

Beating BURNOUT

Constantly stressed out? We talk to the experts about the hidden sources of stress in our lifestyles, and how we can learn to unwind. **Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna**

I'm no stranger to stress—once addicted to my “Crackberry” (and now to my iPhone), I've been known to suffer from anxiety, disrupted sleep patterns and extremely low energy levels. For years, I've waved it off as a common side-effect of a modern lifestyle—a symptom of a success-driven, packed schedule—and joked that I'll sleep when I'm dead. But last month, I had a harsh awakening: As it turns out, I'm also suffering from chronic tension headaches and ever-increasing high blood pressure which could leave me, at the ripe old age of 28, heading down the road to some serious health problems.

“These symptoms are a sign of burnout,” says Dr. Raymond H. Hamden, Clinical & Forensic Psychologist with the Human Relations Institute & Clinics in Dubai. According to Dr. Hamden, the symptoms of burnout include frequent headaches, back pain and muscle aches, a change in appetite or sleep habits, feeling tired and drained most of the time, and lowered immunity. And that's just the physical side—emotionally, feelings of helplessness, failure, defeat and self-doubt take over, along with detachment, loss of motivation, decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment and an increasingly cynical and negative outlook. Once you combine that with symptomatic behavioural traits like increased isolation, procrastination and the need to take out your frustrations on your loved ones, you're left with one very exhausted human being.

I'm not surprised—causes of burnout include extremely high job expectations with numerous demands, and a chaotic or high-pressure environment—and once

you combine that with a perfectionist attitude to life, the longing to be in control, and a high-achieving personality, it's no wonder I'm feeling this way. Other factors include lack of recognition for good work and the absence of supportive relationships. And I'm not alone: A 2010 survey¹ found that 59 per cent of UAE residents were stressed out, with 65 per cent of that majority blaming their workloads. Another survey² found that 81 per cent of respondents described their jobs as somewhat or extremely stressful, while the results of a Towers Watson's Global Workforce Study (GWS) earlier this year found that 42 per cent of people feel excessive pressure from their job.

A HIGH-PRESSURE LIFESTYLE

“Living in Dubai poses a unique set of challenges,” says Carey Kirk, Counselling Psychologist at The LightHouse Arabia. “Jobs in Dubai are often demanding, requiring travel (whether inter-city or international), long hours and frequent restructuring,” she explains, continuing: “While many jobs come with great benefits packages that can be an incentive for individuals to move [here], there can be a lot of work-related stress that is generated if an individual is not happy with their job but feels pressured to stay because it pays for their family's home and visas, [or it helps build up] savings.”

It's precisely this excessive pressure from a job or company, along with uncertainty about the future of one's finances, job insecurity, the lack of support from companies when it comes to staff health and well-being, and the lack of a healthy work-life balance that people

blame for their high levels of stress, according to the surveys. “I agree that [these] are the most common and valid contributors to work-related stress,” says Dr. Atanas Hristov, Specialist of Internal Medicine at AL DAS Medical Clinic. “One reason in particular can be defined as the most relevant—the long working hours! This was evident from the November 2011 Regus business survey into the length of the working day and its impact on employee health. It was found that, globally, almost half of employees work more than nine hours a day,” he adds.

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As any mother will know, career folk are not the only ones who suffer long hours—whether you're a stay-at-home mum or working mother, the pressure and commitment of raising a child can have an equally draining effect. “Valuing one's role in preparing children for the future is a full-time position. If we are to place a monetary value on motherhood, then we must include things we take for granted—cooking, cleaning, driving, partnership, tutor, [and so on]. These are purchased by hiring house help, yet require supervision, [and] combining the cost factor for each of these tasks may range from Dhs350,000 to Dhs550,000 per year,” says Dr. Hamden. →



FINDING ME-TIME

Parenthood is often described as the most important—and toughest—job in the world, and it can have an equally devastating aftermath on your body and mind, particularly since it can, in some ways, be even more difficult to draw the line between work (in your role as mum) and play, meaning that precious “me time” which is so hard to find.

