

Self-help book works to combat burnout and stress—without a therapist

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Credit: Nik Shuliahin, CC0

Around a third of all employees find their work stressful. Interventions for stress and burnout are available, but often not accessible for many employees. A self-help book based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has the potential to reduce burnout, stress and symptoms of depression - without any therapist contact. Researchers from the University of Basel have reported these findings in the scientific journal *Work & Stress*.

Stress in the workplace poses a threat to mental and physical health, and is associated with disability and high socioeconomic costs. Programs to combat [stress](#) and [burnout](#) are often offered by individual organizations for specific occupational groups, but those who are affected but cannot access such programs are left to their own devices. Self-help books could provide an affordable alternative to these programs that require expert administration or a therapist. However, the effectiveness of self-help [books](#) are seldom empirically examined.

More emotional flexibility to combat burnout

Together with the Institute for Work and Mental Health (INSAS) in Munich, researchers at the University of Basel have now, for the first time, examined the effectiveness of a self-help book on symptoms of stress and burnout without any therapist contact. People from various [occupational groups](#) with moderate and severe levels of stress were randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first group immediately began working with the self-help book for a duration of five weeks, while the second group received the book after the wait-list period.

The self-help book demonstrated how burnout is associated with emotional rigidity and described how ACT can alter this inner inflexibility. Mindfulness and acceptance help to facilitate a more flexible interaction with difficult thoughts and emotions.

The people who received the self-help book showed much greater improvement in the areas of stress, burnout, wellbeing and symptoms of depression than people in the waitlist group. Three months after using the self-help book participants reported a further significant reduction in stress, burnout and symptoms of depression.

"A self-help book without any therapist contact could overcome financial and logistical barriers that sometimes prevent people from

accessing help" says Patrizia Hofer from the University of Basel's Faculty of Psychology, the lead author of the study.

As effective as interventions with a therapist

In the study, similar effects for stress reduction and even greater effects for burnout reduction were achieved as in meta-analyses of various interventions with therapists for the treatment of stress and burnout.

"Nevertheless, a self-help book without any therapist contact is not suitable for everyone. However, if there are long waiting times or restricted opportunities to access psychotherapy, a self-help book based on ACT could be a promising first step in a multi-step care concept," says Professor Andrew Gloster, Head of the University of Basel's Clinical Psychology and Intervention Science department, and the director of the study.

More information: Patrizia D. Hofer et al, Self-help for stress and burnout without therapist contact: An online randomised controlled trial, *Work & Stress* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/02678373.2017.1402389](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2017.1402389)

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