

Recognizing and managing stress in the workplace

Productivity and wellbeing are inseparable and should be parallel goals for people and organizations alike





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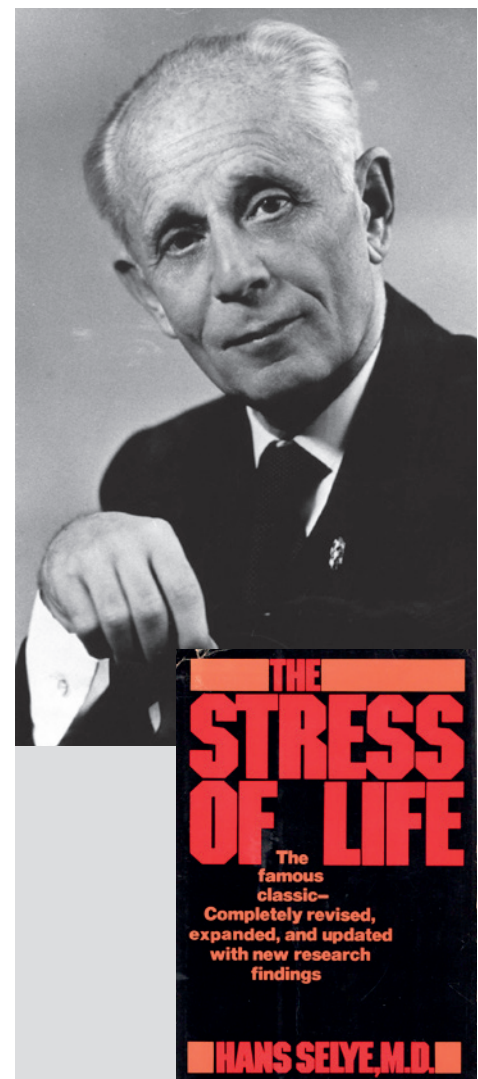
Knowing and understanding stress

Stress: what is it?

Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, defined stress as: "The nonspecific response of the body to any demand" (**The Stress of Life – 1956**). Selye proposed the idea of General Adaptation Syndrome (**General Adaptation Syndrome – 1950**), a generic response of the body characterized by neuroendocrine and neurovegetative reactions that release hormones and neurotransmitters (resulting, for instance, in hypertrophy of adrenal glands; stomach ulcers; thymic involution) and that it is not related to any specific stimulus. In other words, stress corresponds to a general state of hyper-activation of the body, which is not necessarily related to a specific trigger. There are other theories about stress: Mason attributed a key role to emotions; Cannon identified the famous fight or flight reactions; Lazarus focused on the personal history of those facing stressful circumstances.

Eustress, distress, and chronic stress

Theories aside, we know that stress plays a very important role in our lives, because it allows us to face danger and unexpected difficulties, or to overcome hurdles that would otherwise be insurmountable. There is, therefore, a positive

