BURNOUT

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT IS EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS | VOLUNTEERING AWAY BURNOUT | THE PERILS OF CREATIVITY | BURNOUT: A NARRATIVE | ARE WOMEN MORE VULNERABLE TO BURNOUT | AND MANY MORE

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The 21st century global landscape is rapidly changing. Disruption has become the norm rather than exception; innovation is no longer a hallmark of success but an essential ingredient for survival. The way we work and live continues to evolve relentlessly amidst growing uncertainties and ambiguities.

Consequently, traversing such a landscape is not only difficult, but also unprecedented. How then do we navigate these complex and unfamiliar environments without falling prey to the very human afflictions of stress and anxiety? Perhaps, in these trying times, we need to understand psychology more than ever.

It is with this philosophy that we have set out to revive Singapore Psychologist – SPS’ flagship magazine first launched in the 1980s. With a unique Singaporean flavour, Singapore Psychologist is a strategic effort to initiate important conversations and discourse surrounding psychology here at home.

In this issue, we turn our attention to the phenomenon of burnout – one that has plagued every Singaporean at the workplace and in school. All around us, we would often hear of or witness isolated cases of exhaustion. In our everyday conversations, there lies an undertone of negativity or cynicism towards endless work. Yet we believe burnout will not happen to us.

As work becomes increasingly embedded into our lifestyle, it can no longer be divorced from our self-identity. We spend more time with our colleagues than our loved ones; we choose to introduce ourselves by our profession. Have we fully embraced this workaholic culture as the new normal? Is this highly-caffeinated lifestyle sustainable?

We hope our articles will inspire ideas and meaningful conversations for you and those with whom you share your thoughts. As we aim towards making psychology literature more accessible to the general public, we also seek to celebrate the original works of both students and professionals alike.

Read on and get psyched!

Mok Kai Chuen
Editor-in-Chief
SPS Publicity Chair

Annelise Lai Ke Yin
Deputy Editor-in-Chief
SPS Deputy Publicity Chair
As 2019 draws to a close, the Singapore Psychological Society looks back on the year fondly; a good 40 years since it was first formed. What a year it has been for us! This year, the council came together to think about what the society could champion and we settled on the concept of *Professionalising the Profession of Psychology* (a different Triple P to what some of us might be familiar with!).

With our version of Triple P in mind, we set forth through various platforms - strengthening our old paths and creating new ones for us to tread on. We built upon tried and tested ways of going into schools and pushed the boundary by creating greater awareness of the profession of psychology as a whole, not just focusing on one or two domains that dominate our news and headlines. We pushed past old ways of communication through setting up cohesive Facebook and Instagram accounts and chose to curate and share news on mental health / wellbeing in Singapore and how psychologists can be a part of these movements of change. In line with our goal, we initiated a step towards opening up on ethical issues that psychologists in Singapore face, to be that champion for SPS members and to move meaningfully towards regulation.

We recognise that, to move the profession towards Triple P, the key lies not only in our efforts but also in the communication of what is done and how we can increase conversations about (possibly difficult) topics of interest among ourselves. I am proud to introduce the newly minted *Singapore Psychologist* - a forward-looking platform for sharing, pushing boundaries and helping us as psychologists keep abreast of the latest topics both locally and in the world.

We hope that the magazine can help us, as professionals, take a massive stride towards the SPS Triple P journey and we look forward to connecting, collaborating, and contributing to the psychology profession as a whole.

Dr. Cherie Chan
President, SPS
So You Want to Be a Psychologist?
By: Cheslie de la Cruz & Mok Kai Chuen

Gone are the days when we viewed psychologists as mysterious beings able to read minds and conduct hypnosis with a simple pendulum. The assumption that psychologists only do talk therapy in Freudian fashion is also waning. In conservative Singapore, psychology is now flourishing as a legitimate social science with diverse job opportunities and applications. Regardless of whether you are new to psychology, a psychology graduate, or a bored reader waiting for your turn to see the doctor, read on to learn more about the varied pathways psychologists can take in Singapore!

Educational Psychology
Works with: Children & youths; teachers & counsellors, concerned parents

In a meritocratic society almost obsessed with academic excellence, our young students are under tremendous stress to perform well in standardised examinations. These tests, however, presuppose similar learning ability across all students, which is not always the case. In 2014, KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH) and National University Hospital (NUH) reported a 76% increase in pre-schoolers diagnosed with developmental and learning issues, such as autism spectrum disorders, speech and language delays, and developmental delays.

An educational psychologist’s skillset is crucial amidst this local landscape. They work with young people and their relevant stakeholders – parents, teachers, counsellors – to improve learning outcomes and to recommend strategies that are personalised to each student. These recommendations are the result of a comprehensive diagnostical assessment. Specific work includes specialised instructional materials for students with learning difficulties, pedagogical strategies for educators, and research on the antecedents of learning difficulties. Giftedness in students is also heavily researched upon in Singapore.
Sports Psychology
*Works with: Athletes & team, coaches, occasional couch potatoes*

As the popularity of competitive sports in Singapore rises (fuelled by our ambitious World Cup bid this year, our stellar performance at the SEA Games, and Joseph Schooling), so too does the need for sports psychologists.

Sports psychologists work with individual and team athletes holistically to optimise their peak performance. Specifically, they provide psychological assessment and profiling, teamwork building, psychological recovery and injury management, and competition preparedness. Peak emotional and physical conditions with high levels of motivation would give the athletes that extra edge to clinching the gold medal. Outside of competitive sports, sports psychologists also work closely with the casual sportsmen who wish to enjoy a new sport, stick to an exercise regime, or to lose weight.

Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology
*Works with: CEOs and senior management, HR department, disgruntled employees*

With a strong understanding of human behaviour, I-O psychologists apply psychological principles to improve the workplace, both in terms of increasing productivity for organisations and promoting psychological well-being for employees. Essentially, I-O psychologists take on the traditional clinical psychologist’s mindset but instead of working with an individual, his/her client is an entire organisation.

They use or develop assessment tools (e.g., MMPI) for recruitment and performance appraisals, detect pain points and constraints within organisations, and identify star players and potential leaders for succession planning. I-O psychologists are also concerned with the continual growth of a company and their employees and they effect change through career development and coaching interventions.
**Consumer & Engineering Psychology**

*Works with: Marketing department, consumers & shopaholics, hopeful entrepreneurs*

Consumer psychologists aim to understand purchasing behaviours (better known as shopping!) and the factors that influence a consumer’s final decision to part with their money. For example, why is Product A selling faster than Product B when both products are essentially the same except for the brands? The key to this could be in the branding, or perhaps the product arrangement. Consumer psychologists conduct extensive market research through focus groups and surveys to ultimately present a coherent set of strategies and behavioural insights for executives to position their products or services.

While consumer psychologists focus on a person’s decision-making process towards consumption, engineering psychologists look deeper into the interplay between humans and their products to understand their goodness-of-fit, e.g., ergonomics, user experience. By understanding how we interact with objects, machines, and technology in our everyday life, engineering psychologists look to improve our general quality of life. They do so by enhancing and optimising our psychological safety, comfort and overall satisfaction, while lowering cognitive load, fatigue, and stress.
Geropsychology

*Works with: Ageing population, caregivers, and parents with empty nest syndromes*

With Singapore’s ageing population on the rise, carving out additional spaces for new infrastructure (such as nursing homes, hospitals, elderly-friendly facilities) is a good start. But the mere provision of facilities is not enough. There must be equal emphasis on psychological services uniquely suited for the elderly.

