

UNIT 1 | TOPIC 1

LET'S TALK ABOUT STRESS: A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION TO STRESS
AND BURNOUT

T O P I C

01

UNDERSTANDING STRESS: KEY CONCEPTS

Understanding the concepts of stress and burnout is key for managing and preventing these challenges effectively. Within this topic you will learn about the basics of stress and burnout and their features.



The contents herein are for informational and educational purposes only and are not intended as medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult a qualified healthcare professional for any medical concerns or decisions.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

THIS TOPIC IS DESIGNED AROUND THE FOLLOWING MAIN LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

01

Define Stress

Understand and classify different types of stress, including acute stress, chronic stress, and eustress, as discussed in the training material.

02

Understand the Causes of Work-Related Stress

Analyze the causes of work-related stress, particularly how workplace demands can exceed an employee's capacity to cope.

03

Define Burnout

Learn to differentiate between the three types of burnout—overload burnout, neglect burnout, and under-challenged burnout

04

Understand Stress vs Burnout

Explore the key differences between stress and burnout in terms of duration, intensity, and impact on personal and professional functioning.

COMPETENCES

THIS TRAINING CONTENT IS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU ACQUIRE THE FOLLOWING COMPETENCES:

- 01 **Empathy:** Ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- 02 **Interpersonal Sensitivity:** Show that you are aware of others and the environment as well as the influence exerted on both. Develop a behaviour that reflects the recognition of the feelings of others, showing empathy in the face of the different situations that can occur in personal dealings with employees or collaborators.
- 03 **Interpersonal Skills:** Exhibits acceptable standards of professional conduct. Listens carefully. Develops and maintains positive working relationships with all constituents.
- 04 **Self-perception:** Observe and interpret one's own behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, and using those observations and interpretations to define oneself.
- 05 **Self-regulation:** Ability to understand and manage your behaviour and your reactions to feelings and things happening around you.
- 06 **Tolerance to Stress:** Continue to act effectively under time pressure, dealing with disagreement, opposition, and adversity.

INTRODUCTION TO STRESS AND BURNOUT

Introduction

The constant hustles of our daily lives can sometimes leave us feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. It comes from all angles of life: work, family, finances etc. As the demands of our daily life continue to increase, especially in the post pandemic era, the prevalence of stress and burn out has become a priority in the agenda of European societies, in the pursue of a more fulfilled and

productive life. Understanding the concepts of stress and burn-out is key for managing and preventing these challenges effectively.

In the following paragraphs, we offer an overview and a comparison between these two related, but different concepts.