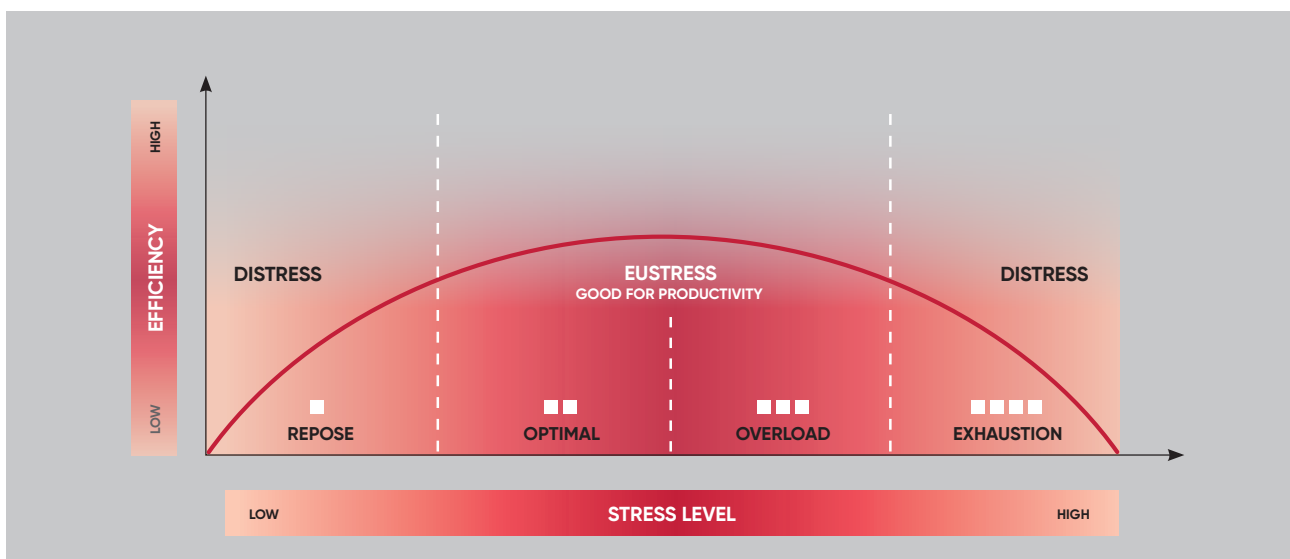


form of stress (“eustress”) that allows us to achieve a perfect balance between stimuli, obstacles, concerns, and goals. To give just one example, **eustress allows athletes to give peak performance in a final**. The harmful form of stress is called “distress” and, as per our previous example, it is the excessive stress that paralyzes athletes and prevents them from performing at their best. We also know that, by its very nature, stress (a word that back in the 17th century referred to “hurdle” or “adversity”) is temporary and fleeting: on the other hand, however, if stress persists over an extended period, it becomes grueling.

The costs of chronic stress

Stress originates from a stimulus (technically defined as a stressor): the body immediately goes into a state of alarm (phase 1), followed by a phase of resistance and, if the stressor is not removed, by a phase in which the person under stress risks exhaustion. In the first two phases, fight or flight responses are ideal: imagine someone noticing that a boulder is about to land on them: thanks to stress responses (accelerated heartbeat, muscle tension, a rise in adrenaline) the body can react faster and move with greater speed and strength.

If rocks keep falling incessantly for months or years, however, the stress overload can be debilitating.



In normal circumstances, once danger has been avoided, the body relaxes, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and, after a phase of "weakness", recovery gradually begins. Nowadays, stress is continuous, indefinite, and ubiquitous. Its effects are, literally, devastating:

- Pain
- Anxiety
- Digestive issues
- Heart issues
- Attention disorders

- Jaw tension
- Insomnia
- Panic
- Paranoia
- Depression

These are just a few of the possible effects. But in addition, constant psychological and physical stress **can cause latent health issues, that would probably** otherwise be kept under control. **Moreover, ongoing excessive stress affects the decision-making processes due to "cortical inhibition"**: under stress – and therefore in a dangerous situation – mental acuity is impaired, and the brain is forced to find simpler, less appropriate solutions. Stress is therefore an ill-suited condition for weighing pros and cons, making decisions, defining and carrying out plans or strategies, and even for learning new things. Finally, in the workplace, **raised stress increases the risk of injury.**



Work-related stress

The costs of health issues caused by work-related stress are very high.

In Italy, the Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress states that:

- **STRESS IS A STATE, WHICH IS ACCOMPANIED BY PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, OR SOCIAL EFFECTS OR DYSFUNCTIONS AND WHICH RESULTS FROM INDIVIDUALS FEELING UNABLE TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT THEY CAN REASONABLY DO AND WHAT IS REQUIRED OR EXPECTED OF THEM**
- **ALL EMPLOYERS HAVE A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO PROTECT THE OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH OF WORKERS. THIS DUTY ALSO APPLIES TO PROBLEMS OF WORK-RELATED STRESS IN SO FAR AS THEY ENTAIL A RISK TO HEALTH AND SAFETY.**

66%

AROUND 66% OF EMPLOYED PEOPLE IN ITALY EXPERIENCE STRESS-RELATED ISSUES, ESPECIALLY BETWEEN THE AGES OF 35 AND 54.