At an older age, chronic illnesses will start to set in. Geropsychologists can help individuals adjust to a life of creeping illnesses and declining health, including memory loss in the form of dementia (e.g., Alzheimer’s disease). Anxiety and depression in older adults are also on the rise due to multiple psychosocial factors, e.g., retirement and financial woes, crumbling social networks, and grief arising from the loss of loved ones. Geropsychologists are committed to advancing psychological treatment and care for older adults, occasionally involving their primary caregivers, so that the ageing population can still see the silver lining at the final stage of their lives.
A.I. Psychology

Works with: No one, currently, but possibly everyone in the future

Is a robot psychologist the next frontier for psychology or just a distant, sci-fi pipe dream? We often believe that only humans are uniquely suited to diagnose human problems. While most administrative work can and will be taken over by machines with greater speed and efficiency (leaving no room for human errors), psychology is argued to be too complex and elusive to be programmable in computer language.

However, in today’s rapidly changing world of disruptions, deep learning and big data, it is not surprising to see innovations centering on online supportive treatments and tailored sessions for various psychological issues, e.g., deprexis for depression. Akin to using deep-learning tools to detect cancerous tumours more accurately than our human eyes, part of what a practising psychologist does can also be automated, such as administering psychological tests and inventories. The technology to quickly and more accurately diagnose someone would reduce cost and increase accessibility.

Will we be able to speak to our phones about our psychological problems one day and receive instantaneous interventions?

We will check back in a few years’ time.
THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

By: Gan Kai Qi

Anna’s spouse, Lee, experienced a heart attack some months ago, and she is now his main caregiver. On top of this, she has a full-time job and is caring for her own elderly mother too. Anna’s son, David, helps out on weekends, but he is also married and working. She believes that David doesn’t give her enough support. With Lee’s deteriorating health and need for close supervision, she has rarely gone out with her friends since he came back from the hospital.

As a result, Anna is both physically and mentally exhausted. She goes about her daily routine without much enthusiasm and thought, doing things simply because it is expected of her. Even helping Lee increasingly begins to feel like a chore. Nothing she does seems to be making a difference.

If you do notice any signs or predictors of burnout, take a step back and re-evaluate where change is needed.

Anna’s case is one portrayal of burnout – a phenomenon that has slipped under the radar for far too long in Singapore. A recent 2019 survey conducted by Cigna found that almost 1 in 8 Singaporeans considered their stress unmanageable. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also recently recognised burnout as a medical condition, albeit an occupational one. Yet, as evidenced in Anna’s case, the factors associated with her burnout prove that this condition is not restricted to the workplace. How then can we accurately identify burnout? How do we differentiate burnout from stress?

Anna’s constant physical and mental fatigue is concerning. While occasional exhaustion is normal, exhaustion becoming the new status quo is not. She is increasingly unable to meet or recover sufficiently from external demands, hinting that this is not merely stress.
Anna’s feeling that what she is doing is no longer important potentially leads to an extremely detached demeanor and lower perceived life satisfaction. She goes through the motions indifferently from one chore to the next. Even taking care of her beloved husband is perceived as another mindless chore to her. This is a stark departure from stress – where one still believes that what they are doing is important. To top it off, Anna perceives her efforts as futile and that nothing she does is helping. This negative evaluation of oneself is yet another symptom of burnout that is absent in stress.

Being able to identify burnout after its manifestation is crucial, but what makes us susceptible to burnout in the first place? In Anna’s case, she was

- carrying a heavy burden without respite,
- laden with a full-time job, as well as the need to take care of both her husband and her mother.
- lacking sufficient social support, relying mostly on herself.

Unfortunately, burnout does not discriminate. Since burnout can occur in almost every aspect of life, every single one of us is susceptible. This is, however, far from a hopeless battle.

If you do notice any signs or risk factors of burnout, take a step back and re-evaluate where change is needed. Look out for those around you as coping with burnout takes more than a one-man team. For Anna, it may mean engaging someone else to help with the caregiving or taking the occasional night off to spend with her friends.

If burnout is a systemic problem caused by unresolved stress from the external environment, it is not just the sole responsibility of the burnt-out individual, but everyone else involved. We may have been late to the party, but it is time for us now to step up and do something about this in Singapore.
VOLUNTEERING AWAY BURNOUT!

By: Russell Lee

‘Am I tired?’

When was the last time you really asked yourself that question? In today’s fast-paced world of endless work and countless responsibilities, it can be all too easy to tell yourself fatigue is the status quo. After all, everyone around you seems exhausted too.

‘I should take a break.’

When was the last time you believed those words? With friends and colleagues slogging day in day out, the thought can sound almost immoral. Perhaps our kiasu culture is partially to blame.

We find ourselves pushing our minds and bodies unreasonably hard, growing collectively more drained and burned out day by day. It is almost as if Singaporeans have an inherent aversion to taking it easy or slowing down. But what if there are ways to actively destress and relax without having to feel like you’ve wasted your time being unproductive?

I first started volunteering earlier this year and ever since, my life hasn’t been quite the same. Like many others with numerous obligations, I had gotten used to the ubiquitous exhaustion of the daily grind over the years. It became a norm to wake up feeling tired and power through the day with the help of the occasional Youtube video or (supposedly) ten minute nap.

VOLUNTEERING PRESENTS A UNIQUE ACTIVE SOLUTION TO BURNOUT, HELPING US BURN LESS WHILE DOING MORE.
Motivation became something that had to be marshalled—regardless of the cost. However, after starting volunteering, though my hectic schedule is largely the same, I no longer feel the same pressure and sluggishness constantly weighing down on my mind and body. I sleep better, wake earlier, and feel like doing more things as if my heart’s battery is always charged. More importantly, I’m not the only one who feels this way.

Studies have shown that volunteering promotes life satisfaction and psychological well-being while reducing burnout and stress (Iverson, 2018; Ramos et al., 2015; Yeo et al., 2018), and these findings have been extrapolated to the older adult population (Jiang et al., 2018) and low-income population as well (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Tang, Choi, & Morrow-Howell, 2010).

Our inner Utilitarianist may say that volunteering is what you absolutely shouldn’t do if you’re constantly tired or burned out. After all, volunteering means adding more work on top of our already hectic schedules—and for free! I disagree. To be honest, I never expected volunteering to be so therapeutic and empowering. Whenever I receive a smile from a beneficiary or a word of thanks from a colleague, what surges through my emotional centres is satisfaction in its rawest form. It’s different from the kind of satisfaction you get when you score good grades or complete a task at work, particularly because there’s no extrinsic reward like money associated with it.