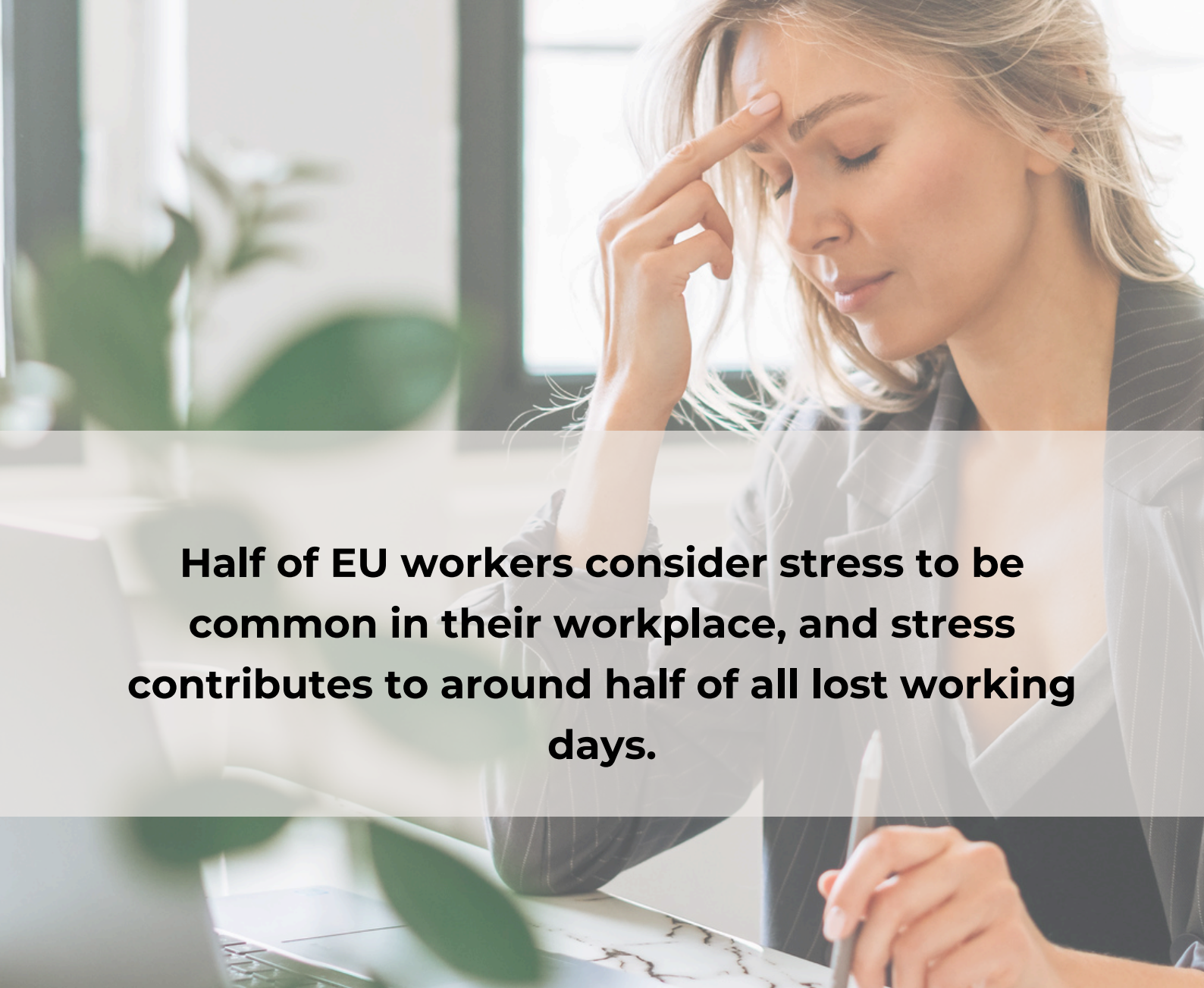
UNDERSTANDING STRESS

According to WHO (2023) stress can be defined as *'a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. It is a natural human response that prompt us to address challenges and threads that we face.'* While stress can be normal human response, too much or for too long can lead to adverse health effects.

There are many things that can cause stress - the stress caused by the demands of the work environment is defined as work-related stress, and refers to the case where *'the demands of the work environment exceed employee's ability to cope or control them'* (EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027).

It is important to keep in mind that there are various types of stress, and not all types are considered negative (Scott, 2024). It's also crucial to remember that different people have different definitions of stress, and what one feels difficult may not be so, for another. We are going to talk more about that in Topic 4, including the impact of personality traits and demographic factors in regards to work-related stress.



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark business suit, is sitting at a desk. She has her eyes closed and her right hand is pressed against her forehead, suggesting stress or fatigue. In her left hand, she holds a pen over a document. A laptop is partially visible on the desk to her left. The background is softly blurred, showing a window and some indoor plants.

Half of EU workers consider stress to be common in their workplace, and stress contributes to around half of all lost working days.

Already before the pandemic, mental health problems affected about [84 million people in the EU](#). Half of EU workers consider stress to be common in their workplace, and stress contributes to around half of all lost working days, while [nearly 80% of managers](#) are concerned about work-related stress.

