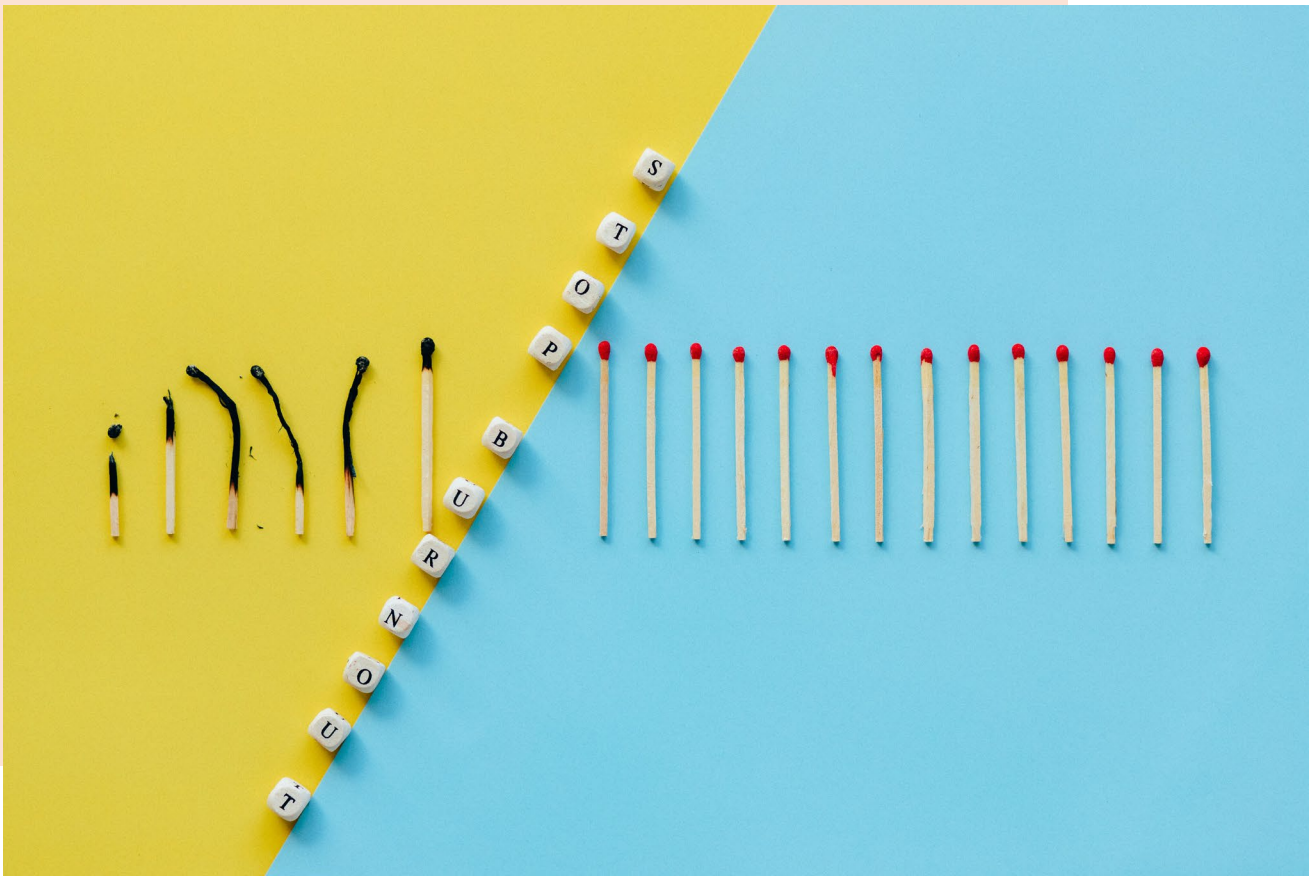

Source. Nataliya Vaitkevich in Pexels, 2021.

Workplace Stress and Burnout: A Global Crisis and Call to Action

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This problem situation was written by Michiel Frederick Coetzer (michiel.coetzer@tec.mx), with the purpose of serving as discussion material in the classroom; it does not intend to illustrate good or bad administrative practices. This document was elaborated from secondary sources.