As a result, volunteering pushes you to think about meaning and question the purpose behind your choices and actions—things we so often become blind to when we get caught up in piles of assignments and to-do lists. It’s meditative in a sense, and helps me remain anchored to my purpose even amid the ferocious currents of productivity. This affirmation of purpose and meaning has been supported as one of the mechanisms underlying volunteering’s benefits. When your purpose is clear, energy follows and every task seems like a step forward or milestone just waiting to be accomplished.
The bonds I’ve forged with beneficiaries, colleagues and fellow volunteers support me in my volunteering and beyond, and I have no doubt they will persevere beyond the end dates of our programs. In addition, I often find that volunteering helps to keep my mind off concerns and worries from other facets of life by providing me with a different focus. It serves as a form of ‘active rest’ or ‘mental vacation’ from the stresses of everyday life.

This is in contrast to relaxing at home, where the guilt of unproductivity inevitably causes thoughts of work and commitments to creep in. It has also been suggested that volunteering may produce its benefits by providing a sense of life balance.

However, despite these potential benefits, we should not consider volunteering a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to burnout. Kulik (2007)’s research suggests that the effects of volunteering may vary depending on factors such as one’s personal characteristics and environmental context.

Other than reaffirming my purpose, volunteering also gives me the motivation to pursue my goals— academic, occupational or otherwise. It is always incredibly humbling when I look back and appreciate that the time and effort I put in had the power to change, albeit slightly, someone’s life. Personally, volunteering helps me put my life in perspective by placing all humans on the same plane.

We are all equal, and hence, we all have the potential to better one another’s lives through our actions. What this insight grants me is a sense of self-competence, which studies also believe to be a driver of volunteering’s effects. With self-competence, what follows is the courage and confidence to approach challenges with a positive mindset.

I believe volunteering protects against burnout through various secondary factors as well. In most cases, volunteering is a social activity. As such, it can contribute to the discovery of new friends and the blossoming of social circles, curbing the isolation that naturally stems from our hectic working lives.
For example, she found that people with higher levels of education derived less satisfaction from volunteering and its rewards, and that the presence of an unsupportive family produced the same effect.

At the same time, we must keep in mind that burnout is a possible consequence of volunteering. As such, it most definitely wouldn’t be a good idea to fill up all your spare time with volunteering activities.

So how about it? Have I managed to pique your interest in volunteering? Volunteering may not be ideal for everyone, but if you feel unsure, I recommend giving it a shot. After all, I never suspected volunteering would have such palpable effects on my mental and emotional health before I tried it. Ultimately, what’s important is for all of us to experiment and try to find our own balance in life—both for our sakes and for the sake of the people around us.

Volunteering presents a unique active solution to burnout, helping us burn less while doing more. It’s a tiny miracle of sorts, and if more Singaporeans try it and adopt it as a shelter from the mortal coil, perhaps it will pave the way to a healthier, kinder and more vibrant Singapore.
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR BRAIN IS BURNED OUT?

By: Charmaine Wah

**Reduction in Allocation of Cognitive Resources and Impaired Working Memory**

Working memory is short-term memory that temporarily stores and manages information to complete complex tasks. Burned out employees have impaired working memory and allocate less cognitive resources to tasks. Thus, they are less motivated and engaged with work.

**Impaired Task Switching**

Task switching is the ability to switch attention from an initially important feature to another, in order to respond correctly and achieve a desired outcome. Burnout affects this ability to rapidly and efficiently adapt to new situations and tasks, therefore leading to more error-making.

**Attention Deficits**

Job burnout leads to disruptions in the ability to orient voluntary\(^1\) and involuntary attention\(^2\). Thus, there is an impaired ability to stay focused on tasks. Burned out employees also require more attentional resources to process conflicting information\(^3\) and have more limited attentional resources in the further processing of such stimuli. Thus, their ability to selectively attend to relevant information and ignore irrelevant information are hindered.

**Enhanced Sensitivity to Negative Events but Dampened Deeper Processing of Negative Stimuli**

Early processing of negative outcomes is enhanced among burned out workers, but later processing of errors remains unchanged. Thus, it is possible that burnout hinders learning from unfavourable events, which could affect future performance improvement.

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1. Voluntary attention refers to the orienting of attention to task-relevant stimuli.
2. Involuntary attention refers to the orienting of attention to irrelevant but potentially significant unexpected events in the environment. For example, distractors.
3. An example of conflicting information would be the Stroop effect, where you would have to say the colour of the word, but not read the word itself. For example, the word “blue” might be printed in red, but you must say “red” rather than “blue.”
**Impaired Regulation of Emotional Stress**

There is an association between burnout and the function of the amygdala – a brain structure crucial in the regulation of emotions. Individuals experiencing occupational burnout have an impaired ability to down-regulate negative emotions. This is reflected by weaker functional connectivity along two neural pathways crucial in emotion regulation – between the amygdala and the anterior cingulate cortex, and the amygdala and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. These structural alterations further perpetuate the stress condition.

**Decrease in BDNF Levels**

Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) is a neurotrophin expressed primarily in regions of the brain involved in mood regulation such as the frontal lobe, striatum, and thalamus and particularly in the hippocampus. BDNF has also been demonstrated to play an important role in mechanisms of memory acquisition and consolidation. Burnout has consistently been found to be associated with reduced BDNF levels which seem to contribute to the severity of burnout symptoms, such as cognitive impairment, memory and attention problems and altered mood.

**Stronger Emotional Dissonance**

Emotional dissonance refers to the gap between felt and expressed emotion. Increased severity of burnout is associated with weaker activity in the anterior insula (AI)/inferior frontal gyrus (IFG) and the temporoparietal junction (TPJ). The IFG has been previously implicated in reducing negative arousal, inhibiting distress and encouraging optimistic thinking. In addition, the TPJ has been found to be involved in distinguishing between awareness of self and others during empathic behaviour and alexithymia. Thus, burned out individuals have an impaired ability to distinguish between emotions of the self and others and additionally have an impaired ability to regulate negative emotions, hence, contributing to stronger emotional dissonance and/or reduced emotional recognition.

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1. Neurotrophin is a family of proteins that induce the survival, development and function of neurons.
2. Emotional dissonance may emerge when one’s efforts to express socially-required or occupationally-required empathic emotions become too much of a burden and emotional responses become poorly regulated.
3. Alexithymia refers to emotional awareness.
Some of the earliest teachings of Psychology could be observed in 1928, with the establishment of the Raffles College – a college of education offering Diplomas in Arts and Science. The public courses in practical psychology were well received by colonial officers and members of the business and medical fields.

In the same year, a new mental hospital, simply named The Mental Hospital, was established along Yio Chu Kang Road. The Mental Hospital was then the largest facility in Singapore providing custodial care for the mentally ill. The Mental Hospital would become a modern hospital, providing hospital-based services and spearheading mental health programmes in the future decades to come.
1930s
Psychology's Fledgling Years

The Singapore Psychological Association was formed in 12 January 1930 with Mr Stuart as President & Dr Frankel as Vice-President.

There were two main aims of the association:

1. To create opportunities for Singapore residents in the pursuit of practical psychology
2. To establish and maintain contact with visiting psychologists and societies from all over the world.

The Association also set up a library that collected Psychology-related books for the use of its members. Unfortunately, the Association would dissolve in 1939 with the outbreak of the Second World War.

