

COPING WITH BURN-OUT

You think stress won't affect you?



Working as a private doctor is stressful and, for some, it is getting ever more so. In a new series for Independent Practitioner Today, consultant psychologist Dr Michael Sinclair sets out some coping strategies for tackling it

STRESS IS often the elephant in the room when it comes to the high-performing health professionals whom I've worked with.

I see many medical consultants, some at the very top of their game, struggling with stress, often for far too long.

Many of these doctors have been delaying seeking help, suffering in silence for fear of being found out as not coping or not being good enough at their job.

In their attempt to eradicate stress and avoid any of the nasty feelings that may come with others knowing that they aren't coping too well, they have engaged in a number of very unhelpful, yet understandable coping strategies that have made their problems much worse, in the longer term anyway.

I hope that this article, the first in a series of four over the next three months, will be of use to you and/or perhaps to a colleague whom you suspect might also be struggling under the pressure of their job.

Being a consultant sucks

Long days, overstretched and overworked, needy and disgruntled patients demanding your time and attention, staff going off sick, mountains of paperwork to get through, rushing from one clinic to ensure you arrive at the next in good time, working through weekends, rising costs of clinic space and consultation rooms, insurance companies capping fees.

Oh, and all the trials and tribulations of running your own business. Is it tax return time again, already?

These are just some of the demands and stressors that we independent consultants frequently experience.

On top of all that, we need to contend with the pressure from home life too. Unhappy partner and kids, complaining that they never get to see you – and they're probably right – struggling to make ends meet. Life can feel pretty grim some days.

First World problems, some would say. At least you have a job and are your own boss in private practice; you can pick and choose what you do, you don't have a monster like the NHS

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breathing down your neck and pushing you to your limits.

But, again, maybe you do. Is that you, giving yourself a hard time again? Perhaps you do work for the NHS too, thinking it would be a nice balance to have a couple of days in private practice to break up the week.

In that case, you have probably got the whole plethora of unrelenting demands and bureaucratic bullsh** to contend with also. (Ah! More paperwork, anyone? Gee, thanks a bunch!) But you're a doctor after all; surely you should be able to handle this?

I'm not stressed. Really, I'm fine!

No matter what others expect – or you might expect of yourself – about how, as a doctor, you should be able to cope and manage stress well, the truth is that you are human also and therefore subject to work-related stress too.

You may like to kid yourself that you are a Vulcan like Mr Spock, and are ever so logical. Emotions don't come into the equation of being a medical consultant or making quick, rational decisions and your 'stressful feelings' are simply not compatible with good business, performance, success and staying on top of your game.

This is a fun idea perhaps, and quite nice for the next *Star Trek* convention, but it is simply not true.

Whoever told you this was lying. You are human, really. You may not like it, sometimes it basically sucks, but there you have it.

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Host of problems

You have emotions and you get stressed. If this stress is left unchecked or managed poorly, a whole host of problems can arise.

Chronic stress can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, social and medical problems and burn-out, which is common among even the seemingly most resilient doctors I've treated. The rates of divorce, substance misuse and suicide are alarming high for doctors.

The assumption that you should be able to handle stress, and your fear that anyone might find out you aren't coping so well, leads to stigma.

This stigma means a lot of doctors don't disclose how they feel to others and, worse still, don't seek help and perhaps even self-prescribe medication or engage in a lot of other unhealthy habits to suppress and eradicate their stress.



What's up, doc?

The truth is that working as an independent medical consultant comes with its own unique range of very real stressors. Running busy clinics and your own practice can often mean that you are frequently on the go and when you're not, you're probably being constantly interrupted.

You are likely to have staff and patients demanding your attention and compassion 24 hours a

day. The wonders of modern technology, eh? You can witness disturbing things. You might need to make quick and potentially life-changing decisions on the spot.

There is always the risk that you could make a mistake that could be harmful to a patient. Please note that this particular risk is even greater when you are under stress. The pressure and responsibility can be understandably hard to handle. It's a pressure cooker.

Irrespective of your specialty, it's not uncommon to have to break bad news and frequently be in contact with illness, anxiety, suffering and death.

Patients' high expectations around medication, surgery or any other form of intervention you might provide can place unrealistic pressure on you. Patients can become dissatisfied and even aggressive at times.

All this can take its toll. However, the typical personality traits of many medical professionals, such as perfectionism, can add to this and lead to some becoming increasingly self-critical, which can increase stress and lead to depression and anxiety.

Other psychological factors that can increase your propensity to exacerbate stress include:

- An excessive sense of responsibility;
- A desire to please everyone;
- Guilt for things outside of your own control;
- Self-doubt;
- Obsessive compulsive traits.

Perhaps some of these resonate with you?

Help is at hand

In this series of articles, I'm keen to help you think about the ways in which you respond to your own stress and to encourage you to consider whether these 'coping strategies' are working for you or not.

That is, do these strategies actually help you to eradicate stress in the long term? Do they help you to be the kind of practitioner you really want to be? Do they help you move towards living the kind of life that matters most to you?

I'm keen to also offer you some alternative strategies to help you manage stressful thoughts, emotions and sensations when they show up, which may prove more effective when your current

toolkit of stress management techniques isn't working out so well for you.

Above all, I want to remind you that stress is an inevitable part of work as a medical consultant and despite what you or others may think, it is natural that you would experience it and at times have difficulty managing it. You are human after all.

You are not alone in experiencing stress. If stress becomes a problem for you, and you find that you aren't coping well, then I would encourage you to speak up, tell others and, better still, seek some professional help from a trained professional such as a psychologist.

Don't forget to catch next month's article in which I will highlight how we tend to respond to stressful situations and our own internal stress experience and invite you to consider whether these strategies are working for you or not. ■

Dr Michael Sinclair (below) is a consultant counselling psychologist. He is the clinical director of City Psychology Group in London, with clinics in Liverpool Street, Harley Street and Canary Wharf.



He is the author of a range of self-help books, including Mindfulness for Busy People, Working with Mindfulness, The Little ACT Workbook, The Little CBT Workbook, and Fear and Self-Loathing in the City.

He provides effective, evidence-based psychological interventions to individuals of all ages, couples and families experiencing a range of psychological problems such as stress, anxiety and depression and adjustment to physical health conditions.

He provides training to medical and other health practitioners, consultation to a growing number of corporate occupational health departments and delivers psychological interventions to large firms to improve employees' health and performance

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