Avoiding burnout

Burnout isn’t a new phenomenon, but it is becoming increasingly prevalent. We look at some effective prevention strategies.

Occupational burnout is a medical condition caused by long-term exposure to work-related stressors. Typical symptoms include emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced sense of personal accomplishment, depersonalisation and cynicism. It can affect workers in all professions, but police officers, teachers, social workers, general practitioners, nurses and healthcare assistants are considered the most at risk largely due to the unique physical and emotional demands of their job.

The current overall prevalence of occupational burnout in Britain in unknown. Figures from a 2015 YouGov survey commissioned by Virgin suggest that 51% of UK full-time employees experience either burnout or anxiety in their job. A study of British social workers, published in the same year by Community Care and Queen’s University in Belfast, found that 73% of respondents had elevated levels of emotional exhaustion – one of the key dimensions of burnout. And the latest available figures for GPs indicate that 1,510 out of 100,000 employees in all industries include time pressure, work-related stressors, stress-management training for staff, and burnout risk monitoring. In this regard, interventions at the organisational level play a crucial role. The PHE report found evidence to suggest that they may be more effective, and produce longer-lasting benefits, than interventions at the individual level alone.

Well-known work-related stressors in all industries include time pressure, excessive workload, working overtime, role ambiguity, conflicts and incivility. According to PHE, “Changes to workload or working practices appear to reduce [these] stressors and factors that can lead to burnout.” However, organisations and employers also need to put effort into creating a culture of support and collaboration, which is mainly achieved through effective communication, teamwork and leadership. Of course, stress cannot be eliminated completely. So, organisations must also empower their employees to successfully manage work-related stressors, through training and education. For example, research led by the University of East Anglia suggests that improving nurses’ self-efficacy (believing in our ability to perform tasks and achieve goals) has a protective effect against workplace incivility and consequent burnout.

Further evidence-based stress-management strategies include exercising regularly, practicing relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, and maintaining a good work-life balance. A UK study of university employees indicated that providing training that promotes positive coping strategies like the above, over negative ones such as drinking alcohol or overeating, is also crucial. Richard Evans, Commercial Director of the British Safety Council, says: “Employers across industries and sectors need to provide all staff with training and other opportunities to learn strategies for managing job stressors, as well as the necessary resources to implement these strategies, such as time and practical support.”

Next steps

Burnout is a widely recognised occupational hazard. But the existing evidence suggests that it can be prevented, through the reduction of workplace stressors, staff training, and risk monitoring. It is important that, as emphasised by PHE in its report, organisations and employers take action and focus on burnout prevention. By doing so, they have the potential to make important contributions to employee wellbeing, while improving productivity and reducing the pressure on our health system.

With thanks to the British Safety Council for this article.

Mental health