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Burnout takes years to develop and years to beat. Individuals and organisations need to be alert to the risks as it wreaks havoc on mind, body and employee engagement.

STORY THEA O'CONNOR ILLUSTRATION GREG BAKES

JO JEWITT CAN remember the conversation she had with her boss three years ago, about why she wasn't hitting sales targets. With 12 years' experience leading sales, service and operations teams, Jewitt was normally resilient during such conversations. This time, a wave of nausea and dizziness swept over her.

That bout of vertigo was the last of a string of symptoms Jo Jewitt finally acknowledged as a sign that things had to change. Intermittent chest pain that travelled to her arm had been present for several years.

After two years of working 10- to 12-hour days while studying for a Master of Business Administration degree, preceded by 18 months of 12-hour days, her body was complaining and her mind beginning to falter.

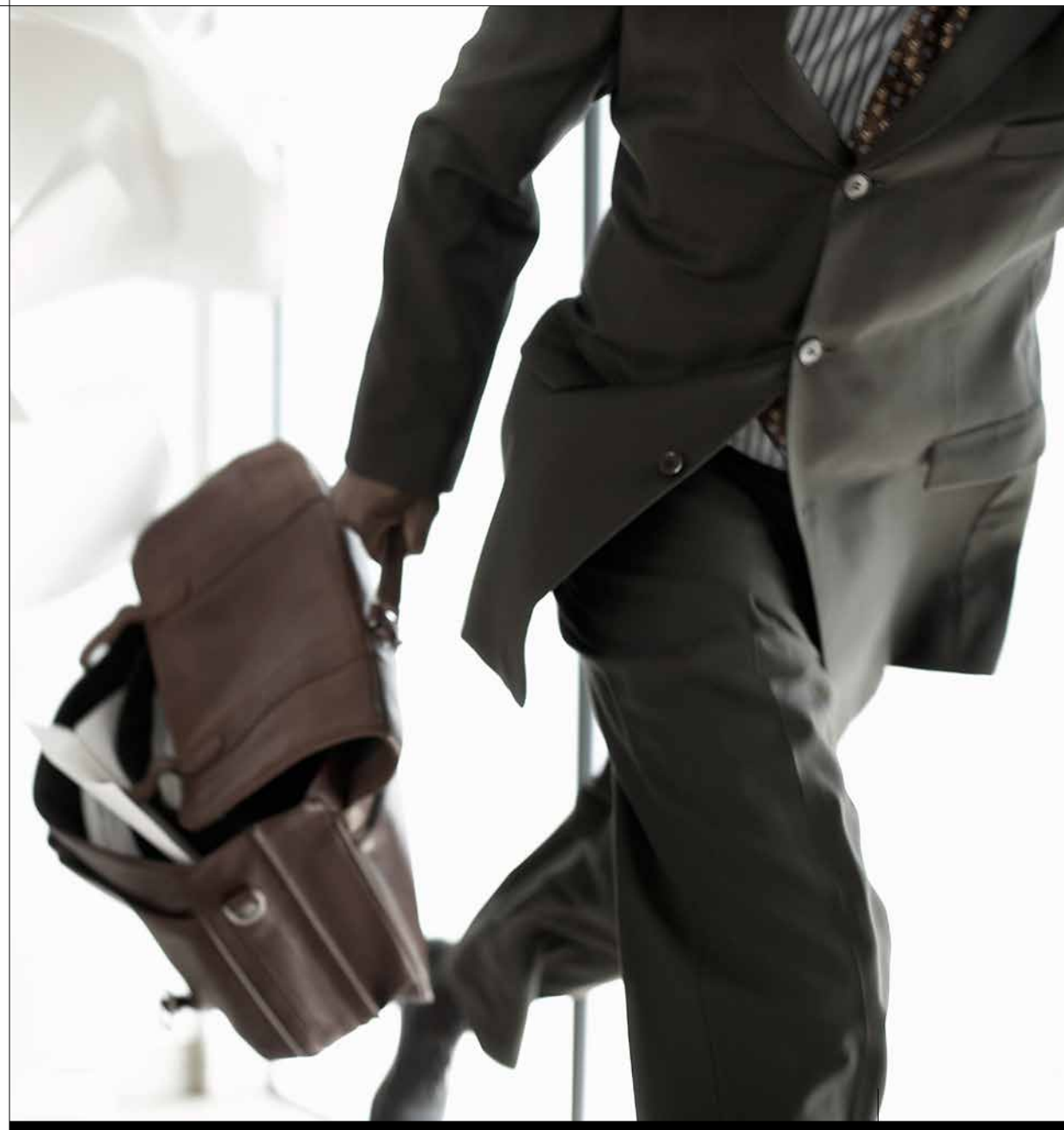
"I started forgetting things and ultimately sabotaging myself by underperforming," Jewitt says. After finally quitting her job in the insurance industry, Jewitt found she couldn't go near an office without having an anxiety attack. It shocked her, but not those who work at the coal-face of executive burnout.