Organizations pay a very high price for sick leave, in terms of reduced productivity, management of staff turnover, and interventions necessary to bring work environment back into balance.

Work-related stress symptoms

According to psychologist Andrea Castiello D'Alfonso, these are the symptoms of work-related stress:

anxiety

INTOLERANCE TOWARDS EVERYTHING THAT IS
A REMINDER OF JOB, WORKPLACE, OR COLLEAGUES

aggression

restlessness

irritability

INNER TENSION

hidden dissatisfaction

DISGUST TOWARDS EVERYTHING
CONNECTED TO WORK

PROVOCATIVE BEHAVIORS

SLIPPING, FALLING, EXPERIENCING SMALL PHYSICAL
TRAUMAS, SPRAINS, BROKEN BONES

rage

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

LACK OF INTEREST TOWARDS USUAL
ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE WORK

thoughtless acts

low spirits

CONSTANT FEELING OF EXHAUSTION

•GENERAL LACK OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

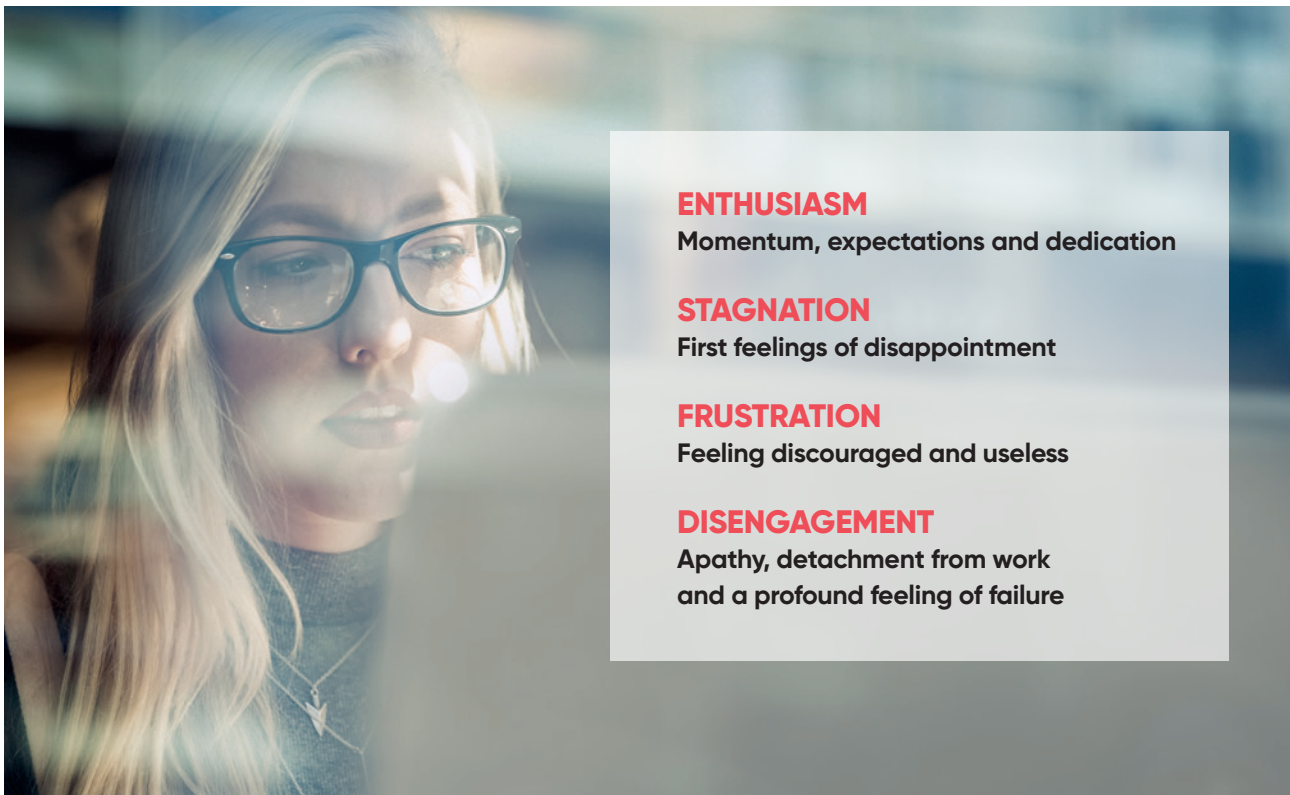
depression

LOSS OF INTEREST IN THE FUTURE AND AN INABILITY TO PLAN

CONSTANTLY LOSING THINGS
AND MISSING APPOINTMENTS

Work-related stress: burnout

Burnout is an extreme level of exhaustion that affects physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. People struggling with burnout suffer from a constant lack of energy, motivation, and enthusiasm: they experience extremely low self-esteem and a sense of despair. Burnout has several causes, which are related to individual character and, often as not, **with personal circumstances outside work**.



ENTHUSIASM

Momentum, expectations and dedication

STAGNATION

First feelings of disappointment

FRUSTRATION

Feeling discouraged and useless

DISENGAGEMENT

Apathy, detachment from work
and a profound feeling of failure

One of the main causes of burnout is a gap between energy invested and reward.

BURNOUT USUALLY OCCURS IN STAGES:

THE FIRST STAGE **IDEALISTIC ENTHUSIASM**

The **first stage idealistic enthusiasm** is characterized by high hopes, unrealistic expectations, and enthusiastic idealism. In some cases, feelings of omnipotence and hopes of immediate success are observed.

THE SECOND STAGE **STAGNATION**

In the **second stage stagnation** work is not impaired, but disappointment creeps in, causing a shift from the excessive initial investment to an increased detachment and a drastic downgrading of expectations.

THE THIRD STAGE **FRUSTRATION**

The **third stage frustration** is Burnout's most critical stage where thoughts of uselessness dominate. Additional factors causing frustration are lack of appreciation and the firm belief that one lacks what it takes to meet expectations.

