, forget it and save yourself. Focus your energy on improving those aspects of the work setting that are within your control.

**Develop a strong social support system.** Build safety zones at home or with friends where you feel secure. Spending time with family and friends is an important buffer against stress. It can be helpful to share your problems with people who care for you.

**Avoid perfection.** Perfectionism tends to paralyze: "I must be perfect or things will go wrong; I won't get what I need; or people won't approve of me." This fear of not living up to your overblown expectations for yourself is a sure-fire stress-producer. And the only way to break the cycle is to lower your expectations. Whenever you can, transform your expectations into preferences. The fewer expectations you have, the less upset and disappointed you will be. The key question to ask yourself is whether you are being unreasonable in your desires and expectations.

**Re-evaluate your goals and prioritize them.** Reconsider your work goals and life priorities. Did you set these goals when you were young and inexperienced? Have you updated them? Are they realistic goals? Have you pushed or stretched yourself too far? Have you set yourself up for failure? Changing goals is not always lowering standards. It's adjustment. Make sure you set yourself a good, attainable goal, so you will be motivated out of inspiration instead of desperation. Each day, have goals that are reasonable. It's OK, and healthy, to realize you cannot be 100 percent successful at everything at once. Don't try to change everything overnight. Think about your choices. Take small steps. Don't tackle your biggest problem right away. Choose situations that will bring immediate success and satisfaction.

**Simplify your life in certain ways.** If you fill up all your time, you won't have any. And you probably won't even be aware of why you don't. Simplifying may mean prioritizing the things that you have to do and, at the same time, consciously choosing to give certain things up.

**Get adequate sleep.** A good night's sleep allows you to tackle the day's stress easier. When you are tired, you are less patient and easily agitated.

**Assert yourself.** Tell people honestly when you can't fulfil their requests. Saying "no" now can often save you more trouble later. Let them know how much time and effort you do have available for them. Keep the person you report to informed about what you are doing. When a new task comes up, work together to evaluate where it fits in your priorities.

## **STRESS COUNSELLOR SERVICES**

The Stress Counsellor offers support and assistance to staff in resolving work or personal related concerns. Through a range of sensitive and innovative services, the Stress Counsellor seeks to enhance the emotional and physical health, well-being and job-performance of all staff members.