

The Resilience Movement

By Nadja Conaghan

Great Minds United

o. The Problem

Does this sound familiar?

High workload and work pressure. Pressing and unrealistic deadlines. Having lunch at your desk to get things done. Long hours. Working on weekends. Taking work home. Drinking more coffee – preferably with an extra shot. Tension and frustration in the team. It feels like others sabotage your work - intentionally do not give you the information you need to do your job or are just too slow. Issues following asleep at night as thoughts about the day and the future popping into your head. Headaches. Tension in your neck and back. Upset stomach...

We all feel stressed from time to time. Stress is a global phenomenon and is a part of life.

“Stress is the spice of life.”

“To be totally without stress is to be dead.”

Hans Selye – “the father of stress research and management”

Stress can give us an energy boost and the focus we need to get stuff done and master a challenge. However, when stress gets too much or becomes chronic, it can make us sick and impact our overall (mental) wellbeing and performance.

Recently, stress caused by work and its related (mental) health conditions, such as burnout, depression and anxiety gain more attention in the media and in many workplaces.

In May 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified burn-out as an *occupational phenomenon* in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).¹ The term burn-out has been already included in the previous edition, however, the definition is now more detailed. This shows that stress and its related conditions are taken very seriously and that we need to act.



ICD-11: Definition of Burnout²

“**Burn-out** is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and 3) reduced professional efficacy. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

Note: Burnout is *NOT* a medical condition.

¹ WHO, 2019

² ICD-11: Burnout

1. Why is this issue so important?

Looking at the numbers and statistic related to stress in Australia shows how severe the issue is.

91% According to the 2014 Lifeline survey, 91% of the surveyed Australian adults reported feeling stressed in at least one of five life factors, namely, *work; finances; thoughts about the future; health; and personal relationships.*³

77% 77% of adult Australians feel stressed because of work – which makes work the top stressor –, followed by 72% who experiencing stress caused by finances.³

49% Alarmingly, almost half of the respondents (49%) reported they had experienced “a lot” of stress in the five areas of their life mentioned above.³

1/3 1/3 of the Australians working in the corporate world are feeling stressed, anxious and depressed.⁴

3.2 Australian employees are absent from work due to stress for an average of 3.2 working days each year.⁵

\$14.2 Workplace related stress costs the Australian economy about \$14.2 billion a year.³

\$10.4 Stress related presenteeism and absenteeism are directly costing Australian employers \$10.4 billion a year.⁵

Noteworthy, healthy employees are up to four times more productive than their unwell peers. So presenteeism, i.e. dragging yourself to work when you are unwell and should not be at work, is very costly.⁶

91% 91% of workers ‘compensation claims in Australia involving a mental health condition (e.g. depression, anxiety, burnout) were linked to work-related stress or mental stress.⁷

In conclusion, stress in the workplace is a severe problem that we can no longer ignore, and we need to take seriously – as an employee and employer.

³ [Lifeline, 2014](#)

⁴ [businessinsider.com.au, April 2018](#)

⁵ [Medibank, 2008](#)

⁶ [Aspc.gov.au](#)

⁷ [safe work Australia \[29 July 2019\]](#)

2. Resilience – the answer?

Wouldn't it be great if everyone would be more **resilient** and tougher in today's very stressful and demanding world?

Resilience is currently a buzzword. Everyone is talking about it, but what does *resilience* actually mean? The Oxford English dictionary⁸ describes the term resilience as "*the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties*" or as "*toughness*".

There are different attempts to define what resilience is. The most promising definition comes from the American Psychological Association (APA):



What is Resilience?⁹

"**Resilience** is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences."

FAQs: My answers to the most asked questions by my clients

Some people seem to be naturally more resilient and tougher than others. Is resilience something you are born with?

Resilience is not so much a trait; but rather a **dynamic process** to deal and bounce back from challenges, i.e. stress. The good news is that even though your personal resilience has a (epi)genetic setpoint, you can change your resilience level through life experience as well as by your own behaviors and mindset. In other words, you can learn and boost your resilience level to a degree.

Is resilience a skill you can learn?

Resilience itself is not a skill, however, is closely linked to skills, mindset and habits. It is the process of using the available resources, suitable learned tools and strategies to manage challenges and stress. In other words, it is the ability to return to a stable state rapidly and effectively with the least possible (long-term) damage after being exposed to a stressful or challenging situation.

Do you need stress to become resilient?

According to the definition above, resilience is revealed in stressful and challenging situations. Exposure to (mild) levels of stress enables you to practise and fine-tune the learned strategies and tools to manage stress. If you have never had the opportunity to practise your resilience strategies and tools, a seemingly small stressor can get you off balance and "bouncing back" can take much longer.