1940s
Ravaged by War

The Second World War resulted in a dearth of psychological services in this decade.
1950s
Expanding Scope

On 11 September 1956, an Australian psychologist, **V. W. Wilson**, was appointed to the Colonial Medical Service, where he began providing psychological services not just within Singapore’s medical domain but to social welfare and education fields.

Wilson’s proposed framework included organising formal psychology courses for psychiatric nurses and other professional staff and making professional advice available to government bodies.

Educational Psychology was offered in the School of Education, **University of Singapore** for the first time. Psychology was also being taught as part of the Social Work curriculum.

1960s
Psychology in the Public Service

With the inception of National Service in Singapore in 1967, the **Public Service Commission** set up a policy to expand the number of psychologists.

Personality testing, as well as the use of other projective techniques, became a mainstay of psychological assessments.

Behaviour therapy was also applied for the first time at **Woodbridge Hospital**. Before this, the scope of psychological assessment was limited to IQ testing.

Applied psychological services began to flourish in the public services.
With the Child Guidance Clinic in full-time operation in April 1970, demands for psychological help became heavy. At the direction of then-Health Minister, Mr. Chua Sian Chin, a five-year projection for psychological services within the Ministry of Health (MOH) was submitted. Subsequently, several psychologists were added to the staff at Woodbridge Hospital and Child Guidance Clinic.

Psychology lectures were conducted for various groups of nurses at the School of Nursing, Singapore General Hospital (SGH), the W. H. School of Psychiatric Nursing as well as students at the Department of Social Work & Social Administration, University of Singapore.

The Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) was listed as a registered society on 11 January 1979. SPS inaugurated 40 founding members, with Mr. Fred Long as the first President. The membership of the SPS would increase from 40 to 197 over the next two decades.
Requests for psychological assistance and inputs from various Government agencies became relentless. They ranged from psychological studies on secret society members to psychological assessments on candidates of the President's and Overseas Merit Scholarship.

**Singapore Psychiatric Association** was founded, Dr. Chee Kuan Tzee as first President.

SPS published its first issue of the SPS journal – **Singapore Psychologist**. The founding Vice-President, Yip, affirmed the roles of SPS in the journal's preface, citing that SPS was established with the aim of advancing psychology as a science and profession in Singapore.

In 1984, the Department of Psychology at Woodbridge Hospital was officially established as a centralised unit for psychological services for the entire Civil Service. Mr. Fred Long was appointed Head of Department and de facto Chief Psychologist.

Undergraduates were offered more comprehensive programmes of Psychology. The first psychology degree was made available at the Department of Social Work and Psychology, **National University of Singapore (NUS)**, with the first batch of 52 Psychology students graduating from NUS in 1989.

In 1987, **Prof H. J. Eysenck** visited Singapore, met then **PM Lee Kuan Yew** and discussed psychology manpower needs for Singapore.
1990s
The Golden Decade of Psychological Services

In 1993, CEO of Woodbridge Hospital, Dr Luisa Lee, lent strong support to the Psychology Department in conducting mental health education, smoking cessation and stress management workshops for the community.

In July 1994, in conjunction with MOH, MHA set up the National Emergency Behaviour Management System (NEBMS). The NEBMS was activated during the 1996 North-South Highway accident, the 1997 SilkAir MI 185 and the 2000 SQ 006 air disasters.

In the aftermath of the Hotel New World disaster, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) enhanced the country’s emergency planning to include the need for psychological support for victims of such incidents.

NUS produced its first 11 Psychology Honours graduates as well as the registration of the first Masters candidate by research.

In 1991, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) set up the Division of Psychological Studies with National Institute of Education (NIE). This formed another important institution for psychology.
Beyond Singapore

In July 2000, a representative from SPS was elected into the Executive Council of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) – the largest international psychological society. IUPsyS aims to facilitate the exchange of scientific ideas among psychologists of different countries.

SPS would also go on to host several conferences, such as the 25th International Congress of Applied Psychology in 2002 – a mega-conference that put psychology in Singapore on the world map.

In 2005, a visiting Psychology Committee to NUS heard representations from staff and suggested separation of Psychology from Social Work. NTU founded its School of Humanities and Social Sciences, which included psychology. In 2007, a psychology major with business focus was offered at Singapore Management University (SMU).

In 2006, The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) replaced WBH at nearby Buangkok Green.

In March 2015, SPS also hosted the 5th ASEAN Regional Union of Psychological Societies Congress (ARUPS), bringing together national psychological associations from all over Southeast Asia.

In 2019, SPS represented Singapore in the inaugural Asia Pacific Psychology Alliance (APPA) meeting with 15 other countries. Dr. Cherie Chan, current SPS President, has also been elected into the APPA Executive Committee and will be the Secretary for the Alliance over the next term.

In 2019, SPS has also begun thinking seriously about the ethics and regulation of Singapore psychologists, culminating in the creation of its first Code of Ethics.
"We need to do a better job of putting ourselves higher on our own 'to do' list."

- Michelle Obama
arah knows she should have done more work yesterday, but she had fallen asleep.

She had tried to wake up earlier at 5am to complete her revision, but her body gave in.

She runs through the same old muddled checklist; the tasks scatter, one by one, on a mental corkboard full of post-it notes. It lists each and every thing on her mind—things she has to complete, things she started but has not finished, things she put away insisting they will get done by tomorrow, and yet there they still remain the following day. Even as she removes one post-it, there comes another five more. The older ones only get pushed back further and further into the pile. There is simply never enough time.

While those thoughts run in her mind, Mr. Lim walks into class. Is this going to be her lucky day?

“All right, everyone, I will now be returning your midterm papers. The highest grade is 74 this time. Come forward to collect your papers when I call out your names”.

Sarah remembers not being so sure about this test. Sure, she had worked hard. Maybe she could perform well this time, but now, in the pit of her stomach, there is a deep-seated feeling that she will score very badly.

This experience is all too familiar. After every major school exam, Sarah could only hold her breath and relentlessly wait for this feeling to end. Even if she was certain it was her best effort, her best never seemed to match up to her peers. Instead, all she ever received were underlined numbers on a report card and parent-teacher meetings. A form teacher, wearing the usual furrowed brow, says the usual words,
“Sarah is doing all right in math, but she really needs to buck up for her other subjects. She is a smart kid, just need to work a lot harder.”

After hearing this, her mom worries again, “You heard what the teacher said – have to buck up”. But she never stops there, “What about that boy in your class? How did he do?” Sarah just wanted to stop all of this jabbering, but there is no point in avoiding it.

Her name gets called out, almost blocked out by the sound of her heartbeat. She rushes forward to collect her paper. She has got to put an end to her turmoil. She turns the page quickly.

48.

Not even close to 74. That is barely a pass. Maybe it isn’t her. Could Mr. Lim have calculated the marks incorrectly? Could she argue against his feedback for a higher grade? Or maybe, just maybe, she is simply not smart enough. But what did it matter? All she tells herself is if she had studied harder, there could have been a chance that she might have done better. But now, out of all her classmates, she is probably at the end of the curve. So what does this mean for her? What will a 48 translate to in the official exams? B, or even worse—

“Now listen up, class, we’re so close to our end goal. Anything that happens after that doesn’t matter. I expect a lot and I hope all of you will not disappoint me. I know you can do better.”

Maybe.

“You all really need to focus at this juncture. Especially you, Ethan and Sarah.”

