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Workplace Stress Can Lead to Total Meltdown

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Experts say hard work, admired by many as the source of this country's success, isn't the problem. It's overwork, which if left unchecked can lead to burnout. Dr. Barbara Distler, a Chicago psychologist and consultant on workplace stress defines burnout as "too much stress, for too long, with no intervention," resulting in complete emotional, mental and physical exhaustion.

One in three American employees are chronically overworked, and 54 percent felt overwhelmed by how much they're expected to complete, according to a 2005 study by the Families and Work Institute.

That's not only bad for productivity, but studies also have shown that too much stress lowers people's immune systems and can lead to high blood pressure, sleep and mental disorders.

In a study of 24,305 employees, those who worked 40 hours a week had a 14

percent higher risk of hypertension than those who worked less. The risk was 17 percent higher in those who worked 41 to 50 hours and 29 percent higher in people who worked even more, according to the study, published in the October issue of the journal Hypertension.

Regular rest, exercise and good nutrition are ways to prevent burnout, but taking vacation is also crucial to rejuvenate, Distler said. You should get away "long enough to forget what day it is," she said.

Joyce Marter, a psychotherapist and co-founder of Urban Balance, a downtown Chicago counseling center, said that long weekends and the occasional vacation day is not enough to properly relax.

"We feel that taking a full week off at least two times a year is important as it seems to take the first three days just to decompress," Marter said. Some jobs are higher risk for burnout, such as nurses, mental health professionals, paramedics, and other jobs that require people to give themselves to other people, said Peter Manzi, Chair of public relations for the National Career Development Association.

Burned out?

Signs of burnout offered by Distler, Marter and Manzi

[THE WASHINGTON POST CONTRIBUTED.]

- » Fatigue or decreased energy; everything feels like a chore.
- » Frequent illness or feeling physically run down.
- » You find it hard to have fun, laugh, or look on the bright side.
- » Headaches or gastrointestinal difficulties.
- » Weight loss or weight gain.
- » You notice yourself always grabbing food on the run, smoking and drinking more.
- » Irritability and negativity.
- » You can't sleep well, or you sleep very long on weekends
- » More tension and muscle aches.
- » Apathy, lack of motivation, depression.
- » You feel overwhelmed, anxious, stressed.
- » Procrastination, tardiness
- » Your productivity goes down and you can't seem to change that, or you don't care about the accomplishments you are making.