“This so-called ‘me time’ is an essential foundation aspect of stress management—learning how to relax. We can’t completely eliminate stress from our lives, but we can control how much it affects us,” says Dr. Hristov. Carey agrees: “It allows our bodies to take a break and physically recuperate from the effects of stress. [It also] gives us the opportunity to reflect on our experiences and internal states, to process what we have learned, and to integrate that knowledge into our outlook of ourselves and the world around us. This is an essential component in our ability to develop the skills that make up emotional intelligence, [and] without this time, we run the risk of developing chronic stress-related problems.”

Experts suggest trying relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing. They also suggest trying to consciously train yourself to develop the ability to draw a line between your working life and leisure time, be it a desk-bound job or your time spent as mum-in-chief. They warn that if we let these concerns fall by the wayside, we’re putting ourselves at risk for a host of



serious health problems that can greatly affect us in the long term.

A SEVERE IMPACT

“Relentless stress can lead to a condition called distress: a negative stress reaction. [This] can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. It can also cause cognitive symptoms such as memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgment and negativity, along with anxious or racing thoughts and a constant feeling of worry,” says Dr. Hristov. Carey also explains that it can lead to a lowered immune system, mental fatigue, feelings of hopelessness and frustration, and in some cases, even depression.

If the physical isn’t bad enough, stress can play havoc with our emotional sphere, too: “[One’s] personality is theoretically consistent, but the characteristics and traits will alter with each scenario or person with whom one has to negotiate and contact,” says Dr. Hamden. Meanwhile, Dr. Hristov agrees that intense stress can potentially make us less sensitive, unthoughtful, more selfish and impatient, adding: “Chronic stress results in behavioural changes such as reduced or increased appetite, sleeping too much or too little, isolating oneself from others, neglecting responsibilities, or using alcohol or drugs to relax. Nervous habits, like nail biting, can also develop through stress.”

Carey believes that stress can have a negative impact on our emotional intelligence—a component comprised of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills—and particularly that of our children. “What children see at home forms the framework for how they, in turn, manage their emotions and stressful experiences. [Kids] who are subjected to high levels of stress may have less opportunity to develop the skills that would enable them to cultivate their emotional intelligence. This could lead them to grow into adults who have a harder time picking up on other people’s emotions,



understanding the impact of their actions on others, managing stressful situations, maintaining healthy relationships, and understanding their own emotional experiences,” she says.

SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Aside from the long hours and work-intensive schedules so common in the region, the UAE’s unique social makeup can also contribute to increased stress.

“The UAE is home to people from so many nationalities, with migrant workers who are here to support their families back home being a predominant part of the workforce. This is often a huge



“Relentless stress can lead to headaches, an upset stomach and problems sleeping”

sacrifice for them, and results in an inability to enjoy a normal family life for many years. This simple fact results in a major work-life imbalance,” says Dr. Hristov.

When the lines between work-time and play-time begin to blur—for instance, as Dr. Hamden points out, even an innocent game of golf with a client can end up as a high-pressure environment in which you have to act right, lest a deal should fall through because you didn’t let them win—it can be even harder to switch off.

And when your job is linked to your entire livelihood as long as you stay here, that’s a lot of pressure to be under.

“Unlike in our home countries, living in Dubai is contingent upon having a job and someone in the family with a work visa. This type of contingency to life here can lead to a sense of impermanence that adds stress to our daily life. It’s often a lot harder to relax into a life and feel at home if we view [it] as a time-limited experience,” says Carey.

Indeed, surveys and research³ have

found that more than 50% of expatriates consider life in the UAE to be more stressful than that in their home country, while financial pressures such as money worries and debt were cited to be among residents’ biggest sources of stress.