Stress responses are highly individualized, meaning that what one person perceives as stressful may not affect another in the same way. Additionally, stress does not always stem from negative circumstances; even positive life changes, like promotions or new responsibilities, can trigger stress responses. Recognizing personal stressors and understanding one's own limits is crucial to preventing stress from escalating into chronic stress or burnout.

To effectively handle stressors in diverse areas of life, coping mechanisms and solutions must be developed, which firstly requires an understanding of the various types of stress, which we are going to talk about in the next section.

TYPES OF STRESS

Some common types of stress (Scott, 2022) are:

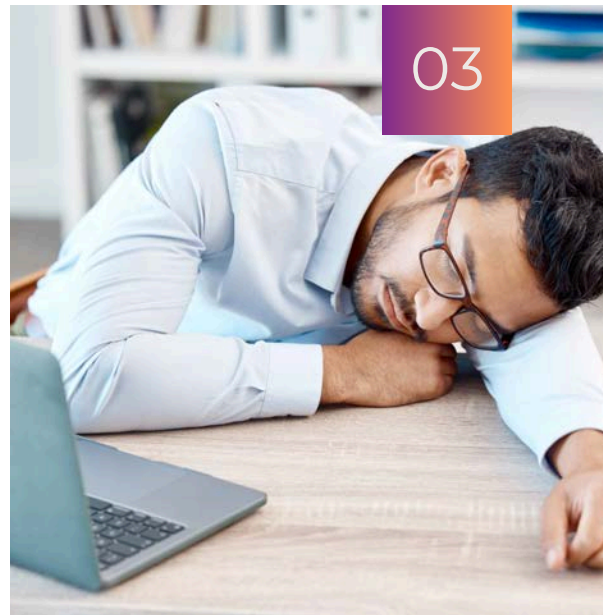


Acute Stress

Usually occurs in response to an immediate threat – it is the type stress that we often encounter in our everyday life and if managed effectively it lasts only for a short period of time i.e. sitting an exam, facing a tight deadline.

Eustress

It is known as the “positive stress” that can keep you energized and motivated – it is associated with adrenaline spikes and some examples are when starting a new job, getting out of your comfort zone.



Chronic Stress

It persists over an extended period of time, and it is often a result of ongoing situations or recurring life difficulties such as financial difficulties, an extremely taxing job, chronic health problems etc. Chronic stress can have a serious negative impact on your overall health if it persists for a long time.

UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), "*Burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job*". Burnout can gradually erode an individual's motivation, productivity, and overall sense of purpose in their work. It often results in detachment, a decline in job performance, and a significant reduction in one's ability to engage meaningfully in personal and professional relationships. Recognizing the early signs of burnout is critical to addressing it before it leads to more severe emotional and physical consequences.

WHO considers burnout an occupational phenomenon, rather than a medical condition which goes beyond the immediate stress response - it represents a chronic exposure to stressors. Based on their widely accepted model, burnout is characterised by three key aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment.

People do not experience burnout for the exact same reasons, and this has led to the identification of three types of burnouts (Wilding, 2022).





74%

**of respondents reported they didn't
receive or were not aware of any
support provided by their employer in
cases of burn-out**

In early 2023, we conducted a preliminary survey across five states—Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Netherlands, and Spain—with more than 150 participants from various job backgrounds, confirming Maslach and Leiter's concept of burnout. We've also found out that 45% of the respondents have experienced burnout at least once, while an additional 35% reported not being sure. Additionally, 35% of respondents experienced anxiety as a symptom during periods of high stress; 40% reported sleeping difficulties and in total 56% reported either anxiety or sleeping issues.

We are sharing more about our findings in the StressOut Policy Recommendations Report, aiming to shed more light on the issues of work-related stress and burnout and provide the impetus for effective legislations on these topics. Read the report at www.stressout-project.eu/resource-centre.

TYPES OF BURNOUTS

There are three types of burnout (Wilding, 2022):



Overload Burnout

The most common and well-known type, which occurs when you work hard to achieve success, often in detriment to your health and personal life.