Tecnológico de Monterrey
Escuela de Negocios

The Global Stress, Burnout, and Mental Ill-Health Crisis

Workplace stress has reached alarming levels. Stress is defined as a person's adaptive reaction to high physical or psychological demands (Griffen et al., 2020). If negative stress (also known as distress) occurs over long periods it causes burnout which ultimately leads to physical and mental ill-health (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Globally, 41% percent of employees reported high stress levels, an increasing trend since 2013 (Gallup, 2024b). In the United States alone, a startling 79% of employees reported high work-related stress (Abramson, 2022) and 37% of adults in this region reported a significant increase in stress levels over the past year (Statista, 2023b). In Latin America, 80% of employees reported high stress levels (Guarino, 2022).

Another global problem is burnout. Burnout is classified as an occupational phenomenon in the International Classifications of Diseases (ICD-11) (World Health Organization, 2024b) and is defined as an employee work-related state characterized by high exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment (Schaufeli, 2003). Employees with burnout experience three main symptoms, namely (1) energy depletion or exhaustion, (2) mental distance from work, and (3) reduced personal efficacy (World Health Organization, 2024b). An imbalance of unmanageable job demands and a lack of job resources normally lead to burnout (Beer et al., 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and can also be the result of unmanageable and chronic workplace stress (World Health Organization, 2024b).

Globally, burnout levels increased to 40% (Future Forum, 2022), and as a result, 36% of global employees experienced cognitive weariness, 32% suffered from emotional exhaustion, and 44% experienced physical fatigue (Abramson, 2022). The latter figure represents a daunting 38% increase since 2019 (Abramson, 2022). A study from Microsoft, which included 20,000 employees across 15 countries, revealed that 48% of global employees and 53% of global managers experienced burnout (Microsoft, 2022). Several other studies reported similar results (Taylor, 2023).

Latin American countries seem to battle with burnout. In Mexico, 75% of employees suffer from burnout (Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), 2023). Another study revealed burnout rates of 86% in Argentina, 82% in Chile, 78% in Panama, 74% in Ecuador, and 66% in Peru (Guarino, 2022). A more recent study reported much higher burnout levels in Latin America, with rates of 94% in Argentina, 91% in Chile, and 83% in Ecuador (Forbes, 2023). These statistics are significantly higher than burnout rates in other parts of the world. For example, in the United States burnout rates are 42% (Statista, 2024), while in Europe, Poland has the highest rate with 70% (Statista, 2022).

Poor mental health is a third global concern and is perceived as a result of work-related stress and burnout. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) indicated that 1 out of 5 adults in the United States suffer from mental illness. Mental ill-health is unfortunately also on the rise with a staggering 50% increase in mental disorders worldwide (Children's Hope Chest, 2023). The Harvard Medical School (2023) predicts that 1 out of 2 people will live with a mental health disorder during their lifetime. Thus, it is no surprise that mental health is considered one of the biggest problems in the world (Statista, 2023a) and the second greatest concern in organizations (SHRM, 2024).

Stress, Burnout, and Mental Ill-Health Among Younger Generations

Younger generations, especially Gen Z and Millennials, are grappling with high levels of stress and anxiety. An alarming 46% of Gen Z and 39% of Millennials reported feeling stressed or anxious all or most of the time (Deloitte, 2023). The levels of burnout are also alarming within these generations. In the case of Gen Z, 52% experienced burnout in 2023, compared to 46% in 2022. For Millennials, this figure is at 49% in 2023, compared to 45% in 2022 (Deloitte, 2023). Shockingly, statistics reveal that 36% of Gen Z individuals feel exhausted all or most of the time, while 35% feel mentally distanced from their work, and 42% often struggle to perform at their best. The numbers are not significantly different for Millennials, where these figures stand at 30%, 28%, and 40%, respectively (Deloitte, 2023). The inconsistency of burnout levels among different generations was confirmed by another study which reported that 49% of people aged between 18 and 29 experienced burnout, while

only 38% of workers aged 30 and older experienced it (Future Forum, 2022). These statistics highlight a growing stress and burnout crisis among younger generations, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address and mitigate stress and burnout.

Stress, Burnout, and Mental Ill-Health Among Women

Although stress, burnout, and mental ill-health are common among both men and women, women seem to experience more stress, burnout, and mental ill-health than men. For example, in a study, 61% of women and 52% of men experienced work-related stress (Saad et al., 2021). Another study revealed that female workers experienced 32% more burnout than males (Future Forum, 2022). In terms of mental ill-health, depression and anxiety disorders are about 50% more common among women than men (World Health Organization, 2022). In younger generations, 54% of Gen Z females experience burnout versus 37% of their male counterparts, while 43% male versus 35% female Millennials experience burnout (Deloitte, 2023).