Psychotherapist Sue Robertson has worked in employee assistance programs in corporate settings. "I've had senior male consultants from large corporate finance firms in my office completely dismantled," she says. "They present in tears, cry all the way through the session and they don't understand why. When you ask them about their life, they are spending all of their time working and their relationships and friendships are in tatters. Given a safe space, enormous grief pours out about what they have lost and who they have become."

Burnout is a layperson's description of the meltdown that can result from prolonged workplace stress. It's not a medical diagnosis, but can lead to a number of serious mental and physical health problems, including depression and anxiety, immune deficiency disorders and gastrointestinal problems.

Dr Craig Hassed is a mindfulness expert with the Department of General Practice at Monash University in Melbourne. He explains the high cost of normalising the early warning signs of burnout, such as hyper stress.

"When you continually push yourself to keep going despite constant tiredness, your body starts to carry a heavy allostatic load [the body's response to constantly switching in and out of high stress]," he says. "This physiological wear and tear is associated with impaired immunity, metabolic syndrome [overweight, high blood pressure, high blood glucose and fats], accelerated osteoporosis, thickening of the arteries and impaired functioning of the learning and executive centres of the brain. An overstimulated



sympathetic nervous system also interferes with sleep quality, leaving you even more tired, and reduces serotonin production, making depression more likely."

Little wonder, then, that a third of cardiovascular disease in men and a third of depression cases in women are attributable to job stress, according to an international literature review commissioned by VicHealth.

Workplace stress even ages your DNA prematurely. A study of 2911 men and women aged 30 to 64, conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, found those who were exhausted from job stress had shorter telomeres – the ends of their chromosomes – than other

workers. Telomere shortening has been associated with Parkinson's disease, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Employee disengagement is a defining feature of burnout, so it isn't just people's personal health that suffers.

The most studied measurement of burnout, the Maslachs Burnout Inventory, defines three markers of its presence: emotional exhaustion; performance depersonalisation, or cynicism about one's work; and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. "I always cared about the people I worked with," Jewitt says, "but I got to the point where I didn't care about the job or that I wasn't performing."

Pathways to wellness

♥ Ramsay Health Care, winner of the 2012 Mental Health Promoting Workplace Award, fosters wellness in the workplace in several ways, including flexible work and leave arrangements, telecommuting, a buddy system for doctors and nurses from different cultures and performance management plans that include work-life balance questions.

♥ Managers are trained so they can have meaningful conversations about how employees are coping and encourage part-time work if it helps to meet employees' family responsibilities.

♥ "We continually ask our workers – what are the key pressures in your life and what can we do to reduce them," says Genevieve D'Adam, national wellness and employee benefits manager at Ramsay Health Care, which employs 23,000 staff Australia-wide.

♥ "Parenting stress and mortgage stress are current hot topics, which is why Ramsay is making the Triple P parenting program available to staff as well as bringing in experts to address parenting issues such as bullying and social media," says D'Adam, who never works on weekends or checks her emails after 6pm.

US\$300 billion

Estimated annual cost to US of absenteeism and health care of stressed employees.

SOURCE: US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health



"The more I see leaders run their businesses like they are at war, 'killing' their competitors or referring to employees who engage with customers as 'frontline troops', the more likely I am to see burnout."

KAMAL SARMA, REZILIUM

Despite the debilitating effects of burnout, the stigma of not coping deters workers from speaking up, according to Robyn McNeill, founder of stress management consultancy Beating Burnout: "People are scared of losing their jobs."

Jewitt feared being overlooked for promotion. "As a young manager trying to work my way up the ladder I thought I had to tough it out. I was worried about the impact of taking stress leave on others' perception of my performance."

One possible perception is that burnout sorts strong high-performers from the sensitive and highly strung. However, the VicHealth review debunks the belief, with research confirming that all types of people are susceptible. So-called "negative personality" accounts for only a small part of the relationship between job stress and poor health.

Nonetheless, personal traits and beliefs do play a role. "I'm a bit of a perfectionist, always wanting to strive to be the best," Jewitt says. "I was pretty hard on myself."