Under-challenged Burnout

As surprising as it sounds, doing too little can result to burnout. This type is characterised by boredom and lack of stimulation, which make employees feeling lethargic, unmotivated and worthless.



Neglect Burnout

Neglect burnout occurs when you are lacking structure, direction, or guidance in the workplace, and you feel helpless in the face of challenges. Over time, this can make you feel incompetent and uncertain about your skills too ('the imposter syndrome').

WORK-RELATED STRESS AND BURNOUT: WHAT IS CAUSING IT

Several key risk factors contribute to the development of work-related stress and burnout. Although, these factors can vary across individuals and organizations, here's a list of the most common risk factors:

HIGH WORKLOAD	Excessive demands and workload without sufficient resources or support.
LACK OF CONTROL	Employees who perceive a lack of control or autonomy over their work.
POOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE	Inability to balance work responsibilities with personal life.
UNCLEAR JOB EXPECTATIONS	Ambiguity about roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations.
JOB INSECURITY	Fear of job loss or uncertainty about employment conditions.
LACK OF RECOGNITION	Not receiving acknowledgement or appreciation for one's contributions.
LACK OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT	Insufficient opportunities for skill development or career advancement.
ROLE CONFLICT	Conflicting expectations and demands from different roles within an organization.

POOR COMMUNICATION	Ineffective communication within the workplace.
SOCIAL ISOLATION	Lack of social support and a sense of isolation at the workplace.
INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES	Inadequate tools, technology, or support systems for job tasks.
TECHNOLOGICAL OVERLOAD	Constant connectivity and expectations to be available at all hours due to technology.
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	A toxic organizational culture e.g. competition, lack of collaboration, or a focus solely on outcomes.
POOR MANAGERIAL SUPPORT	A lack of support, feedback, or clear communication from supervisors.
DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT	Workplace discrimination, harassment, or bullying.
WORKPLACE BULLYING	Experiencing bullying or aggressive behaviour in the workplace.
JOB DISSATISFACTION	Persistent dissatisfaction with one's job or career.

It is important to note that these risk factors are interconnected, and the presence of multiple factors can amplify the risk of work-related stress and burnout. Employers and individuals alike can benefit from identifying and addressing these factors to create a healthier work environment. We invite you to explore Unit 2 - Topic 1 to learn more about each of the common causes of stress and burnout and see Units 4-5-6 of this training course to learn how you can learn to manage them.

IF STRESS WAS A METAPHOR

LIKE A STURDY SHIP

Stress and burnout are two interrelated concepts, but it is often difficult to see where one ends and the other begins.

Imagine that Stress and Burnout are like a relentless storm that batters a sturdy ship. At first, the ship manages to navigate through the turbulent waters, enduring the challenges with resilience. However, as the storm persists without respite, the ship's structure weakens, the crew becomes exhausted, and eventually, the vessel succumbs to the overwhelming pressure.

In this metaphor, stress represents the relentless storm, while burnout symbolizes the gradual deterioration of the ship until it can no longer withstand the strain.



STRESS VS BURNOUT: KEY DIFFERENCES



STRESS

✓ Duration and Intensity

Can be short-term (acute) or long-term (chronic), and it often involves a heightened state of arousal and alertness. Stress can vary in intensity and may be a normal part of life.

✓ Nature of the Response

Is a natural and adaptive response to a perceived threat or challenge. It activates the body's "fight or flight" response, preparing the individual to deal with the stressor.

✓ Work Involvement

Can be related to specific stressors, such as a heavy workload, tight deadlines, or conflicts at work. It doesn't necessarily mean a complete disengagement from work.



BURNOUT

✓ Duration and Intensity

Is typically a chronic and persistent condition, characterized by a state of exhaustion that goes beyond normal fatigue. Burnout is often the result of prolonged and unmanaged stress.

✓ Nature of the Response

It manifests as a cumulative, long-term emotional reaction to unrelieved stress. It often involves feelings of detachment, reduced effectiveness, and a sense of being overwhelmed.