The Consequences of Stress and Burnout

Individual Consequences

Stress and burnout have detrimental consequences for individuals, organizations, and societies. On an individual level, stress and burnout will cause physical and psychological ill-health (Abramson, 2022; Zhang et al., 2018). For instance, stress and burnout have been associated with higher physical illnesses, such as cardiovascular diseases (Adebayo et al., 2023; Honkonen et al., 2006; Melamed et al., 1992, 2006), hypercholesterolemia, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, musculoskeletal pain, gastrointestinal diseases, respiratory problems, severe injuries, and even mortality (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Cardiovascular diseases are considered one of the top causes of death worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024a). Burnout also causes mental ill-health such as depression, anxiety (Koutsimani et al., 2019), insomnia, memory impairment (Peterson et al., 2008), mental disorders, and other psychological ill-health symptoms (Salvagioni et al., 2017).

Organizational Consequences

Stress and burnout not only affect individuals but also organizations. For example, stress and burnout have been associated with negative organizational outcomes, such as high employee turnover (Özkan, 2022; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010; Willard-Grace et al., 2019), workplace violence (Giménez Lozano et al., 2021), workplace accidents (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022; Kotti et al., 2017), job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and presenteeism (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Furthermore, stress and burnout reduced job performance (Dall'Ora et al., 2020; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010), productivity (Jun et al., 2021; Leitão et al., 2021), commitment (Jun et al., 2021), and innovation (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022) in companies. Stress and burnout may thus be potential reasons for six out of every ten employees to be quietly quitting (Harter, 2022) while only 23% of the world's employees are fully engaged in their work (Gallup, 2024a).

Socio-Economic Consequences

The stress, burnout, and mental ill-health crises extend beyond individual workplaces, reverberating throughout society and the global economic landscape. In the United States alone, the healthcare spending of employees with physical or psychological illnesses due to burnout is estimated at between $125 billion (USD) and $190 billion (USD) (Garton, 2017). An alarming $23 billion is also spent annually in this region on work productivity loss due to depression (SHRM, 2024). Furthermore, mental illness is projected to contribute to an astronomical $16 trillion (USD) in lost global output by 2030 (SHRM, 2024). Depression, one of the most prevalent mental health conditions, is estimated to cause an astonishing 200 million lost workdays annually (SHRM, 2024). Low engagement costs the global economy $8.8 trillion (USD), 9% of the worldwide GDP, enough to make the difference between success and failure for humanity (Gallup, 2024b).

Causes of Stress, Burnout, and Mental Ill-Health

High job demands and low job resources are considered the main contributors to stress and burnout. The job demands-resources model indicates that a lack of job resources in combination with high and unmanageable job demands, will cause burnout and stress (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), which will then lead to physical and mental ill-health (De Beer, Rothmann, & Pienaar, 2012). In contrast, manageable job demands with sufficient job resources will not only decrease burnout but also increase employees' work engagement levels (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Job demands are job expectations that will drain physical and mental energy and they include workload, emotional load, and mental load (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Job resources are the resources available for the employee at work that will neutralize the negative effects of the job demands (Hu et al., 2011). Job resources can be clustered into social resources, positional resources, organizational resources, and developmental resources. Hence, if companies want to decrease stress, burnout, and mental ill-health in their organizations, it is imperative to decrease job demands while increasing job resources on an individual, team, and organizational level.

A Call to Action

Considering the dire statistics above, it is evident that a comprehensive and strategic response is urgently required to address these issues. If the workplace does not make people miserable at least, it can kill people at worst. Stress, burnout, and mental ill-health problems are certainly linked to unhealthy and ineffective organizational environments. Addressing the issue of employees' well-being and mental health is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic necessity for organizations to maintain their effectiveness. Additionally, it is imperative to resolve this in society to prevent further erosion of mental ill-health and to foster economic prosperity in the world.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) calls upon organizations to prioritize the well-being of their employees and take active steps to address these critical issues, further reinforcing the imperative to act decisively. Resolving these global problems requires a systematic approach as mental ill-health is a consequence of stress and burnout resulting from high job demands and low job resources.

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