Add to that social pressures, such as the constant reminders of fancy cars, glamorous meals out and plenty of opportunities for shopping, and we’re often left torn between the two. “There is an element of glamour to Dubai, and when we are constantly surrounded by Bentleys, Lamborghinis, Louis Vuitton, expensive brunches and hotel health club memberships, [for instance], it is easy to unconsciously adjust our expectations of →

life and how much money we are willing to spend. We want to save, but we also yearn to (and can feel pressured to) have a certain lifestyle in Dubai. These contrasting desires can be the sources of a lot of money-related stress,” says Carey.

These social pressures aren’t restricted to our real-life world either, with a modern lifestyle leading many of us down the path to pressures of social media in our online existence.

With our social lives so often dependent on our working schedules, and many people even meeting their other halves and closest friends only through work, many of us turn to social media to find some kind of escape. Experts have suggested that over-use of social media—a common outlet of release for many living a fast-paced lifestyle, far away from their families back home—can lead to psychological issues such as increased narcissism, aggressive tendencies, antisocial behaviour and anxiety.

A German study⁴ found that the social effects of Facebook can even lead to depression, with some users experiencing feelings of jealousy, envy and eventually loneliness, after spending too much time looking at their online friends’ happy photos and status updates. Meanwhile, research from the California State University Dominguez Hills has found that students who felt the need to check their Facebook accounts at least once during a 15-minute period achieved lower grades than those who did not.

“The high expectations pertaining to your personal, social and family life, along with access to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, can be occasionally be detrimental. Apart from the inevitable security issues related to using such websites or mobile applications, if someone goes into the extremes of ‘oversharing’, he or she might actually create a very serious and relentless source of emotional stress,” says Dr. Hristov.

FINDING RELIEF

So how do we draw a line and learn how to really switch off? First, identify the sources of stress in your life. Carey advises asking yourself realistic questions to assess and identify these sources of stress, such as: Are you not getting enough exercise? Do you have a pattern of over-committing? Are you trying to approach too many changes in your life at once—remembering that even



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positive changes can be a source of stress? Do you procrastinate and not leave yourself with sufficient time to complete tasks? Are you using up your energy trying to change things that are not under your control?

Next, sit down and break that list down into different categories: What we can change immediately, what will take more time to tackle, and any resources we may need to do so, Carey suggests. “For example, if one of our sources of stress is that we are continually over-committing ourselves because we have difficulty saying no to people, assertiveness training or counselling could be helpful. If you are not getting enough exercise, joining a gym and making time in your schedule to exercise for at least 30 minutes three times a week will be important,” she says.

Once you’ve identified the sources of your distress, try some new techniques to tackle them. Research from the University of Sussex has found that reading can reduce stress by up to 68 per cent, while yoga is another great option, as deep breathing has been suggested to cause a temporary drop in blood pressure. “[Yoga and deep breathing can]

activate the body’s relaxation response, and when practiced regularly, they can lead to a reduction in everyday stress levels and boost our feelings of joy and serenity. They also increase our ability to stay calm and composed under pressure,” says Dr. Hristov.

Other techniques, such as massage, aromatherapy, relaxing music, laughter, spending time with an animal, physical exertion or even art therapy have also been found to help reduce stress. “In the heat of stressful situations, it often helps if we can give ourselves a small break before reacting to things/sending that email/trying to tackle the problem at hand. At work, getting up from our desks to take a quick walk, doing some breathing exercises to slow down our heart-rate, and going to the bathroom to splash cool water on our face, wrists and back of our neck can help us ‘cool down’ when we are stressed,” says Carey.

Meanwhile, Dr. Hamden suggests treating our “me time” with as much importance as we would a work meeting: try making it a part of your daily time management routine. “[For instance, if you] work 25 minutes, take 5 minutes off to relax. [If you work for] 45 minutes, take 15 minutes off to relax; [If you work for] 90 minutes, take 30 minutes off to relax; [and so on],” he says.

It isn’t easy achieving that ever-elusive work-life balance, but with a little bit of conscious effort, self-awareness and the willingness to try, and a commitment to a healthier, stress-free lifestyle, it really is possible. As for me? I’m preparing to wave my old friend stress goodbye. ■