



GIVING IT YOUR ALL (AND THEN SOME)

If your work is causing you stress, it may mean more than just burning the candle at both ends. It may affect your health, and the bottom line for your employer. Dr. David Posen, AKA Dr. Calm, talks about the psychology of workplace stress, and what we can do to reign in the pressure.

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Rania identifies herself as a "Type-A" personality. She's a perfectionist and diligent, which she admits can often lead to burn-out. And while Type-A personalities can often bring self-inflicted overwork on themselves, she says that wasn't what led her to the dark place she's in now.*

Rania, 41, worked at her employer for over 15 years. She moved from position to position, often times being placed in jobs that didn't fit her background, and with managers that she thought lacked real leadership. She describes the experience as a methodical and calculated campaign to give her debilitating stress, and a workplace atmosphere that had a culture of harassment and humiliation.

"I believe stress at work caused me to have **involuntary muscle twitches** all over my body. Little twitches popped up everywhere — my left foot, my right thigh, my lips, my back. It was constant and very unnerving. I did go to my doctor but there was no underlying cause. I took a mindfulness course trying to control things and magnesium and tried to leave work on time. Eventually they subsided." -JB

"Over the years, I felt like I was in high school," she recalls. "The rumours, the pettiness, the overt aggressiveness, and the passive-aggressiveness took a real toll on my health. I was blamed and yelled at in front of co-workers at meetings, I was punished for missing unrealistic deadlines, I was humiliated and berated regularly."

She would try to stick up for herself, but that only got her labelled as "difficult" among the senior managers and human resources. She was working long hours to try and prove herself and to meet deadlines that were impossible to meet.

She vividly recalls when the health issues started popping up. "I was near the end of my sixth month of pregnancy, and I was having crippling anxiety. I thought it was a pregnancy thing, but even when I was on maternity leave with my son, I

couldn't even find the wherewithal to leave my home. When it was time to go back, I started having panic attacks."

As her work situation worsened, so did her health. Initially, she was not sleeping and binge eating late at night, but soon it turned into depression and anxiety so bad that she couldn't focus enough to even do the dishes, or take a shower. She was prescribed anti-depressants to help deal with her work stress.

"It was a mix of despair, apathy, and self-loathing," she recollects. "I was starting to believe all the things that I was being told at work — that I was lazy, and not good at anything I do."

An accident at work last year led to some time off, but while she was under the care of her doctor he noticed her symptoms. He warned her that going back to work would seriously jeopardize her health, mentally and physically. She went on stress leave, and has been at home for six months trying to recover.

Let's face it. As much as self-help books speak to how important it is to love your job, work may not always be enjoyable. For most employees, parts of the job are rewarding, but day-to-day menial tasks and bad work relationships may threaten that satisfaction.

And, according to a TD Survey¹, Rania isn't alone, and many Canadian workers are overly stressed. More than two-thirds of working Canadians surveyed said they experience moderate to high levels of stress at their job. This was especially true for people working in health care, social assistance, finance, insurance and real estate.

The TD Survey² also found that age plays a role in job stress. Millennials and Gen Xers who participated in the survey were more likely to say they experienced high or moderate stress levels at work, compared to Baby Boomers. Other studies have

shown that workplace stress has caused many Canadians to quit a job due to unbearable work stress.

"Stress kills energy. It kills engagement, it kills morale, it kills spirit," says Dr. David Posen, author of *Is Work Killing You?* and is also known as Dr. Calm. "And you know what else? It kills performance and productivity."

"I worked in a television newsroom and we were regularly told that we were all replaceable; that we are all a dime a dozen and they could **replace us all by tomorrow**. This was said all the time." -NM

The Psychology of Work Stress

"The stress reaction is built into us — the fight or flight response — to give us quick energy to run away from danger," says Posen, "and it's mediated by adrenaline ... and all these stress hormones. But the thing is, you can't keep drawing on your body to give you more energy if you don't have time to stop and put the energy back in."

Posen warns that if you don't take time to recover that energy, "the body simply breaks down. The adrenal gland peters out; it affects the heart, and the brain, blood pressure, cholesterol, everything else, and the body simply can't withstand that."

Posen identifies three distinct causes of workplace stress:

1 VOLUME OF WORK

Posen says that the amount of work doled out to employees is increasing. "Particularly with downsizing, and companies that are pared to the bone, the lucky survivors end up having to do the work that was once shared with others," he says.

2 THE VELOCITY OF WORK

Also referred to as the pace and the speed of work. "Speed has increased because of technology," Posen says, "but also because of unrealistic expectations, and frankly impatience. Everybody wants something right now."