Physical symptoms and psychosomatic issues begin to surface. People experiencing this kind of frustration can become aggressive towards themselves as well as others, and often show flight behaviors, such as frequent unjustified absence and longer breaks.

THE FOURTH STAGE **DISENGAGEMENT**

The **fourth stage disengagement** is marked by an increased emotional disengagement resulting from frustration, with a shift from empathy to apathy: a sort of professional death occurs, at times combined with severe risk to life including possible suicidal tendencies.

It is easy to see therefore, depending on one's personality, how there can be a higher or lower resistance to burnout, a condition that may be avoided both through top-down interventions (e.g., improving working conditions) and through stress management techniques implemented by the workers themselves.

Stress prevention and management

Stress: The role of organizations

There are several variables based on which organizations can and should intervene to curb the factors that may cause stress: business **organization, structural** dynamics, shared **values** within a company, senior management behavior.



1. Business organization

An organization that aims to reward people's commitment, sets up specific policies for welfare and wellness, monitors workers' wellbeing, and implements clear and easily-understandable communication, is going the distance to prevent the risk of work-related stress. Needless to say, this must be a concrete plan, not a mere declaration of intent (or, even worse, a tick-box gimmick). So, for instance, rewarding commitment should not morph into encouraging internal competition, but must be defined by choices that encourage cooperation. **It is of utmost importance to understand that supporting people (through benefits such as meal vouchers or company day-care) boosts their engagement level.**

2. Structural dynamics

The way in which one's job can be performed is critical to ensure wellbeing. Workers are unlikely to suffer from stress when tasks are clear and hierarchy pressure not excessive, when salary can guarantee a decent lifestyle, relationships between people and teams are based on listening and dialogue, and options are well defined. Reasonable workload, hours and pressure are essential, as well as the "right to disconnect": outside working hours, people are entitled to be left alone while they "recharge their batteries".

