

# Manage stress to prevent burnout

Balancing your needs and available resources will help you to cope with life's demands

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**S**tress is an inevitable part of life and small amounts of it are necessary for healthy living. However, when stress turns into a chronic condition and the chances of it easing are slim, we begin to experience the common negative mental and physical reactions such as burnout, depression, panic and even illness.

Richard Hawkey, a 40-year-old senior portfolio manager at one of South Africa's major banks, says he ignored the signs of stress and burnout for many years, possibly even a decade. "You don't realise you have it until it's staring you in the face, leaving you unable to function. I was doing a job I found unfulfilling and even though I was good at it, it left me feeling hollow and unsatisfied."

For Hawkey, the symptoms built up slowly, until — over the course of a 10-day holiday with his family — he lost his appetite and his desire to have fun, and he started obsessing and dreading his return to city life. It was then that he decided to seek help and booked an appointment with his general practitioner.

According to the World Health Organisation, between 50% and 80% of all visits to the general practitioner are rooted in a stress-related illness. "Stress can be thought of as a relationship between demands, for example, time, tasks or people, and coping resources, for example, good health, finances or support systems," says Johannesburg clinical psychologist Dr Colinda Linde. "If there is no balance between these, we do not have enough resources to deal with everyday demands and we begin to experience strain — this is what is commonly referred to as stress."

Specific to the work environment, burnout is the result of excessive work demands over an extended period of time. "When this negativity spreads to other areas of a person's life, depression may develop."

Hawkey's symptoms included headaches, backaches, colds, extreme tiredness, fluctuating appetite, low libido and poor sleep. "I struggled



**Just relax: Yoga and meditation are said to go a long way in combating stress.** Photo: Lisa Skinner

to get to sleep and then woke in the early hours, worrying about the day ahead."

He also struggled with concentration and felt quite angry. "The smallest things would trigger a reaction far out of proportion and I caught myself shouting at my boys, my wife and, to a lesser degree, my work colleagues. I was very negative. And although I never attempted suicide, I went from being someone who arrogantly decreed that it was an act of gross selfishness to fundamentally

understanding why someone like me could contemplate ending their life."

Financial difficulties have been a worldwide trend for several years and, in South Africa, these pressures are compounded by political unrest and crime — further sources of chronic stress for many people. Linde says: "We are witnessing higher levels of burnout as people try to hold on to their jobs, in the process accepting longer working hours for less pay.

"Depression is another risk for peo-

## Healthy lifestyle habits

- Allow yourself to cry
- Practise deep breathing
- Try yoga, meditation and visualisation
- Eat a healthy diet
- Exercise in a way you enjoy, such as dancing
- Spend some time gardening
- Get plenty of rest, not just sleep
- Take up a hobby
- Indulge in a hot bath or shower
- Enjoy affection from loved ones
- Keep a journal
- Draw up a to-do list to put your mind at ease
- Laugh
- Go for a massage
- Use positive self-talk
- Read interesting literature
- Realise your own limitations
- Share your stress with family, friends, support groups, counsellors, churches or helplines
- Spend some time alone
- Volunteer at a church, hospital, the SPCA or an old-age home
- Try something completely different, like ice skating or hiking
- Get a pet, or volunteer to walk a neighbour's dog

ple who are retrenched and struggle to find other employment, or for those with advanced burnout."

A major hurdle for many is coming to terms with the fact that certain problems are beyond their control. Linde advises people to separate what they can control, such as their reactions to a situation, from what is uncontrollable and will only waste their time and energy.

"If you have limited resources, allocate them to where you have the best chance of success. For example, if you are experiencing marital problems, poor business turnover and conflict with extended family, it may be best to focus on your business, thinking of innovative ways to secure new business. Utilising resources in this area will have a positive effect on family and personal wellbeing. If you spend energy on worrying instead, you will not only be left with no progress, but will also have fewer resources left."

Emphasising the importance of support, Linde says: "If you need to 'borrow' some energy, speak to a counsellor or psychologist. Medication can also help."

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group is available seven days a week, from 8am to 8pm on 0800 21 22 23, and can recommend a suitable therapist, often trained in cognitive behavioural therapy — a very effective treatment for stress, depression and anxiety.

Knowing when to ask for help may prevent more serious problems. It is also vital that you make time for fun. Everyone needs a break from their daily routine to just relax.

During his recovery, Hawkey found his family's unconditional love and

support invaluable. He also used medication and cognitive behavioural therapy, he read literature on the subject and made significant lifestyle changes. "I started eating more healthily, cut down on caffeine, exercised gently most days and meditated. I also finally admitted that a feeling of fulfilment and purpose was essential and then I could no longer 'suck it up for the salary', so I quit my job."

Hawkey's path through stress and burnout has taught him that life is worthless if you are not happy. "Material possessions can never give you that feeling of happiness and far too many people are living a half-life, a life less lived."

Now on a new course, Hawkey has documented his journey in his brutally honest and powerful book, *Life Less Lived*.

His advice to companies is to start treating individuals as the "most valuable assets" many of their vision statements say they are.

"Educate all staff on how to recognise signs of excess stress in themselves, their colleagues and their families and equip them with the techniques to build resilience. Companies need to realise that stress management is not a nice-to-have soft and fluffy human resources issue — it truly impacts the bottom line."

Hawkey advises other men in a similar situation to "speak up and seek help. You can and will get better; you just have to acknowledge that you need help and then have the will to do something about it.

"Have the courage to find the root cause and don't just treat the symptoms if you want a lasting recovery."