



## Mental Health in the Workplace

How to detect signs of stress related mental illness



### Background & facts

- Burnout (Swe: "Utmattningssyndrom") with or without depression, leads to longer sick leaves compared to most other illnesses in Sweden.
- Rehabilitation time often takes 6 months or more.
- Cases of stress related mental illness contributes to an ever larger percentage of all sick leaves in Sweden.
- Female are at a much higher risk of developing stress related illness as compared to men.

Source: Försäkringskassan 2020



### What is stress? A few definitions...

- When demands and expectations does not match our current abilities, knowledge and/or best efforts to cope with a given situation.
- Psychological and physiological reactions to when internal and external demands are not balanced.
- Psychological and physiological reactions to when we are exposed to a life threatening situation.
- A necessary and vital hormonal response that mobilizes our bodies and minds to perform and/or avert threats by entering the "fight"-, "flight"-, or "freeze"- modes!



## Demands and resources

### Examples of demands (stressors)

Workload  
Re-organization  
Conflicts  
Unclear job roles  
Attention shifting  
Time frames and deadlines  
Complex tasks  
Emotional and relational stress  
Cognitive strain  
Poorly defined tasks



### Examples of resources

Working methods  
Tools/aids  
Social support from colleagues and managers  
Feedback  
Mandate and room for action (control)  
Possibility to recover/rest

**A mismatch between resources and demands is perceived as stress!**

Resources



**= Threat!**

**Stress is mediated by social support from...**

- ...supervisors
- ...colleagues
- ...friends & family
- ...partners/spouses



## The fast and slow stress systems: a brief overview

### The fast stress system

- Part of the Autonomous Nervous System (ANS)
- Active hormonal agent: Adrenaline
- Purpose: To prepare the body and the psyche to a quick adaptive behavioural response as a perceived threat appears
- Typical trigger situation 300.000 years ago: A sabre tooth tiger attack or a wildfire
- Typical current triggers: Being late for an important presentation (and poorly prepared), or being yelled at one's supervisor (conflict).

### The slow stress system

- Part of the Autonomous Nervous System (ANS)
- Active hormonal agent: Cortisol
- Purpose: To signal that it is time to put the body and mind to rest and to recover
- Typical (probably?) situation 300.000 years ago: Exhaustion after a hectic hunting season
- Typical current situation: Burnout and/or depression after working too hard, during a sustained and prolonged period of time, with insufficient amount of rest, self-care and recovery time

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## Worth noting...

Long before reaching exhaustion, the body sends out signals that are known as "symptoms".

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## Symptoms of chronic stress A few examples

### Cognitive

Rumination  
Catastrophic thinking  
Self-criticism/self-blame  
Hopelessness thinking  
Disastrous thinking  
Memory and concentration deficit  
Sensory sensitivity  
Executive function deficit

### Emotional

Irritability, aggressiveness  
Worry, anxiety  
Impaired patience  
Shame  
Guilt  
Depression

### Stress behaviours

Skipping breaks  
Procrastination  
"Hurry sickness"  
Multitasking  
Isolation/withdrawal  
Limitless working

### Physiological

Head aches  
Gastrointestinal problems  
Fast and hard heart beats  
Shallow breathing and/or hyperventilation  
Ache and pain  
Lack of energy  
Dizziness  
Sleep disturbances  
Restlessness

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## Examples of cognitive symptoms

### 1. Worry/anxiety related thoughts

- Rumination = Endless problem solving without finding the solution
- Fast thinking = Thinking at high speeds, thinking simultaneously about several creative solutions to problems.
- Catastrophic thinking (Crystal ball) = *"What if I fail again, they will fire me, and then I will lose my apartment and my partner..."*

### 2. Depressive thoughts

- Self criticism & self blame = *"I failed, therefore I am a loser..."*
- Hopelessness thinking = *"The future is dark and uncertain and everything is hopeless"*
- Ditomic thinking (black or white) = *"Others always seem so happy and I always feel bad..."*
- Memory deficit = Having trouble doing head calculations or remember where your keys are

### 3. Executive functions deficit

- Concentration deficit = Unable to read a paper continuously for more than 10 min before losing focus or getting tired.
- Sensory sensitivity = Difficulty blocking out noises or listening to a conversation in a crowd
- Difficulty planning, organizing, prioritizing, evaluating, inhibiting = I can't prioritize what is more important; writing post-its with phone numbers, or filling a research application before deadline.



## Examples of emotional symptoms

Irritability, aggressiveness = Easily evoked frustration and anger that is disproportional to the given situation.

Worry, anxiety = An unpleasant sense in the body that something is terribly wrong, without being able to pinpoint any particular reason.