3 ABUSE, INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT

This includes bullying and abuse of kinds, including sexual harassment and racial abuse. "It's often under the radar," Posen says. "It's not being dealt with and in many cases, organizations know who the perpetrator is, but somehow they're getting a free ride." The patients that he works with the longest are the ones who are being abused, and severe abuse can even lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Marika's* another person who has suffered. She's worked for challenging bosses throughout her career, but one sticks out in her mind. "After coming on board, this manager proceeded to decimate the department," she recalls. "My colleagues of 10, 15, 20 years were being walked out of the building."

"I was working 50+ hour weeks in a chaotic and stressful environment, and expected to be available into the evening. I was being called into meetings late at night and on weekends. On top of this, the **COO was a bully** who routinely yelled at staff and fired them for minor infractions. I started experiencing stomach pains, heartburn and severe fatigue. I'm now under the care of my doctor, looking for another job, and practicing setting boundaries at work." -VP

This created an atmosphere of fear that allowed her boss to wreak havoc on the employees that were left. "I remember one incident distinctly where I asked for some praise and feedback for a project that had gone very well. She actually sat across the desk and mocked me for requesting that, like a schoolyard taunting. I was shocked."

Marika began to take sick-days off of work after she would have run-ins with her boss. Like Rania, she fell into a depression as well, and has been on anti-depressant medication ever since.

Suppress the Stress

Because of the detrimental effects on health and wellbeing, Posen says that long-term stress is something that has to be tackled. He offers some suggestions to those who are feeling the ulcers coming on:

Contain work hours. "The research shows, and it's fascinating, that the optimum number of hours in a week for productivity is about 40 hours. Maybe you can stretch it to 45 or 50, but anything past that, you start spinning your wheels."

Take regular breaks. "A break midmorning, a break at lunch, and a break mid-afternoon or at dinner time breaks up your day into what are called ultradian rhythms. We have wake-sleep cycles every 24 hours but we also have these two-hour cycles within the day. If you take breaks that mesh with your regular energy cycles anyway, you'll be much more productive."

Learn to say no. "There's an expression, add one, subtract one. You can't keep piling this stuff up, and at some point individuals have to learn how to say no and set boundaries and limits."

Stop overusing technology. "People have to have a life to go to after work, and work has become so open ended. ... There is only so much we can do. People have to set some limits for themselves and make time for themselves."

Posen also advocates getting technology out of the bedroom, as it interferes with the quality and amount of sleep we need. "Use the technology, but stop letting it use you," Posen advises.

Employers Aren't Off the Hook

It's not always easy to say no, particularly when the nature of employment is less secure and more precarious as time goes on, so part of the onus is on employers to help employees manage their stress load, Posen says.

"Stress kills a lot of things, including the bottom line. There is a business case to

be made for paying attention to this," Posen says.

Posen says that many organizations expect their employees to deal with all the stress on their own, assuming that it's a personal performance issue if they can't deliver as expected. "It has to be a shared responsibility. This is a systemic problem, and it cannot be dealt with by just the individuals who in many cases are the victims. The organizations have to step up and take responsibility too," says Posen. "This is a message for everybody, all the way up the food chain."

"One of my bosses was such a bully that I had to quit my job. I **was getting panic attacks** on my way to work. After I quit, I hired a lawyer and sued the company for constructive dismissal — essentially saying that her harassment forced me to leave the company and end my contract early. They settled for \$20,000." -DC

Invest in Yourself to Reduce Stress

According to the TD survey³, more than half of Canadians don't take the time to invest in themselves as often as they'd like, and more than two thirds of those surveyed (67 per cent) said they don't invest in themselves as much as they'd like to because they can't afford it.

"Being confident about your financial picture often provides a feeling of empowerment, and that can affect how you view your work. Whether you work to live, or live to work," says Jody Beaupre, Regional Vice-President of TD Wealth.

Financial Planning

"Invest in yourself, as you would any other financial goal, like a cottage or a new car," says Jody. "Consider adding a little money to your savings by automatic withdrawals, and use it when you need some personal time at the spa, or the golf course, or have a cushion in case you ever need to leave your job. It may make you feel less enslaved."

Marika is still dealing with depression, but her days look much brighter after

being moved to a different unit with a manager that seems to understand how to get the best out of her people. "She approaches work and managing from a place of professionalism, a place of trust and a place of security," she says. "It has made all the difference to me, my health, and my outlook."

— **Denise O'Connell, MoneyTalk Life**

*Names have been changed.

¹TD Bank CAPA Research Poll 2018 "Invest in Yourself", March 5th, 2018. [http://td.mediaroom.com/2018-04-19-](http://td.mediaroom.com/2018-04-19-Stressed-out-working-Canadians-want-to-invest-in-themselves-but-cant-afford-it)

[Stressed-out-working-Canadians-want-to-invest-in-themselves-but-cant-afford-it](http://td.mediaroom.com/2018-04-19-Stressed-out-working-Canadians-want-to-invest-in-themselves-but-cant-afford-it). Accessed May 11, 2018

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

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