3. Shared values within a company

The work environment can breed either a feeling of fulfillment or stress. Where trust, empathy, teamwork, equality and openness prevail, it will be easier for people to develop a sense of attachment, for internal relations to be frank and positive, and for stress risks to fade away. **On the other hand, organizations characterized by suspicion, judgement, rigidity and punishment will undoubtedly be stressing.**

4. Top management

This is a tricky area, since those who oversee business units or teams are often reluctant to reconsider their choices. Yet they need to assess and understand how they act within the company, because leaders are essential for the creation of a positive environment. When leaders are intoxicated by stress and live exclusively for their job, they end up expecting the same from everyone, poisoning the work environment, sapping people's energy, and, in the long run, impacting the bottom line. Systematic monitoring is essential to appraise requests made to employees by top managers and is helpful in creating a healthier environment.

5. Reducing communication channels and multitasking

Communication channels and simultaneous performance requests should be considered in depth separately, since the discussion around them is as popular as it is misleading. It is commonly thought that the proliferation of communication channels (email, WhatsApp chats, dedicated messaging apps, boards, personal phone, work mobile, etc.) characterizes a company as modern. Equally widespread is the idea that those capable of multitasking are strong, energetic and efficient. These beliefs lack any scientific foundation. In fact, multitasking is not helpful, but stressful and exhausting. Moreover, an increased number of communication channels makes it more likely that people will be interrupted while attending to a task, which causes slowdown, waste of energy, stress, and reduced productivity.

6. Organizational BES

ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) **has been evaluating BES (Benessere Equo e Sostenibile: "Fair and Sustainable Wellbeing")** indicators since 2013. *"Dignified, well-paid, secure employment, which corresponds with one's skills is a factor that critically contributes to people's wellbeing. The lack of decent employment has a negative impact on wellbeing, and so does an excessive burden of work commitments, as it hinders the balancing of work, social and family time".*

Defining and constantly measuring organizational BES can be a great survey tool and an aid in tackling harmful situations.

7. Stress prevention training:

from an organizational, structural, and relational point of view removing stressors is not always easy, as it requires the active participation of all those involved in a company. Proper training is required to accomplish such a goal effectively: it must be multidisciplinary and repeated over time.

Top management should be responsible for its provision, while active participation should be required of all employees.

Stress: What workers can do

The key to fighting stress is awareness. This is about having the means to understand that work can generate psychological, physical, and emotional effects, and that a wide range of actions is available to us all, starting from attitudes and behavior.



1. Perceiving ourselves as complex

Thoughts, emotions, body, and – why not? – soul: to have the best attitude to approaching stress, we must be aware that these are the elements which combine to make us human. **Reaching such level of awareness requires us to commit to a pathway, to understand its importance, and to be willing to walk it.**

2. Taking care of our body

Our body is the foundation of it all, and it needs to be taken care of through nutrition, adequate physical activity (possibly outdoor) and the necessary hours of sleep. Taking care of our body means paying attention to our lifestyle, but also to implement specific actions.

3. Taking care of our thoughts

Acquiring awareness of one's cognitive style, of thoughts which dominate our mind, gives us the power to change them. Facing any given event, our "explanatory style", i.e., the way in which we describe what happens, can be closed and catastrophic or open. The words we use to describe facts promote negative or positive feelings. **Using different words can contribute to enhancing our lives and reducing stress.**

4. Taking care of our emotions

Emotions make our lives colorful, but it is essential to learn to recognize, name, and express them.

Asking ourselves whether we are capable of doing so is crucial to personal equilibrium and experiencing joy while keeping stress at bay.

5. Taking care of our soul

Faith or adherence to spiritual doctrines has proved helpful for individual wellbeing and to help us in critical circumstances: if one is attracted to spirituality, it is worthwhile exploring it further.

Stress: a few ways to fight it

Here are some useful tips for workers as well as for organizations willing to offer an opportunity for growth and a chance to experience a deep sense of wellbeing



1. Breathing techniques

Good breathing provides oxygen for our cell and – even more so if one works on the correct functioning of the diaphragm – helps us to deal effectively with emotions, improves our posture, limits anxiety, has pain-relieving effects. From yoga breathing to diaphragmatic breathing classes, one can explore the topic in depth and learn how to practise fairly easily.