Impaired patience = A sense of constant urgency and wanting things to get done right away.

Shame = A sense of being "bad", wanting to hide, feeling "small", inadequate and/or feeling ostracized from one's group.

Guilt = A sense of being to blame for events/situations, or for others' feelings, to a disproportional extent.

Depression = Feeling a lack of energy, drive, motivation, lust, joy for the most part, for a prolonged period of time



## Examples of Stress behaviours

Skipping breaks = Saying no to fika pauses, skipping breakfast, eating lunch by the computer.

Procrastination = Deliberately or subconsciously, postponing and delaying writing an important paper.

Hurry sickness: Talking, walking and eating fast.

Multitasking: Emailing my supervisor, writing post-its with "todo"-lists, calling a colleague and playing "Candy crush", all at the same time.

Isolation: Closing my office door, avoiding public gatherings at work, turning down social events and invites to hang-outs, not answering the phone when friends and family calls me in the middle of a work day.

Limitless working: Working overtime a lot, working in the evenings, writing emails on bathroom breaks, emailing my colleague 10 minutes before I go to bed, getting out of bed in the night to write job-thoughts down so I don't forget anything "important".





## Examples of physiological symptoms

- Headaches = Frequent and long lasting headaches and/or migraine.
- Gastrointestinal problems = Frequent (or hardly any) bathroom breaks, problems with defecation, stomach aches, "bubbly/fizzy" bowel.
- Decreased sex drive = None, or less than normal, sexual desire, or lust.
- Increased heart rate = heart is racing, beating hard and/or beating "double" strokes.
- Shallow breathing = A sense of not being able to take "full" breaths (from the diaphragm) and/or fast shallow breathing (hyperventilation).
- Aches and pains = In the back and in limbs.
- Numbness/tingling = A sense of not being able to "feel" one's face or limbs, and/or having tingling sensations in the face or limbs.
- Tightness of the chest = A feeling of "pressure" against the chest, or a sense of not getting enough air and/or being choked.
- Tightness of muscles: Clenched jaws, fists or toes, a tense muscles in the body (Fx arms, legs, neck, shoulders or abs).
- Lack of energy = A sense of never feeling enough rested, a constant sense of being tired even though you've slept "enough" hours, and/or yawning a lot.
- Dizziness = Feeling light headed, dizzy, nausea and/or as if "in a fog".
- Sleep disturbances = Trouble falling asleep or waking up in the night, having trouble falling back to sleep (insomnia). Sleeping to little/night (hyposomnia), or sleeping too much/night (hypersomnia).
- Restlessness = A constant feeling of wanting to get up to do something/perform. An "active" feeling in the body or limbs (Fx restless legs).



## Take two minutes...

Turn to the person next to you and discuss the following questions:

1. Have you ever felt one or several of these symptoms?
2. If so, do you know what triggered them?
3. How did you react to your symptoms?



## Help to self-help

What can we do to detect early signs of distress?  
A few tips..!





## Body

### 1. Scan your body:

- a) Take a couple of minutes, a couple of times/day. Put away your phone and your computer and make sure you won't be disturbed.
- b) Sit, or lie down comfortably.
- c) Close your eyes, take a few slow, deep breaths.
- d) Focus your attention on the body, and let your mind wander through every part of your body, one part of the time.
- e) Be curious! See if you can discover any symptoms in the body.
- f) Try to not be alarmed if you do. See if you can accept and even welcome your body's signals and for a moment, let them be the way they are.



## Brain

### 2. Scan your mind:

- a) Prepare yourself in the same way as in (1)
- b) Instead: try to direct your focus on what thoughts are going through your head for the moment.
- c) What feelings do you notice?
- d) Let your mind wander free for a few moments, and allow yourself to just feel what you feel.
- e) Try to avoid problem-solving and/or add value to your inner experiences as this could trigger rumination.



## Behaviour

### 3. Observe your own behaviour during the day

Fx:

- a) Are you taking breaks or skipping them for the most part?
- b) In what pace do you do things, talk and eat?
- c) Can you be satisfied with yourself, even though you've underperformed?
- d) Are you isolating yourself, and/or saying no to social invites?
- e) Are you working evenings and/or week ends?
- f) Are you skipping exercise, rest/recovery, meals?
- g) How was your sleep during the last couple of weeks?





### **Don't forget!**

1. Work's not everything: Take time to do things that you enjoy, preferably with people you love.
2. Take your signals (symptoms) seriously, but don't be afraid of them. They are important, much like a misunderstood friend.
3. Take breaks. Preferably 10-15 minutes every hour (and don't play candy crush!)