✓ Work Involvement

Often results in a sense of detachment from work and a loss of interest or motivation. Individuals experiencing burnout may become emotionally distant and disengaged from their tasks and responsibilities.



STRESS

✓ **Physical Symptoms**

May manifest in physical symptoms like tension, headaches, and insomnia. These symptoms are often reversible with adequate rest and relaxation.

✓ **Psychological Symptoms**

Can cause heightened anxiety, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. These symptoms often subside once the stressor is addressed or removed.

✓ **Impact on Functioning**

May impact an individual's ability to cope with specific stressors, but with adequate coping strategies and support, it is often reversible.



BURNOUT

✓ **Physical Symptoms**

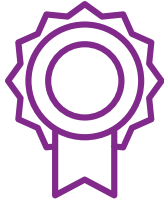
Can lead to more severe and persistent physical symptoms, such as chronic fatigue, frequent illnesses, and changes in appetite. Recovery from burnout may require more comprehensive intervention.

✓ **Psychological Symptoms**

Involves a deeper sense of disillusionment, hopelessness, and a negative outlook toward work. Emotional exhaustion is a central component of burnout.

✓ **Impact on Functioning**

Can have a more profound and lasting impact on an individual's overall functioning, including job performance, relationships, and general well-being. Recovery from burnout may require significant changes in work environment and lifestyle.



GOOD PRACTICES - TIPS



It is all in our mindset!

Turning stress into positive stress, also known as "eustress," involves shifting your mindset and adopting healthy coping mechanisms.



Our response matters!

Remember that it's normal to experience stress, but how you respond to it ultimately determines its impact on your well-being.



Listen to your body!

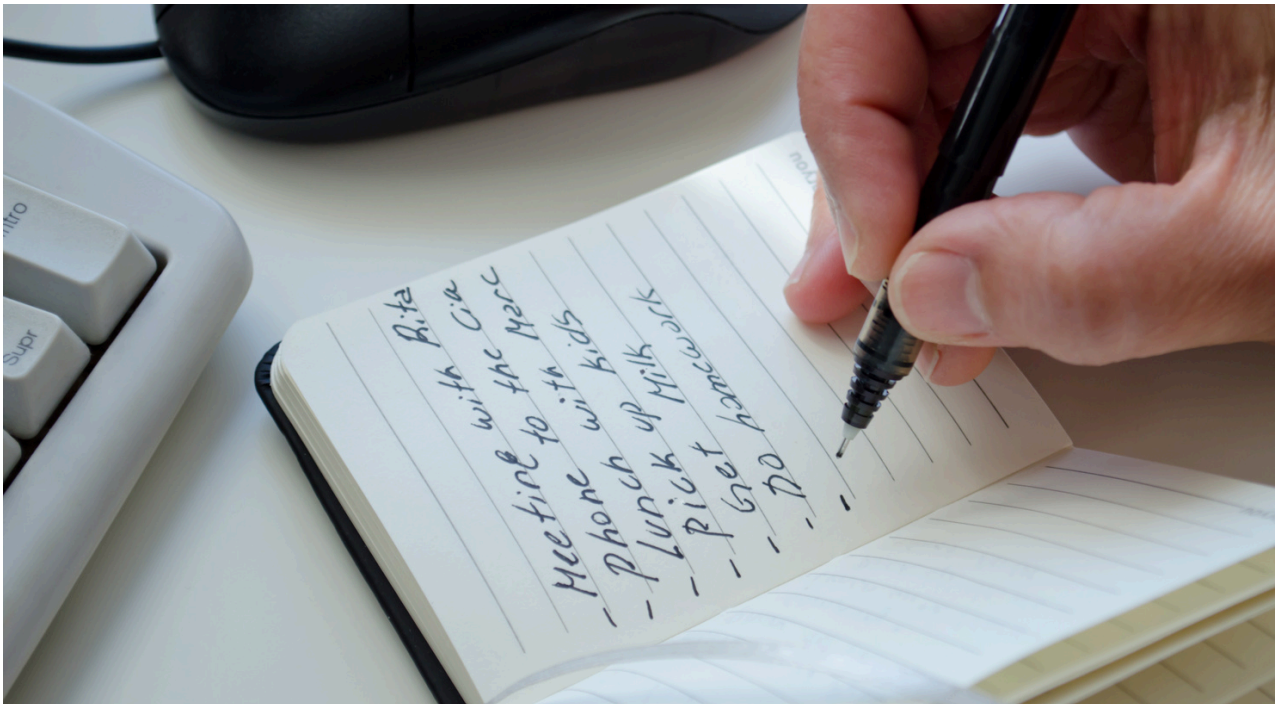
By practicing self-awareness and being attentive to the signs of stress and burnout, you can take proactive steps to address these issues and prioritize your well-being.