McNeill's own path was formed by her challenge-driven nature and a belief that she had to earn a certain level of income to be successful. "I was so caught up on the money train, which just kept gathering speed until I couldn't get off."

When a driven personality is immersed in a competitive work culture offering handsome rewards for going the extra distance, some can't help but go all out whatever the cost.

Peter Selinger – given the opportunity to become managing director of the leisure division of Bateaux London, one of the world's biggest facilities and catering contract management firms – threw himself into the role, working 15-hour days four days a week and 10 hours on the others.

"Did my former employer ask me to work 80 hours a week? No. Did they reward me hand-some-ly for performance? Yes," Selinger says.

"I could earn an extra 30 per cent of my annual package if I hit my KPIs. That was a huge driver."

Working conditions play a critical role in workplace stress. Professions or workplaces that entail long hours, heavy workloads, high pressure, little control over work, lack of participation in decision making, poor social support and unclear roles are likely to be hothouses for burnout.

A war-like workplace culture is also a high-risk environment, according to Kamal Sarma, director of strategic leadership company Rezilium. "The more I see leaders run their businesses like they are at war, 'killing' their competitors or referring to employees who engage with customers as 'frontline troops', the more likely I am to see burnout," he says. "The thing about war is that it often causes post-traumatic stress disorder."

Andrew Noblet, associate professor at Deakin University's Graduate School of Business, specialises in taking a comprehensive systems approach to stress in the workplace. "For job stress prevention it's absolutely critical to look at how you manage employees and to identify and minimise the sources of job stress," Noblet says. "Then, and only then, equip individuals to cope with the strains of working life."

At STW Communications Group, senior executives can participate in a series of workshops comprising a Burnout Inoculator program run by Rezilium. Chief digital officer David Trewern participated in the "mental resilience" day.

While focused on individual skills, the course also helped shift peer culture, according to Trewern. "It's challenging to get personal in a corporate environment, but doing the course together helped us be more understanding of each other and to be more honest about the fact we only have so many good hours in us per week. We can acknowledge when we are not feeling great, rather than put on bravado, which can have a negative impact."

Those who reach the point of burnout soon discover that it takes more than a good holiday to fully recover. For many it takes years.

It was only when Selinger and his wife moved from Britain to Australia for a new start and >



“I’ve redefined success as having a balanced lifestyle, having time for my relationships and time to give back to others. Money is well down the list.”

ROBYN MCNEILL, BEATING BURNOUT

healthier lifestyle that they realised just how hard they’d been pushing themselves. “Initially, all we wanted to do was sleep and we couldn’t understand it,” Selinger says.

“It took us a little while to realise we were suffering burnout, which we thought was just for wimps. It took us three years to recover and five years before feeling truly happy again.”

Now head of commercial and visitor services at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, Selinger is much more mindful of the need for downtime after busy work periods, both for himself and his staff.

Jewitt also took three years to feel well again. “To begin with I just read and slept a lot, peeling back the onion to rediscover who I was,” she says. Her recovery involved re-engaging with the creative things she loved. “I started singing, which makes me happy. It literally took my chest pain away.”

Monash University’s Hased believes mindfulness techniques may well reduce recovery time by rewiring our stress response.

“With chronic stress the amygdala, a centre of the brain associated with anxiety, gets bigger and more reactive,” he says.

“It will remain that way, even when you change to a less stressful job, unless reprogrammed. The practice of mindfulness actually reduces the size of the amygdala, reducing anxiety.”

For O’Neill, understanding the brain’s stress response made a critical difference. So did redefining success.

“My definition of success used to be about status, income and the house I lived in,” she says. “I’ve managed to redefine success as having a balanced lifestyle, having time for my relationships and time to give back to others. Money is well down the list.”

Burnout sufferers typically report how they ignored the early warning signs, such as feeling overwhelmed, cumulative tiredness, loss of joy, reactive thinking and physical symptoms.

“Your body talks to you,” Jewitt says. “Have the strength to listen to it, or you’ll end up very sick.” ■

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Further reading

Access these CPA Library items at cpaaustralia.com.au/guide_burnout

How to Improve Your Personal Resilience, by A Davda and V Culpin, *Public Finance*, 2012

Do Leaders Really Need to be Tired?, by M Cannon, *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2011

The Leader in Midlife, by R J Leider, *Business Strategy Series*, 2008

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A systems approach to stress prevention

- Ensure a good job fit through thorough job analysis and effective recruitment.
- Make sure employees are trained and properly equipped to do their job well.
- Demonstrate supportive leadership – support from direct supervisors is critical to job stress prevention.
- Allow participatory decision-making – give workers a say about factors that affect them.
- Recognise and reward people – so they know when they are performing to a required level and how they can improve.
- Communicate clearly one-to-one and across the organisation to ensure people have the information needed to their job.
- Provide job clarity so people know what they are meant to be doing.