2. Gut health

As a cornerstone of our immune system, the gut has a huge impact on our mood through the microbiome. Psychobiotics are foods or enzymes that support the brain-gut connection and foster good mood. With the support of a professional, gut health can be restored, opting for fermented foods, and ensuring a good intake of fiber. One of the most widely known psychobiotics is Lactobacillus Rhamnosus, which reduces anxiety and stress.

3. Exercise

Introduces oxygen to the body, clears the mind, boosts our health, and often creates strong relationships. Exercise is truly a panacea. Exercise is recommended for everyone except in the face of specific contraindications. Many companies have arrangements with pools and gyms or promote physical activities for their employees.

After a stressful event, exercising has a cathartic effect.

4. Expressive Arts

Music, painting, singing, dancing. Everything that has to do with artistic expression is a source of wellness and balance. It is often the case that while many people recognize the need for it, they are afraid of not being able to paint, sing, or dance. Here's the good news: with a good teacher everyone can learn to sing, to following a rhythm or handle a brush.

5. Meditation techniques

Yoga, meditation, sound healing, autogenic training, and other meditative disciplines have extraordinary effects on mind and body alike. They bring the body to a state of deep relaxation, calm the brain and facilitate positive introspection and self-knowledge.

6. Pets

Adopting a pet makes life better. Love, adventures, relationships, a sense of gratitude and responsibility are huge sources of wellbeing. The simple act of stroking a cat or dog is relaxing and lowers the heartbeat.

7. Physical contact

Even though not everyone is aware of it, a hug lowers blood pressure, alleviates anxiety, makes concentration easier, promotes a sense of safety and care. Getting a massage stimulates oxytocin's production and lowers cortisol (the "stress hormone") levels.

8. Silence

Hyper-connected and hyper-stimulated, we are losing the ability to be quiet. Silence, however, is essential to one's wellbeing: it calms one's thoughts and brings us back to more natural rhythms, it feeds our mind and our imagination. Silence also means listening to nature's sounds, while walking on the seashore or in the woods. It calms body and soul alike, providing us with a unique sense of wellbeing.

9. Powering off

switching our smartphone off is necessary for our mind to disengage and function in a more physiological way. Neither airplane nor silent modes have the same effect.

Switching the phone off every time we do not need it eliminates "notification induced stress" and prevents the risk of addiction.

5 facts about burnout

It is a disease recognized worldwide as occupational phenomenon

1

The World Health Organization has long included burnout among diseases, defining it as an occupational phenomenon "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job, or negative feelings or cynicism related to one's job
- reduced professional efficacy.

Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."

Personality types most prone to burnout

2

A few individual psychological traits that can trigger burnout are:

- Perfectionism
- Inability to say "no"
- Lack of faith in capabilities or hypertrophic self-esteem
- Mental rigidity
- Attention deficit
- Need for immediate satisfaction of desires
- Difficulty in controlling hostile impulses
- Difficulty in having satisfactory social relationships.

Burnout as a precursor to depression

3

Burnout can be followed by severe depression (Minor or Major Depressive Disorder):

in 50% of cases depression proves to be recurring and among those who have already suffered of depressive disorders twice, the chance to have a third episode rises to 75%.

Burnout and sense of control

4

Burnout is a disease related to one's job and workplace. This severe form of discomfort is not so much caused by real workload, but rather by the feeling of facing excessively difficult tasks and of being unable to satisfy requests effectively.

The Locus of Control (LOC), theorized by Julian B. Rotter in the mid-Sixties, is among the main causes of burnout syndrome. People with an external LOC feel helpless, as they believe they have no control over what happens. On the other hand, people with an inner LOC feel that their own skills and actions give them power over their own life. **Having an external LOC puts one at risk of suffering from burnout.**

Lack of clarity induces burnout

5

Professional goals that are not well defined, ambiguity in communicating tasks and feedback, as well as requiring performance that is not part of the job are organizational and structural factors that tend to cause burnout.

