



## ***STRESS, BURNOUT AND THE DANGERS TO THE HEALTH OF WORKERS AND ORGANIZATIONS***

*Stress levels, as determined by patient questionnaires, are rising alarmingly, and are having a major impact on the health of businesses and individuals. In my fifteen years of family practice, where 80% of all patient visits were traceable to poorly-managed stress, the vast majority of this stress originated in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>*

Stress and work are no strangers to each other. There is good stress and bad stress. Good stress causes the body to release cortisol to help one cope with a stressful situation in the short term. However, prolonged or severe stress means excess production of cortisol which can result in damaged neurons implicated in dissociative disorders, including post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Recent studies and surveys are indicating that stress levels among workers are on the increase. As Heather Menzies points out: "Stress and burnout have reached epidemic proportions, as has depression, with its telltale symptoms: inner disintegration of focus, loss of control and sense of self."<sup>2</sup> Studies have shown a strong relationship between chronic stress and the incidence of burnout, depression and absenteeism within the workforce.

- According to a Statistics Canada report released in 2006, more than one-third of Canadians complained of long hours or overwork in a survey conducted in 2000, while 15 percent cited "poor interpersonal relations" as a major source of stress and 13 percent cited risk of accident or injury.
- Data from the 2002 Canadian Community Health – Mental Health and Wellbeing survey indicated that women reported higher levels of job strain and general day-to-day stress. When the various sources of stress were considered simultaneously, along with other possible confounders, for both sexes, high levels of general day-to-day stress and low levels of co-worker support were associated with higher odds of depression, as was high job strain for men. Over a two-year period, men with high strain jobs and women with high personal stress and low co-worker support had elevated odds of incident depression.<sup>3</sup>
- A Statistics Canada study published in 2007 found that high self-perceived work stress was strongly related to taking disability days. Almost one in five men and women who perceived their regular work days to be stressful took at least one disability day during the two weeks prior to the survey.<sup>4</sup>
- A detailed survey of junior nurses working in hospitals across Ontario in 2006 found 66 percent were experiencing symptoms of burnout, including emotional exhaustion and depression.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Stress for Success - Thriving on Stress at Work*: Peter G. Hanson, M.D. (Collins Publishers, Toronto, 1989)

<sup>2</sup> *No Time - (Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life)*: Heather Menzies (Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., Vancouver, B.C., 2005)

<sup>3</sup> *Stress and Depression in the Employed Population*: Margot Shields, Health Reports, Statistics Canada, Vol. 17, No. 4

<sup>4</sup> "[Work stress and job performance](#)," online edition of Perspectives on Labour and Income, Statistics Canada, December 2007, Vol. 8, no. 12

### **What is burnout?**

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves *too much*: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and psychologically. However, stressed people can still imagine that, if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better. Burnout, on the other hand, is about *not enough*. Being burned out means feeling empty, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress is like drowning in responsibilities, burnout is being all dried up. One other difference between stress and burnout is that, while you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens.

Most studies have shown that work-related stress is often attributed to such factors as work overload, lack of control over the work performed and a lack of recognition or adequate reward for the end results. If not dealt with appropriately and left to fester, these and other various stressors found within organizations can lead eventually to burnout. People may become stressed out, but they are normally not suffering from a mental illness. As per researchers, a condition indicating symptoms of burnout — such as exhaustion or feelings of incompetence — are frequently being misinterpreted as mental disorders. If the work stressors are not eased, then there is not only the danger of eventual burnout, but it also could contribute to the development of a serious mental disorder such as depression.

Burnout is not a problem of the people themselves but of the social environment in which people work. There are generally three primary dimensions of burnout. People feel exhaustion where they are overextended, both emotionally and physically. People begin to feel cynical, taking a cold, distant attitude toward work and their fellow workers. Feeling ineffective, there is a growing sense of inadequacy. The drop in quality and quantity of work produced is the occupational bottom line of burnout.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why is there a growing incidence of stress and burnout in today's work environment?**

We are living in a fast-paced technologically-driven world. More and more work has become 24/7 with the introduction of new forms of instant telecommunications. The current recession and increasing impact on job security has resulted in management and employees working longer hours, taking on heavier workloads and reducing their time away from work. Combine this with existing work-life balance issues and one has a virtual "tsunami" of conditions ripe for increasing stress and burnout.

Faced with anorexic staffing levels and heavier workloads, one in five Canadians is putting in longer hours at work just to keep up, according to a new national labour force survey by Environics Research in January 2009.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, employers fail to recognize the heavier workloads and longer hours, much of it unreported or non-remunerated. As a result, the survey indicated that common methods of self-remuneration included leaving early (53 percent), working at a more leisurely pace (27 percent), taking sick days when healthy (23 percent), extending lunch breaks (21 percent) and arriving late (16 percent). These are simply means of employee coping. Moreover, any resulting burnout has serious implications for employee productivity, including the emergence of growing absenteeism and presenteeism within an organization.

<sup>5</sup> High proportion of recent nursing grads experiencing burnout - study: Sheryl Ubelacker, Canadian Press, Feb. 26, 2006

<sup>6</sup> *The Truth about Burnout – How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do About It*, Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1997)

<sup>7</sup> *Many Canadian workers making up for extra time: Survey*, Misty Harris, Canwest News Service, March 12, 2009

***"Healthier organizations mean more productive employees."***

### What can organizations do to prevent burnout?

Workers who are most in need of help for stress-related occupational burnout are the least likely to take advantage of remedies, according to researchers in Helsinki, Finland. (The research, which involved 3,276 Finnish workers, appeared in the September issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.) Instead, “workers with severe burnout are about 40 percent as likely” as those who don’t suffer from burnout to participate in work-based interventions, such as stress reduction, occupational training or vocational rehabilitation.<sup>8</sup>

The first thing for organizations to realize is that harmful stress and burnout are a very real consequence of the working environment in combination with other factors such as work-life imbalance. Stressors within the workplace must be addressed to help resolve the problems that can contribute to stress-related occupational burnout.

A number of steps can be taken by organizations to deal with detrimental stressors or pressure points:

- ☞ Assess which stressors (e.g. long working hours, rapid change, heavy targets and workloads, conflicting priorities, constant business travel, few breaks, failure to take vacation time, lack of control and involvement, lack of trust in management, layoff fears and survivor syndrome, etc.).
- ☞ Work with employee representatives to address work-related stressors. By opening up channels of communication, the sources of stress can be identified and dealt with together. This also helps to obtain employee buy-in.
- ☞ Provide assistance, respecting confidentiality, to employees in need of support resources (e.g. employee assistance programs).
- ☞ Educate supervisors and staff about stress-related occupational burnout and its symptoms.
- ☞ Remove any stigma attached to burnout and mental and physical health issues which individuals may be experiencing. Individuals are more willing to admit in confidence if they are suffering from stress or burnout when they can expect to be dealt with empathetically. In some cases, good counselling may be all that is needed.
- ☞ Consider supportive intervention, including training in stress management and relaxation techniques, promoting healthy behaviour and exercise and, most importantly, access to stress counselling when it’s needed.
- ☞ Promote greater work-life balance by introducing more flexible working arrangements.

### Recommended Reading:



#### “No Time”

(*Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*)

by Heather Menzies

(Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., Vancouver, B.C., 2005)

<sup>8</sup> *Burned-Out Workers Forgoing Treatment*: Garry Kranz, Workforce Management, October 21 - 28, 2007, Vol. 8 Issue 42

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