SOURCE: ANDREW NOBLET, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Make health a KPI: Kennett

Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett, founding chairman of beyondblue, a national depression initiative, says the mental and physical health of workers is the joint responsibility of employees and employers.



“People won’t turn their back on you if you talk about how you are feeling. They are more likely to turn their back because of behaviour they don’t understand.”

JEFF KENNETT

“Employers are responsible for the environment in which their employees work, including creating a happy workforce,” Kennett says. “If employees really are an organisation’s finest asset then organisations should invest in their health, including running a mental health education program twice a year. “A well-educated workforce is more likely to notice people who are

struggling and get them into early treatment, increasing the chances of a cure.

“Investing in health leads to better productivity and so financial results. It’s not rocket science. Why shouldn’t the mental and physical condition of employees be a KPI of organisations that could be measured through indicators such as absenteeism or productivity?”

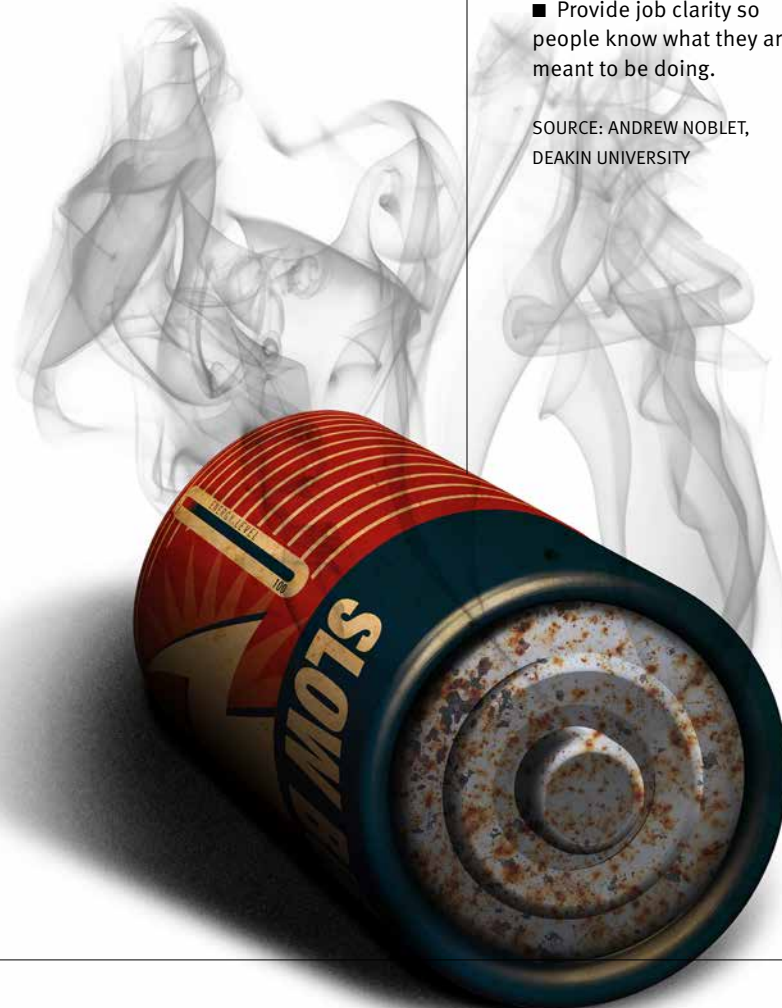
Kennett is also a strong advocate of taking personal responsibility for your own wellbeing.

His own burnout prevention program includes exercising daily, doing a quick debrief at the end of the day regarding what went well and what didn’t and always turning his phone off at night. It’s a process that served him well as premier and he still uses it.

“That way I’m physically tired when I go to bed and I’ve got things off my mind. If you go to bed with issues, that affects the quality of your sleep and how you face the next day.”

His advice for those struggling at work but who don’t speak up: “See your doctor – it’s not a crime to be ill. It is a crime not to seek help, because it’s not only you that’s affected – it’s also family and friends.

“People won’t turn their back on you if you talk about how you are feeling. They are more likely to turn their back because of behaviour they don’t understand.”



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