5 facts about multitasking

The brain is not built for multitasking

1

Our brain architecture developed to tackle one task at time (and therefore to carry out tasks serially): **this holds true, in particular, for the control functions located in the frontoparietal and lateral lobes**, as well as for the ventral and dorsal attention network. It is nearly impossible to carry out activities while multitasking, excepted those the brain developed some sort of automatism for (chatting while making coffee, for instance, is feasible if one is well-practiced in using the coffee machine, since the actions required to prepare coffee are managed by a sort of neutral neural network that has "solidified" over the years).

No one is good at multitasking

2

Over the last decades, the scientific investigation of multitasking revealed important aspects regarding the possibility of executing several actions at the same time.

One discovery proved to be of utmost importance: while the perception of accomplishing things may increase while multitasking, there is little correlation with the actual ability to do so.

Only a small number of people in the world can manage multitasking effectively: they have been identified completely by chance and have been labeled as "supertaskers".

Switching from one medium to the other while multitasking causes easy distraction

3

Switching from a PC screen to a smartphone, then to a planner and then again to a landline can **cause systemic distraction**: without even realizing it, we focus on irrelevant details in a room, of the furniture, of the environment.

It is easy to see how this causes a severe impairment of one's productivity.

Media multitasking is harmful to memory

4

Switching continuously from one medium to the other impairs the ability to remember facts, objects, and received instructions. Research highlights a deterioration of the so-called "working memory" (the one we use to carry out routine tasks and that retains verbal and visuospatial information, as well as the connections between one piece of information and the other).

It is also becoming apparent that excessive media multitasking impairs long term memory.

Multitasking makes the brain smaller

5

If we practice multitasking repeatedly over a long span of time, **the grey matter inside the Anterior Cingulate Cortex** (ACC: the area of the brain that intervenes when we experience emotions, reacts to certain types of pain, and manages motivations) **grows smaller**.

5 signs that signal excessive stress on the job

Sudden desire to cry

1

An overwhelming feeling of discouragement, often leading to outbursts of apparently crying for no reason, is one of the signs of psychological suffering and can be a symptom of excessive stress at work

Recurrent relational issues with colleagues and superiors

2

The clash, that can happen under stress, between actual environment-related issues and perception – loaded with negative connotations – can cause colleagues and superiors to be targets for one's rage. An outburst of rage against a superior, for instance, symbolizes the desire to assert one's identity and autonomy as against those in charge, and to dissipate the excessive energy caused by those same feelings.

A single episode does not imply work-related stress: on the other hand, a constellation of difficult relationships in the workplace is without doubt a signal to be considered with extreme care.

Desire to isolate oneself and to be constantly in solitude

3

When we are not at ease with ourselves, we tend to isolate from other people. We should pay attention when an unusual and excessive desire for solitude pairs up with work-related issues. On the one hand, being alone may help to regain some balance, but it is also true that satisfactory friendship relationships are life-savers from a psychological and emotional point of view. (There is, in other words, the risk of triggering a downward spiral of isolation and sadness). We should be worried if the balance between the desire to be alone and the need for relationships shifts.

Binge eating

4

The act of eating is loaded with symbolic meanings: we nurture ourselves (i.e., we build the foundation that enables us to keep going); we fill up (therefore getting rid of an inner void), we get satiated (thus feeling fulfilled and satisfied). Moreover, while biting, we reenact an animal gesture that expresses aggressiveness, self-affirmation, and strength. We may also add that the jaw bone stores tension: in this respect, eating in a bulimic and mechanical way contributes to relaxing the mouth's muscular system. Likewise, the post-gorging feeling of general anesthesia hinders the ability to be fully aware of our own psychological suffering.

The unusual occurrence of binge eating episodes may well signal an overly stressful working environment.

Headaches, lumbar pains, cramps

5

Stress induced headache is a typical symptom of the fact that things are not going well.

The tension experienced in the office or factory translates into a chronic contraction of the neck and shoulder muscles that may cause inflammation: this often results in a constant headache that paradoxically may peak during the weekend, once work-related stress is gone and muscles stiffness subsides. **Cramps and backpain in the lumbar area can be other symptoms of work-related stress.**



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