I am trying.

“There’s only one month left.”

...I know.

The lesson ends and Sarah is still clutching her exam paper. She has to chase it. She has to make the cut. If she does not...there is no way...failure is not an option, for her or for anyone.

Homework, grades, and examinations fill her mind. Her fears invite yet another nightmare tonight. It’s a classroom – yet another examination, yet another parent-teacher meeting. All she sees are faces—faces of her teachers, of her schoolmates, and of her mother. Massive red circles magnify her disastrous grades. Their eyes bear into hers with disappointment and pity.

Loud blaring sounds from an alarm awaken her. Shaken out of her nightmare, Sarah freezes in a state of terror. It is 5am. She hastily scrambles to her corkboard. She writes another post-it note, places it on top of the pile:

I will work harder.
THE PERILS OF CREATIVITY
By: Juanita Ong

The distinction between art and design is not new, nor is it conclusive (Irwin, 1991). To many, however, these demarcations might largely be seen as irrelevant since professions in both fields constitute the creative industry.

Consequently, the nomenclature of a "creative type" in the industry leads to broad generalisations in the works of an artist and designer. Yet, in understanding their experience with burnout, it is imperative that we first recognise their fundamental differences as this would come to affect their relationship with creativity and prolonged drudgery.

While art is defined as “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination...producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power”, design is "a plan or drawing produced to show the look and function or workings of a building, garment, or other object before it is made".

Thus, what follows from this when they experience burnout would be the converse of their creative process – a lack of motivation and inspiration to create.

From these definitions, we can begin to comprehend how art connotes the idea of aestheticism or rhetoric, whereas design implies functionality. As such, it is worth noting that professions in the creative industry would take on some degree of polarity – contrasting creation as means to an end or an end in itself.

The artistic realm, then, seems to be the de facto association the layman makes to the creative industry. With vocations like visual artists, music composers and photographers, it is easy to see how they may aptly fit the "creative type" stereotype – hosts of individuals starting artistic projects when their muses so decide to strike and creating art pieces according to their whim and fancy.
Thus, what follows from this when they experience burnout would be the converse of their creative process – a lack of motivation and inspiration to create. Such creative slumps may appear counterintuitive to most, since we are used to formal settings in which the rigor of our corporate and school environments logically seem to lead more naturally to burnout through copious amounts of tasks needing completion.

The realm of design usually remains unexplored as a result of the aforementioned stereotyping the general populace is guilty of. In their line of work, designers instead experience a curtailing of freedoms where, in place of creating something liberally out of sheer passion and expression, their free reign is curtailed by job specifications.

Ranging from clients’ needs to infrastructural limits, these specifications form a structure within which the designer is supposed to work. The creative process for these designers, then, lies not in how to best express and experiment with their works, but how to channel their creative energies to fulfil lists of exact requirements.

In fulfilling their obligations to adhere to requisite after requisite, the burnout they face appears to stem from the methodological nature in which they go about creating. This would then ironically bear closer semblance to our conventional conception of burnout in formal settings.

It is not very often that designers have such high levels of unrestrained creativity. Ultimately, a designer’s creativity is sanctioned and subservient to an end goal of functionality.

Consequently, when work piles up over a continuous period, the form of burnout they experience should decidedly differ from that of an artist’s.

In Singapore today, the trend of blurring the line between art and design appears to continue – though for another reason. With the budding arts scene in Singapore, many more artists appear to crossover into the burnout designers feel as a result of commissioned work. With semblances of restrictions being imposed on the themes their art can take on or the production of a piece that is popular, we can begin to see how art and design might overlap after all.
What follows is a series of interview questions with two individuals from the creative industry: Samantha, an 18 year-old student undergoing full-time professional ballet training, and Lin How, an architect with 38 years of experience in the industry. We hear from both the artist and designer themselves, what it is like to be on the cusp of, or to experience such burnout in their line of work.

The Artist – Samantha, Ballet Dancer

Juanita (J): Beyond just feeling stressed, have you ever had any experience with burnout?

Samantha (S): Yes, definitely. I had not noticed I was feeling burnt out until one of the weeks where, for all 5 classes, my only thoughts during class were “I don’t want to be here” or “I’d rather be doing anything than dancing right now”. I dreaded going for classes and felt very unmotivated. I also felt guilty for feeling this way in that I knew I was very blessed to be able to pursue what I love. It was difficult knowing that I was burnt out and not able to take control of it.

J: What factors of dance do you think contributed to the burnout?

S: I think the creative demands inherent in the nature of dance could be a factor. It’s essential for dancers to train almost every day in order to keep our technique and stamina up. Ballet is very demanding on the body. I’ll get through a class using pure mind power because my body could be aching badly from the previous day. In a performance rehearsal, I can rehearse a short 5-minute piece for 1.5 hours. It requires a lot of focus to constantly repeat the steps over and over just so that it can turn into muscle memory without really thinking about it.

J: Do you think your experience with burnout is unique to what you are doing, i.e. being in a more ‘creative’ environment?

S: My understanding of burnout is that it usually occurs to people who overwork or are doing too much, whether in dance or in their studies. So I don’t think burnout in the creative forms is that much different from normal forms. But everyone has a slightly different and unique experience of burnout, which stems from what he or she is doing.

This exchange not only debunks the notion that artistic creation is as spontaneous as it seems, but also showcases how the repetition of a form of creative expression can lead to burnout. Additionally, the burnout of the Artist even appears comparable to careers in “conventional” settings, when taken to the extreme, in which individuals are tasked to execute the same duties in a methodological fashion, over an inordinate amount of time.
You mentioned experiencing burnout in your younger days. What about now?

LH: When you’re older, you tend to be more familiar with your work, which reduces the tendency to experience high stress and burnout. Because of this familiarity, you become more efficient. However, you tend to curtail a lot of creative, explorative work because of this efficiency. You learn to be more compliant and less creative since you learn that time is not something you have with these projects. Yet, being in this dynamic industry, there’s always potential for burnout because of outside stressors. Especially for complicated projects, a lot of things can go wrong – not only before your plans are approved, but when the project is underway on the ground. When things go wrong, we need to rally people around us to solve the problem.

Do you think your experience with burnout is unique to your profession?

LH: I think that though the work setting is different, the experience itself may well be the same. As an architect, you’re torn between a regime of stress-inducing delivery and the nature of creative work. Creative work requires freedom of boundaries for good work to surface. Also, designers tend to be idealistic. They are always trying to improve that one extra thing in a project, whether it be in terms of a look, feel or composition. So this urge for perfectionism manifests as an inner tension between deciding when to push creatively and when to do only what the client wants. Such idealistic designers hence either end up quitting or not liking what they eventually do.
From this, we can see how it is indeed true that the designer is subject to more rigour in their work and thus has a higher likelihood of experiencing burnout due to external factors. Though their work may not be repetitive with each project, their idealism may be shown to worsen the situation or even be the main source of burnout.

Consequently, this not only highlights the overlap between the realm of art and design, where stipulated requirements – informal or otherwise – place a form of pressure on the individual, but also points to a more universal problem of how the misalignment of goals with the environment an individual is placed in is a stressor and potential source of burnout.