Once resilient, always resilient?

Resilience is not fixed and is rather something dynamic, i.e. In the same situation you can be more or less resilient depending on factors, such as, the available resources, your current capacity and capability, your previous experiences, your mindset and circumstances.

Stress does not bother me - it bounces off me. Does that mean I am resilient?

Being resilient does not mean that you are "Teflon", where stress magically bounces off you and does not leave a mark. If you choose to ignore and deny stress, you may pay for it in the long run with your (mental) health. Resilience is the ability to successfully deal with and recover from stress and remain (mentally) healthy. To be able to do so, first you need to identify and acknowledge that you are stressed.

⁸ <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/resilience>

⁹ American Psychological Association

3. Stress Management – the answer?

When we talk about resilience, we also need to talk about stress. To be more precise, we need to explore about our beliefs about and relationship with stress. We all have a vague idea what stress is and what it feels like. However, the term ‘stress’ is difficult to define and is used inconsistently in everyday life and even in science. Stress means very different things to different people. Some of us wear “being busy and stressed” as a badge of honor and perceive stress as the price we have to pay to be successful and accomplished. Others see it as pure evil and something that is completely out of their control.

Stress is a normal response that we experience when we are overwhelmed and cannot cope. In fact, we need stress – as Hans Selye said, “*Without stress, there would be no life.*”

The definition from World Health Organization (WHO) provides possible answers what stress in the context of work is and what can be done to prevent and manage stress successfully, and therefore, become resilient:



What is Work-related Stress?¹⁰

“Work-related stress is the response people *may* have when presented with **work demands and pressures** that are not matched to their **knowledge and abilities** and which challenge **their ability to cope.**”

Develop a toolkit with suitable and effective coping strategies & tools and resources.

Even when the demands are bigger than your skills and knowledge, you may not perceive the situation as stress, instead feel challenged and see an opportunity to grow and learn as long as you are **able to cope** and have the required **resources**. Your coping strategies will determine if you manage the situation successfully or not.

Note: Coping strategies are habits, i.e. your default strategies, habits/routines and tools you have in place to deal and overcome a potentially stressful situation.

Change work demands and pressures.

An organizational approach to reduce stress is to change the work demands and pressures. This includes modifying work content, working hours, time pressure, workload and work pace, access to resources, general working conditions and organizational/team culture.

Change your perception or mindset.

Stress is something **subjective** and a **personal experience**. This means the same event can be perceived differently by two different people who have the same knowledge, abilities and available resources. Even more interestingly, the same person may perceive the same event differently depending on the circumstances and previous experience.



Enhance and utilize abilities, skills and knowledge.

You may experience stress when you feel you lack experience, skills, knowledge but also if your skills/ knowledge are underutilized.

Boost and utilise your personal knowledge and skills through experience/exposure and getting opportunities as well as through training and coaching.

¹⁰ WHO – Stress at the workplace

4. Prevention and Intervention

Based on the WHO stress definition above, there are two approaches to create and support a resilient workforce and work environment.

A. Organizational and structural changes to create a (mentally) healthy work environment and culture



What parts of the WHO stress definition are addressed?

Organizational and structural interventions address stress caused by **work demands and pressures**.

Organizational and structural interventions aim to create work conditions and work environments that reduce the risk of stress.

To achieve this, organizations assess risks and processes (i.e. “the way work is done”) to then improve the physical environment and work organization. The latter includes systems, policies, procedures, processes, physical and mental demands, work characteristics and the organizational context.¹¹

According to a meta-evaluation (2012), embedding work health and wellbeing into organizational systems and culture is linked to long-term benefits, such as, the reduction of stress and poor mental health, better health status and improved productivity.¹²

B. Training and wellbeing programs



What parts of the WHO stress definition are addressed?

Training and wellbeing programs help the individual to develop and boost their personal resilience. The following areas are addressed:

- Personal coping strategies
- Individual's perception and mindset
- Individual's knowledge and abilities

Resilience & wellbeing training and programs aim to...

1. Enable and empower the individual to succeed at work and become resilient, by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, skills, tools and strategies as well as mindset.
2. Create a “resilience culture”.

A systematic review (2015) showed that resilience (training) programs can improve personal resilience and are linked to positive mental health and subjective wellbeing outcomes in employees (incl. reduced subjective stress) and performance.¹³

¹¹ Worksafe.qld.gov.au – Health and wellbeing at work

¹² Chapman I.S. Meta-evaluation of worksite health promotion economic return studies: 2012 update. *The Art of Health Promotion* 2012; 26(4).


¹³ Robertson, I., Cooper, C. L., Sarkar, M., & Curran, T. (2015). Resilience training in the workplace from 2003-2014: A systematic review. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 88, 533-562.

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