

STRESSING ON STRESS

*With the rat race of life continuing at a pace much faster than ever before, work stress has become a very real mental health issue that plagues society. We talk to **Dr Eugene Tee** about how stress doesn't just affect your productivity but other aspects of life too*



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People who share the same experiences empathise less

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What are some of the common stressors you notice in workplace scenarios?

Workplace stressors tend to stem from one of two broad factors. The first relates to the nature and demands of the work itself, such as role ambiguity (unclear descriptions of expectations of one's work) and work overload. Most of the time, however, I hear mention of stress resulting from interpersonal relationships—abusive leadership, toxic co-workers, incivility in the workplace and organisational politics, just to name a few. Situational stressors are another one—organisational change events such as mergers and acquisitions, alterations and reassignments are also typical sources of stress. Less mentioned, but also worth highlighting is stress resulting from a lack of growth opportunities. An employee may feel stressed, bored and frustrated when he or she perceives a lack of personal growth and development, or lack of mentoring and coaching on their jobs.

What are the worst possible outcomes, physical and mental, that you've come across due to work-related stressors?

For physical health, it's not uncommon for individuals to report changes to their sleep or appetite, or even gastrointestinal diseases. Headaches and muscular tensions are also commonly-reported consequences of stress.

Stress also manifests itself as anxiety, depression, panic attacks, lack of engagement and lowered job satisfaction. Also commonly reported are helplessness (and hopelessness), which may lead to deviant acts at work (like behaving aggressively), all of which can be considered among the mental consequences of stress.

Some workplace stressors lead to more mental issues (e.g. depression, social anxiety, etc.) Could you explain a little bit about how this would affect a person as an individual and the workplace/workforce environment in general?

To the individual, the most obvious consequence is the diminished sense of productivity, morale, and overall sense of wellbeing. The loss of productivity also impacts the organisation, but in addition to this, the company may also suffer potential repercussions in terms of its reputation. That is, the company may not be seen as an attractive, or a psychologically safe place to work in the eyes of potential applicants.

It's also worth mentioning the role that technology plays in blurring the work-personal life boundaries. A lot of us have our work emails accessible on our smartphones. When a company expects employees to answer emails on weekends, work and personal life then become so closely intertwined that it is not clear what the

boundaries and limits are for one or the other. Technology obliges us, and our time, to be devoted more towards work—which is not always a healthy thing, but also not something that can be so easily avoided in this day and age. This is especially problematic for individuals who identify strongly with their work selves. Their professional identities are so heavily linked to who they are that work stressors and work-related events have a greater impact on their sense of self and their overall wellbeing.

How can employers help to prevent such mental issues from developing or progressing further among employees?

I would argue that we should first aim to increase awareness of mental health issues if we are to at least reduce its prevalence in the workplace. Providing the necessary support systems can go some way to reducing the likelihood of workplace stressors spilling over and adversely impacting mental health. This is easier said than done, but some strategies may include providing a safe psychological climate to talk about mental health issues at work, not stigmatising or demonising mental health concerns at work, but accepting it as an issue that needs to be openly and freely discussed, investing in awareness programmes

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that bridge work-related experiences with mental health, making mental health issues (along with physical and emotional health) central to employee assistance programmes and fostering a collaborative climate that will enhance trust, morale, and camaraderie at work. There are, of course, approaches that more directly address the nature of the job itself—ensuring that the workplace and the nature of the work addresses employee occupational health and safety needs, matching job demands and expectations to employee skill and experience, plus identifying opportunities for employees to grow and coach them in a way that acknowledges their individuality.

Nowadays we have plenty of tech start-up entrepreneurs, but with the need to compete and keep abreast, many end up spiralling into depression, anxiety disorders and even suicide as highlighted by one of our Generation T listers, Khailee Ng of 500 Startups. What would you recommend to these individuals whose work is very fast paced and highly stressful?

Entrepreneurs are unique in a sense that, like you mentioned, they work in fast paced and highly stressful environments. But another factor that separates them from say, an organisational employee, is their identity anchor. The entrepreneur and his/her start-up, venture, or new business is an inseparable part of who they are; their venture's fortunes and failures are so much more closely tied to the entrepreneur's sense of self, success, and self-esteem. I would hazard a guess and say that because of such a deep-seated and personal identification with their business and desire to see the new venture succeed, any failure is going to be seen much more a failure of the self, than of the organisation.

Some recommendations might be to anchor one's identity to something outside of your work—preferably something more familial and social, rather than a work role. Review and revise your expectations, limit social comparisons and develop a social support network. You might even try speaking and relating to a friend who is not personally invested in your challenges. Why? There's a study which shows that people who share the same experiences as you tend to empathise less with you; they assume that since they've overcome the difficulty in the past, that it would be easy for you to do the same. ❶

