

Job burnout can severely compromise heart health

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Americans work longer hours, take fewer vacation days, and retire later than employees in other industrialized countries around the globe. With such demanding careers, it's no surprise that many experience job burnout—physical, cognitive, and emotional exhaustion that results from stress at work. Researchers have found that burnout is also associated with obesity, insomnia, and anxiety.

Now Dr. Sharon Toker of Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Management and her fellow researchers—Profs. Samuel Melamed, Shlomo Berliner, David Zeltser and Itzhak Shpira of TAU's Sackler Faculty of Medicine—have found a link between job burnout and [coronary heart disease](#) (CHD), the buildup of plaque in the coronary arteries that leads to angina or heart attacks.

Those who were identified as being in the top 20 percent of the burnout scale were found to have a 79 percent increased risk of [coronary disease](#), the researchers reported in the journal [Psychosomatic Medicine](#). Calling the results "alarming," Dr. Toker says that these findings were more extreme than the researchers had expected—and make burnout a stronger predictor of CHD than many other classical risk factors, including smoking, [blood lipid levels](#), and physical activity.

Taking a toll on the heart

Some of the factors that contribute to burnout are common experiences

in the workplace, including high stress, heavy workload, a lack of control over job situations, a lack of emotional support, and long work hours. This leads to physical wear and tear, which will eventually weaken the body.

Knowing that burnout has been associated with other [cardiovascular risk factors](#), such as heightened amounts of cholesterol or fat in the bloodstream, the researchers hypothesized that it could also be a risk factor for coronary heart disease. Over the course of the study, a total of 8,838 apparently healthy employed men and women between the ages of 19 and 67 who presented for routine health examinations were followed for an average of 3.4 years. Each participant was measured for burnout levels and examined for signs of CHD. The researchers controlled for typical [risk factors](#) for the disease, such as sex, age, family history of heart disease, and smoking.

During the follow-up period, 93 new cases of CHD were identified. Burnout was associated with a 40% increased risk of developing CHD. But the 20% of participants with the highest burnout scores had a 79% increased risk. Dr. Toker predicts that with a more extended follow-up period, the results would be even more dramatic.

Avoiding long-term damage

These results are valuable for preventative medicine, says Dr. Toker. Healthcare providers who know that their patients are experiencing burnout can closely monitor for signs of coronary heart disease as well.

Once burnout begins to develop, it sparks a downwards spiral and ultimately becomes a chronic condition, she warns. Employers need to prioritize prevention by promoting healthy and supportive work environments and keeping watch for early warning signs of the condition. Simple diagnostic questionnaires that identify burnout are

already available online. Workers can contribute to prevention by making healthy lifestyle choices, such as exercising more regularly, getting seven to eight hours sleep per night, and seeking psychological therapy if required.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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