Do not hesitate to seek professional help!

If you're unsure whether you're experiencing stress or burnout, or if you're finding it challenging to cope on your own, consider seeking support from a mental health professional.





PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

IDENTIFYING TYPES OF STRESS

Objective:

To recognize and categorize different types of stress by noting down stressful situations and past experiences.

FOLLOW THE STEPS:

- Take a few minutes to reflect on recent stressful situations you have experienced recently. These could be related to work, school, relationships, or personal challenges.
- Write down each stressful situation on a piece of paper.
- Review each one and identify the type of stress or burnout.



PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

Read the following short story and answer the questions below!

Jack is a dedicated software engineer at a fast-paced tech startup. Known for his exceptional coding skills and tireless work ethic, Jack is always the first to arrive at the office and the last to leave. He pours all his energy into meeting tight deadlines and delivering flawless results, often sacrificing his personal time and well-being in the process.

As the demands of his job continue to escalate, Jack finds himself feeling increasingly stressed and overwhelmed. He works long hours, skips meals, and rarely takes breaks, believing that his hard work will eventually pay off. However, despite his best efforts, the pressure continues to mount, and Jack begins to feel the effects of burnout creeping in. One day, Jack hits a breaking point. Exhausted and emotionally drained, he finds himself lacking energy and unable to go into work. He realizes that he has pushed himself too far and neglected his own well-being in the pursuit of success.

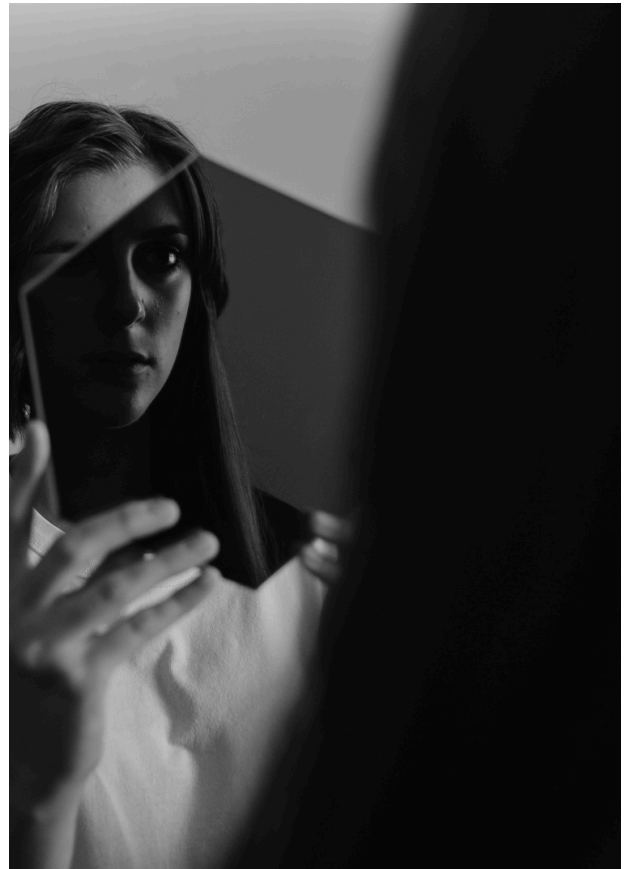
- What type of burnout is Jack dealing with?
- How did Jack's work habits and behaviors contribute to his burnout?
- How did Jack's burnout impact his work performance and personal life?
- What lessons can be learned from Jack's experience, and how can they be applied to prevent burnout in your own life or workplace?

EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

SELF REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Take time to write a reflective essay or journal entry exploring your understanding of stress and burnout.

Take some time to reflect on your recent experiences and feelings. Consider moments when you've felt overwhelmed, exhausted, or emotionally drained.



HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN USE AS REFLECTION POINTS:

- What are the main sources of stress in my life currently?
- How do I typically respond to stressful situations?
- Have I experienced any prolonged periods of exhaustion or decreased motivation?
- How do I differentiate between stress and burnout based on my self-assessment?
- How have stress and burnout impacted my life and well-being?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

Understanding the concepts of stress and burnout is key for managing and preventing these challenges effectively.

02

There are various causes and types of stress, and not all types are considered negative.

03

Burnout is a response to a prolonged stress, and can happen because of overload, under-load and/or neglect.

04

There are key differences between stress and burnout that we need to be aware of, in order to manage them effectively.

ASSESSMENT

01.

What does the term "burnout" refer to in the context of mental health?

- ☐ A- Short-term stress response
- ☐ B- A prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors
- ☐ C- Sudden onset of extreme energy

03.

Which of the following can cause burnout?

- ☐ A- Being under-challenged
- ☐ B- Exercise after work
- ☐ C- Stressed about an exam

02.

Which of the following is NOT a type of stress?

- ☐ A- Eustress
- ☐ B- Burnout
- ☐ C- Acute

04.

Which of the following is key difference between stress and burnout?

- ☐ A- Our biological response
- ☐ B- Duration and Intensity
- ☐ C- No difference, it is the same.

ASSESSMENT

05.

Turning stress into positive stress involves shifting your mindset and adopting healthy coping mechanisms.

☐

A- True

☐

B- False

ASSESSMENT ANSWERS

1-B

2-B

3-A

4-B

5-A

RESOURCE LIBRARY

Explore our resource library to discover more about work-related stress and burnout, how they differ and how they are alike. It is crucial to understand more about this in order to build proper responses to each later on.



UNDERSTANDING JOB BURNOUT

In this eye-opening lecture by Dr. Christina Maslach, Professor of Psychology at the Emerita University of California, Berkeley, you will learn more about what are the reasons that lead to burnout at the workplace.

[WATCH ON YOUTUBE](#)



UNDERSTANDING STRESS

The better you understand stress, the better you will pay attention to what is causing it in your every day life. Watch this video by the Health Museum to learn more about stress, its causes and its consequences.

[WATCH ON YOUTUBE](#)



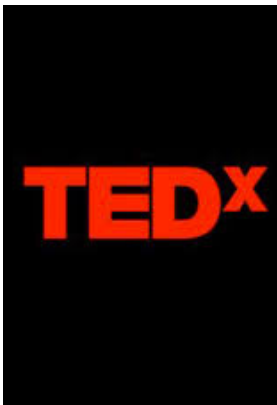
BURNOUT VS STRESS: THE DIFFERENCES

In this video, Mental Health Inclusion Expert-in-Residence Dr. Komal Bhasin shares how stress and burnout are different and how they affect our bodies and minds in different ways.

[WATCH ON YOUTUBE](#)

RESOURCE LIBRARY

Explore our resource library to discover more about work-related stress and burnout, how they differ and how they are alike. It is crucial to understand more about this in order to build proper responses to each later on.



WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Watch this TEDx talk by Tom Oxley, Mental Health Consultant who is a workplace mental health expert – one of the most experienced mental health speakers, advisers and wellbeing trainers across the UK and Europe.

[WATCH ON YOUTUBE](#)

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