The creative industry may, at some point, face an interesting juxtaposition between creating something they love wholeheartedly when they so decide to and being commissioned to simply go through the motions for the sake of livelihood and/or popularity. However, regardless of whether artists and designers may continue to run in parallel trajectories or become increasingly congruent what lies behind it is this: that all individuals are susceptible to burnout and finding out the causes of it would definitely help to improve our overall wellbeing.
"Without ambition, one starts nothing. Without work, one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You have to win it."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
Asia Pacific Psychology Alliance (APPA)

On 27th July 2016, attendees at the Asia-Pacific Psychology Leadership Forum, which took place at the International Congress of Psychology meeting in Yokohama, Japan, became signatories to the Yokohama declaration. This was to focus on the development of the Asia Pacific Psychology Alliance (APPA) to promote psychology in the region. In Bali 2018, the constitution of the APPA was signed, marking the official start of the alliance.

We are excited to announce that we participated in the inaugural APPA meeting which was held in Penang on the 1st of August 2019. The Singapore Psychological Society was represented by Clare Yeo, our immediate past President as well as Dr. Cherie Chan, our current SPS President. A total of 16 countries form this Alliance, with representatives from Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Philippines, India, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, China, Malaysia and Singapore. We were privileged to have Dr. Pam Maras, current President of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) and Dr. Saths Cooper, immediate past President, to observe and provide guidance for this meeting.
Dr. Cherie Chan has also been elected into the APPA Executive Committee and will be the Secretary for the Alliance over the next term. We hope to be able to influence and learn from the region as we work together with our partners to promote and professionalise Psychology across Asia Pacific.

ASEAN Regional Union of Psychological Societies (ARUPS)

On the 2nd of August 2019, SPS was also represented in the meeting of ASEAN psychology societies with representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore. The meeting was held in conjunction with the 7th ARUPS Congress which was hosted this year in Penang, Malaysia. SPS was represented by Dr. Cherie Chan as well as Mr. Adrian Toh, our current Singapore Register of Psychologist (SRP) chair.

SPS hopes to both support and learn from our regional partners. We are working together to build professional networks to inform change in this region where psychology is still a growing profession. More importantly, we are excited to see legislation and regulation for psychologists in the Philippines. Following Philippines' footsteps, SPS has begun thinking seriously about our own psychologists' ethics and regulation in Singapore. Look out for more updates as we aim towards professionalising our profession!
In my role as the Research Chair, one of my self-selected Key Performance Indicators (KPI) is to ‘promote psychological research and organise meetings on matters in particular fields of psychology.’ Of course this KPI was set up to align with running our annual Student Research Awards (SRA) event as an operational performance target, with the success of the event as the performance measure.

Well, mission accomplished! Our SRA 2019 was run in conjunction with our biennial student forum and networking event, this year tagged as Kudos and Connections and held on Saturday, 19 October at JCU Singapore (our event venue sponsor). Our panel of seven SRA judges read, deliberated, and scored 28 submissions from three categories (Diploma, Undergraduate, Postgraduate) on a number of criteria including Novelty & Actuality, Methods, Data, Analysis & Interpretation, and Structure & Style. Nine finalists were identified through this process, with three finalists from each category invited to present their research at our awards ceremony.

The quality of these presentations alone attests to the high standards in research training afforded to students in Singapore. As for topics, submissions addressed eight broad themes with the majority addressing issues of importance to Singapore such as racism and racial equality, stigmatisation, prejudice and extremism (‘judging category’). Several of the studies addressed helping behaviours such as volunteer recruitment, the influence of spiritual beliefs on helping, and understanding caregiver burden.

I extend my own personal congratulations to all SRA participants and I encourage current students to keep an eye out for our SRA competition next year, with announcements scheduled for the latter half of 2020.
SPS’ biennial Student Forum was established in 2015 and due to its extensive coverage of various psychology specialisations, it successfully grasped the attention of psychology students in Singapore. This concept was well-received and it has since become the flagship event for our Public Education team to continue said legacy.

This year, SPS Student Forum adopted a fresh new concept through panel discussion. In this format, we invited speakers of different specialisations within the field of psychology to share their expertise and experiences and to concurrently answer participants’ burning questions about the latest psychological trends in Singapore.

This latest concept was well-received with numerous positive real-time feedback from the participants, as well as from the speakers. It provided a much-needed bridge between professional information and public ideas in order to evoke change. Real-time questions asked were relevant and helpful to both psychologists and psychologists-to-be, as it created a clear sight of where we had grown over the years.

As SPS Public Education Chair, it is with utmost honor to have seen this event turn out to be such a fruitful one. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my team for their ideas and actions that made SPS Kudos and Connections 2019 a resounding success. We will definitely take the best parts of this event and adapt it for future Student Forum(s) so as to continue to create quality events. Rest assured that every next event will be better than the one before. To continue the streak of hype, SPS Public Education team would like to invite you to our upcoming event on 7 and 8 December 2019 - SPS Psych Weekend 2019!
I had the privilege of representing the Singapore Psychological Society at the Response to Intervention (RTI) for International Schools Summit (www.rtiforinternationalschools.org) on 24 and 25 October 2019 at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Singapore.

RTI is a multi-tier approach to the "early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs", which originated in the United States of America in response to educational and social policies, research and needs (www.rtinetwork.org). The RTI for International Schools Summit was said to be the first conference across the globe that focused on the application of these concepts in an international school setting.

The organisers were from Stamford American International School, The International School of Kuala Lumpur, Canadian International School, Singapore American School, Shanghai Community International School, Hong Kong Academy, Australian International School, and The International School Nido de Aguila. Besides Singapore, I met participants who had travelled from countries in the region, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Hong Kong, Dubai, China, and as far as Chile. Both school leaders and practitioners were in attendance. Keynote speakers included top researchers in special education, education and school psychology from the United States such as Dr. Amanda VanDerHeyden, Dr. Matthew Burns, Dr. John Hosp and Dr. Chris Borgmeier.
The summit was well designed in that it addressed all three tiers of the model and provided theoretical, scientific and practical information. RTI consists of high-quality empirically supported classroom instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, and universal screening and frequent progress monitoring of students’ learning rate and level of achievement using standardised curriculum-based assessments. According to this framework, struggling learners receive scientifically-based interventions with varying intensities to accelerate their rate of learning. Services are provided by classroom teachers, special educators and specialists. Educational decisions are based on data from a student’s response to intervention, taking into account the context over time.

RTI also aligns nicely with the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for Specific Learning Disorder. As a clinical and school psychologist, working privately with children and adolescents doing psychotherapy and psychological assessments, I found this conference incredibly inspiring and edifying in that RTI is founded on many principles I observe and value in my own work: research-based decision-making, scientifically proven interventions and diverse learners. When collaborating with schools, it is imperative to understand their unique environment and practices in order to make recommendations that are sensitive, appropriate and useful – and this conference certainly increased my insight. It is my hope that Singapore Psychological Society will continue to have opportunities to partner with organisations and allied health providers in the community for the betterment of all of those whom we serve.

For more information on RTI:
www.interventioncentral.org
www.rti4success.org
www.intensiveintervention.org
www.rtinetwork.org
The following is based on a true Singapore story.

