

Understanding Stress, Distress, Chronic Stress

Stress, as defined by the World Health Organization, is any type of change that causes physical, emotional or psychological strain. There are many kinds of stressors, both internal and external. Our body reacts or responds to these stressors in a multitude of ways. We often think stress reactions are all harmful. However, this is only sometimes true. Our body's responses or reactions prepare us for positive and negative challenges. For example, stress can help you achieve a goal or alert you to dangers.

Distress is when stress causes you to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. The difference between stress and distress is dependent on how you interpret the stressor, your emotional resources and the potential for support in the situation.

Compassion Fatigue

Most commonly experienced by professionals such as psychologists, nurses, and emergency persons. Compassion fatigue is the constant re-exposure to traumatic events and stress through their clients' experiences.

Burnout

Burnout affects your emotional, mental and physical states. It can be caused by a myriad of events, factors, and situations, such as chronic work stressors, caregiving stress and other aspects of our lives where we do not have the coping mechanism to help navigate stressful situations. Therefore, it is essential to recognize your signs of stress and create healthy self-care practices to take preventative action against burnout.

- **Signs of burn out** - exhaustion that is continuous and unshakeable, chronic and long term.
- **Physical and psychological issues related to burnout** - unable to recover from a cold, headaches, gastrointestinal problems, sleep disturbances, shortness of breath, irritability, heightened emotional responses, suspicion/paranoia, substance abuse, rigid thinking, unwillingness to listen, negative attitude, withdrawing, pessimistic, increased rate of anxiety and depression, sense of dread, less confident.
- Burnout commonly falls into three dimensions.
 - Exhaustion or energy depletion
 - Feeling increasingly distant, negative and cynical
 - Reduced efficacy / decreased self-evaluation of output / decreased performance
- People experiencing burnout are 63% more likely to take a sick day and 23% more likely to visit the emergency room.
- **Burnout vs depression.** The cause of burnout vs depression is different. Burnout is caused by unmanaged stress rather than a multitude of other factors that can result in depression.

How to help

There will be times you come up against obstacles. It has been found that creating a plan for overcoming these obstacles improves the odds of overcoming them. Here are some ideas to help some of the bigger ones.

- Use a monthly check-in
- Manage your stress
- Practice self-care
- Gain awareness of what is creating your feelings of burnout
 - What is making you most stressed, worried, anxious or depressed
 - What is different now than a few years ago?
 - What is within your control, and what is not?
 - For those things outside your control, do you have coping skills to help
- Create health boundaries
- Value and prioritize your health and well-being
- Improve work-life balance
- Seek professional help
- Understand your Window of Tolerance and when you have "flipped your lid" (see the window of tolerance handout)

In the moment things to try (especially at work)

- Sit in your car and take a moment before going to work. Check in with yourself. Where are you on the emotional scale? Engaged and ready to work? Are you within your window of tolerance? What can you do to get yourself into a better emotional state?
- Dealing with escalated people. Recognize they have flipped their lid (see the window of tolerance handout). To help de-escalate, take a deep breath and use a calm voice. Or even step away for a moment.
- Need a moment to catch your breath? The bathroom is a great place to escape. Take a moment to check in with yourself. Do you need to take some deep breaths? Splash some cold water on your face?
- Take five deep breaths before walking into a room, a situation or even just because it will help calm you. Sighing also is a great way to release stress.
- Take breaks, go get a drink (preferably water), or go have a conversation with someone.
- Plan ahead. Knowing what your day may entail can help calm the system to put a plan in place for the day.
- Get some fresh air, even if it is for a few minutes.
- Take your lunch/dinner break and change the scenery. Even if it is in your car, in a different room, outside, or anywhere but your desk.