

Germany wages war against 'burnout'

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Germany, holding up better than its eurozone partners in the current debt crisis, is battling the increasingly widespread phenomenon of "burnout" which it says is costing its economy billions of euros (dollars) each year.

According to data compiled by the economic institute of the public-sector [health insurer](#) AOK last year, psychological illness is on the rise among Germany's workforce.

Nearly one out of every 10 [sick days](#) in Germany in 2010 was due to psychological illness, the WIdO institute calculated. And between 2004 and 2010, the number of sick days related to psychological illness increased ninefold.

"[Time pressure](#) and stress are on the increase and the danger is that people will suffer burnout due to their jobs on the one hand and family pressures on other," says WIdO's deputy chief Helmut Schroeder.

Labour Minister Ursula von der Leyen has launched a campaign to raise awareness of the phenomenon and tackle it, particularly in small and medium-sized companies which form the backbone of the mighty German economy.

While big companies had already largely recognised the need to act, "70 percent of small and medium-sized companies aren't doing anything. They often don't know what to do," von der Leyen told AFP in an interview.

"We're losing a lot of time and money in Germany before businesses recognise that it's not just about migraines or psychosomatic back problems," she said, estimating burnout was costing businesses 8.0-10.0 billion euros (\$10.5-13.1 billion) in lost output each year.

"Nothing is more expensive than sending a good worker into retirement in their mid-40s because they're burned out. These cases are no longer just the exception. It's a trend that we have to do something about," she said.

In the past, the focus of the labour protection strategies developed by authorities, employers, employee representatives and insurers had been on the physical well-being of the workforce.

The new aim is to make [psychological health](#) a top priority from 2013.

Von der Leyen argued it was not about tightening legislation, as Germany's current labour protection laws were already sufficiently strict and required employers to ensure the psychological well-being of their workers.

"But the laws aren't sufficiently enforced, largely out of ignorance," the minister said.

Asked what is making people ill, von der Leyen suggested a number of different factors, from monotony, time pressure, poor management, a lack of solidarity among workers, but also things such as open-floor office space and expectations that employees be available around the clock, receiving and answering work-related emails and phone calls even in their leisure time.

The powerful IG Metall labour union insists that concrete and binding regulations be drawn up to protect people's mental health at the work

place.

According to the union's estimates, the health costs from burnout amount to 27 billion euros a year.

"While everyone is talking about burnout, neither firms nor policymakers are doing anything about it," said IG Metall board member Hans-Juergen Urban.

Nevertheless, for some psychiatrists, "burnout" is simply a word in vogue, a fashionable and more acceptable moniker for what is simply a form of depression without the stigma attached to mental illness.

"Burnout is not a disease and never will be. It's a vague, unclearly defined syndrome that for good reason is not included in the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases," said psychologist Markus Pawelzik.

But the public health insurer AOK disagrees.

"The burnout syndrome is an illness that must be taken seriously," it writes on its website.

It could bring with it serious complications, such as cardiac arrhythmia or gastro-intestinal problems, AOK said.

"It can also lead to manifest depression including suicidal thoughts. It is not merely as fashionable disease, but was diagnosed in around 10 percent of the workforce as far back as the 1960s and 1970s. And estimates see the proportion rising to around a quarter of the workforce in the coming years," AOK said.

The term has certainly become a buzzword for the media in recent years,

with the prestigious weekly magazine Der Spiegel dedicating two issues to the phenomenon last year and the Society for the German Language ranking it sixth in its annual list of Words of the Year.

Recently, well-known personalities such as football trainer Ralf Rangnick and the former head of media giant Bertelsmann, Hartmut Ostrowski, have spoken openly about their affliction.

But the high-brow daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung questioned why [burnout](#) was being written so much about in Germany, while in France, which is economically a lot worse off, "it's hardly a preoccupation at all."

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