John, a man in his fifties, has been working for the same company for more than 20 years. These long years of service must surely suggest that John is comfortable in his company, even excelling in his duties. Yet recently, he finds himself feeling overwhelmed at work.

Tasks easily accomplished in hours now take days. Lively chatter among colleagues is now reduced to the frantic, monotonous tapping of his keyboard as he struggles to meet deadlines. New opportunities, once met with utmost excitement, are now replaced by endless worry and a fear of failure. Upon reaching home, he is often exhausted and heads straight to bed. John no longer possesses the energy to spend time with his family.

John realises he is in dire need of a break. He visits a family physician for a letter to take a year of No-Pay Leave. He has finally mustered the courage to confront his problem. But alas, his request is swiftly rejected by his company.

“Burnout is not a medical condition, John.” His supervisor nonchalantly responds.
The contentious nature of burnout as a legitimate diagnosis has stirred much debate amongst mental health professionals and laypeople alike. Earlier this year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) made an unprecedented move to add burnout to the latest edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). WHO defines burnout as characterised by three dimensions:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion,
2. Increased mental distance from one’s job or feelings of negativity/cynicism related to one’s job, and
3. Reduced professional efficacy.

However, WHO was quick to clarify that burnout is still only an occupational phenomenon and a factor which contributes to a diagnosis, not the diagnosis itself.

The lack of formal categorisation of burnout in the ICD naturally draws attention to the parallel Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), from which burnout is absent too.

However, the rising number of people experiencing burnout makes this absence both pressing and puzzling.

The diagnosticity of burnout, if successful, will have lasting implications for multiple stakeholders, e.g., employers, healthcare industry, social services, and one's own family. It is, therefore, important to take a closer look at some of the arguments in this debate.

There is certainly a case to be made in favour of acknowledging burnout as a psychological or medical condition in its own right. Unsurprisingly, research has indicated that burnout is linked to decreased performance in the workplace and is frequently correlated with absenteeism (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011; Ruotsalainen et al., 2015). Like John, those experiencing burnout feel overwhelmed to the point of significant distress in their day-to-day functioning. The psychological stress takes a toll on their physical health, creating a cycle of diminishing productivity. From an institutional standpoint, burnout incurs tremendous costs in terms of productivity losses.
Formally recognising burnout will help to legitimise this condition. This will, in turn, spur companies to acknowledge and adopt proactive measures to reduce and/or prevent such burnout in their employees, e.g., willingness to grant leave, introduction of workplace interventions to combat burnout. Such a strategy ultimately restores employees’ efficacy, thereby boosting productivity for the companies.

At the individual level, formalising burnout as a diagnosis would be a step towards combating the ‘victim-blaming’ mentality. In collectivistic Singapore, many are afraid to take leave for burnout for fear of being perceived negatively by their employers and colleagues. Not seen as legitimate, individuals with burnout must suffer in silence. They continue to push on in vain, or worse, misattribute their low performance to a lack of skill or cognitive prowess. Taken to the extreme, individuals may view burnout as a ‘badge of honour’, a necessary by-product of success.

Arguments against formalising burnout are aplenty too, suggesting that burnout as a diagnosis may be premature.

Burnout is a relatively new concept and there is a glaring lack of systematic conceptualisation of the construct itself.

It was first coined by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1874 – a phenomenon he noticed in his colleagues who were becoming exhausted by excessive workplace demands. Christina Maslach and her colleagues then expanded upon it as a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (i.e., feeling detached and a sense that the world around you is unreal), and reduced personal accomplishment caused by chronic work stress. Since then, many practitioners have chimed in on an ever-changing framework of burnout. Without a clear framework, going ahead with formalising burnout may do more harm than good.

Some experts also believe that burnout is not deserving of a classification of its own, but rather is a form of depression. One such research pointed out that there is significant qualitative and quantitative overlap between burnout and depression, i.e. 90% of individuals categorised as burnt-out met the criteria for a provisional diagnosis of depression (Bianchi, Schonfeld, & Laurent, 2015).
Is burnout yet another case of over-labelling, or an attempt to distance oneself from the stigma of depression?

Regardless of where one falls on this burnout debate, one thing remains painfully clear – burnout is a real and increasingly pressing problem. Formally recognising burnout as a diagnosis may require further analysis and endless rounds of debate, but we should not rest on our laurels. We can work towards raising awareness of burnout so that those experiencing it are able to seek the help they need. One example is to model after countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, where burnout is recognised as a legitimate reason to grant employees leave. This would be a good collective step forward.

After all, we all want John to take the leave he so requires for his mental wellbeing, whether or not burnout eventually receives an official categorisation.
EMPLOYEE BURNOUT IS EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS

By: Fiona Hsu

Following the World Health Organisation’s recent acknowledgement of burnout as an occupational phenomenon, it is critical to note that burnout is now defined as a syndrome resulting from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” – the first time burnout has ever been explicitly tied to the workplace.

Unfortunately, there remains a misconception that burnout is a personal issue – a direct consequence of one not successfully managing their own occupational stress, and should, therefore, be resolved by the employees themselves. Employees must now tap on readily-available resources to recognise, deal with, or recover from burnout, and self-help books to improve their productivity. Many organisations are also quick to regard employee burnout as strictly an issue of productivity, introducing quick fixes such as reallocating workload to more effective team members or referring employees to company-paid medical or professional help. Employees are expected to fix the burnout and return fully functional.

These reactive solutions do not address the root of the problem – the work itself. Instead, it puts the blame on the individual employee’s resilience, or worse, motivation level. This mentality is further exacerbated by the massive costs incurred, i.e., stress-related medical fees alone cost up to $190 billion annually in the U.S. Add the unpredictable pattern of medical absences, low engagement, rising presenteeism, and high staff turnover, and the actual cost goes beyond $300 billion on a global scale. This will undoubtedly serve as a cautionary tale for employers to double down on hiring the best employee, one who is highly efficient and not susceptible to burnout.
BECOMING AWARE OF HOW CURRENT ORGANISATIONAL NORMS AND PRACTICES ARE AFFECTING EMPLOYEES IS THE FIRST CRUCIAL STEP.

Ultimately, this creates a negative, almost toxic attitude towards burnout. Could employee burnout be the consequence of a larger organisational and systemic problem? After all, it is almost impossible that an employee will be burnt-out in the absence of work. Employers need to start recognising and take responsibility for their role in defining and distributing work. Mankins and Garton (2017) found that companies with excess collaboration practices, weak time-management disciplines, and a tendency to overload their most capable talents were those with the highest burnout rates. A survey by Kronos (2017) also identified poor leadership management, negative workplace culture, and employees feeling disconnected from the corporate strategy as reasons for burnout. All of these organisational factors lie outside of the individual employees and can be addressed by proactive and effective leadership. Allowing direct and open feedback from employees provides critical insight into specific pain points in an employee’s day-to-day work routine. A strong feedback culture contextualises burnout, providing clarity to the otherwise indistinguishable symptoms of burnout (from other physical illnesses).

Addressing these issues swiftly is the next step. It involves executives leaning in to help establish new ways of working within and across teams, setting new cultural norms around time and talent management, and coaching their department heads on how to fairly distribute workloads in their own teams. Senior management and HR teams can also introduce workplace interventions to alleviate burnout. Tailored physical activity programs, for one, have been associated with reduced risks of chronic illness and lowered medical fees (Levy & Thorndike, 2018).

Given the influence leaders have over their company’s strategic direction, they are in an ideal position to make impactful shifts that can ultimately transform the organisational culture. Leaders must take a proactive and nurturing stance towards managing occupational stress and burnout, instead of medicalising burnout. As much as the success of a company is not attributable to any one employee, so should burnout not just be an employee’s sole responsibility. A collective, top-down effort to recognise and combat burnout will go a long way towards a healthier and more sustainable workforce.
ARE WOMEN MORE VULNERABLE TO BURNOUT?

By: Pansy Pan

In 2019, Singapore ranked among the top few stressful countries with 92% of working Singaporeans reported feeling stressed and exhausted. With the surging cost of living and higher education standards in the country, Singaporeans would undoubtedly feel the pressure to work harder and secure better jobs. It is no wonder, then, that there is a growing prevalence of dual-income families in today’s society.

More women have begun to take up professional roles in the workforce. Despite their evolving role in society, expectations remain that wives should be responsible for the majority of household chores and childcare as maintained by deeply ingrained gender roles. Conversely, husbands continue to fulfil the breadwinner role.

Therefore, working mothers, as the name suggests, take on dual obligations of employee and primary caregiver. This ultimately puts extra stress on women and increases their risk of burnout. Yet, correlation does not imply causation. This dual role that women play may not be the only factor promoting such gender differences in burnout. To fully understand the complexity of burnout in women compared to men, we need to explore further.
What may further contribute to gender differences in burnout?

Workplace culture may promote gender biases that put women at a clear disadvantage. Women in Singapore’s workforce are found to generally occupy lower status positions (Alluora, 2018), be given fewer opportunities to display competence, be disadvantaged in promotion, and to suffer from income inequality (Seow, 2019). Left unchecked, such workplace norms can potentially promote greater uncertainty and anxiety in women, especially with regard to their career prospects and feelings of underappreciation.

In patriarchal Singapore, with men still regarded as the main ‘breadwinners’ of the family, husbands are more likely to contribute less, or even be absent, when it comes to housework. To fulfil the breadwinner role is to focus on bringing the money in and to minimise all other ‘less important’ tasks. Any departure from portraying himself as the hard worker would undoubtedly generate a fear of negative judgement from others, especially employers or colleagues. The stigma of helping their wives and not appearing dedicated to real work may prevent husbands from offering to help around the house.
In a 2013 survey by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), more than half of female respondents indicated that they spent more time on household chores and caregiving than their spouses. With a constant need to juggle between work and housework and less time for self-care – an important protective factor in building up one’s resilience against emotional exhaustion, women are hard-pressed to find quality time for themselves, let alone quality support from their counterparts.

Are women truly more burnt-out than men?

With burnout becoming a growing phenomenon in today’s high-strung society, this seemingly benign question is now more urgent than ever. A deeper and more holistic investigation is needed to better understand, and ultimately reduce, the occurrence of burnout in both men and women.

Yet, if women are more likely to suffer from this condition – current interventions must be able to address this disproportionality. Perhaps a one-size-fits-all intervention for burnout will no longer be suitable if factors are indeed gender-specific. Addressing burnout cannot stop at the individual level either.

Whether burnout affects women or men, it seems that the quality of relationship between spouses will be adversely affected, creating spillover effects on the larger family unit and possibly on society as a whole.
A psychologist developed romantic feelings for a client soon after they started treatment. They got into a romantic relationship and engaged in sexual intimacy while in treatment. The client was discharged from the treatment session a year later, but continued the relationship with the psychologist.

This is a contravention of the Singapore Psychological Society Code of Ethics and this case was reported to the Council.

Why?
Code 2.8 (a) of the Code of Ethics informed that: “Psychologists do not engage in sexual intimacies or/romantic relationships with persons whom they have professional relationships with. Psychologists do not terminate the professional relationship to circumvent this standard.”

The client will be subjected to potential exploitation, maleficence, and reduced autonomy when he/she engages in sexual intimacy and a romantic relationship with the psychologist.

Know someone in a similar situation?
Contact the Singapore Psychological Society Council and submit a Complaint Form to the Council as soon as possible.

The full SPS Code of Ethics can be found on our website: singaporepsychologicalsociety.org.
THE CULTURE OF BUSYNESS
By: Soh Yu Ting & Mok Kai Chuen

Everyone is busy.

It shows up in the seemingly innocuous “Ugh, sorry I can’t meet this week again, I’m far too busy”.
Other times, it shows up by not showing up – through late text or email replies, through missed calls or appointments.

Nowadays, failure to meet occasionally is perfectly acceptable and will, at worst, only lead to broken friendships. However, if left unchecked, prolonged periods of busyness can also manifest in more alarming ways like workaholism and, more insidiously, burnout.

Burnout and overworking are more than just simple, isolated cases of fatigue or stress. In more serious cases, overwork can even be fatal. In Japan, being busy takes on a toxic undertone. Japan’s notorious culture of overworking has claimed a significant number of lives, to the extent that Japanese coined a term for this tragic phenomenon – Karoshi – literally translating to death by overwork.

A 2016 report found that more than 20% of Japanese employees worked at least 80 hours of overtime a month. Half of the 10,000 Japanese workers surveyed did not take paid vacations at all. With today’s focus on and deeper understanding of self-care and employee engagement, one might have assumed that employers and employees alike are more likely to promote work-life balance.

But that does not seem to be the case at all.

Perplexingly, people today are working even more tirelessly, despite being fully cognizant of the risks and dire consequences associated with overworking. It seems almost as if being busy has become the new normal. Popular (millennial) catchphrases like ‘sleep is for the weak’ and ‘rise and grind’ attribute a positive connotation toward having too much work, while ‘the struggle is real’ suggests a degree of learned helplessness. Many have taken to social media to lament how demanding their jobs are, suggesting a spillover effect of work to other aspects of life.
BURNOUT AND OVERWORKING ARE MORE THAN JUST SIMPLE, ISOLATED CASES OF FATIGUE OR STRESS. IN MORE SERIOUS CASES, OVERWORK CAN EVEN BE FATAL.

Ironically, the most productive ones would actually be the first to complete their work and not be busy all the time. The generalisation, therefore, does not hold. Could it be that we are busy only because we are inept and are therefore unable to get things done?

External societal pressures may also convince the worker that an obsession with busyness is healthy and acceptable. In terms of goal contagion, we may unconsciously get so caught up with other people’s goal-directed behaviours that we lose sight of what truly matters. The anxiety of watching others live seemingly more productive lives has also led to a new phenomenon known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).

If everyone is busy, we too ought to be busy. In the process of trying to meet an unwritten and ambiguous benchmark for success, we may unwittingly push ourselves to the brink of exhaustion.

Do we commit ourselves to work because we are truly living fruitful, productive lives? Or are we robotically taking on responsibility after responsibility just to create a façade of being productive? Have we been busy simply for the sake of being busy? These are burning questions to which a definite answer might never be elucidated. Perhaps, they highlight best what it means to be human – a delicate dance between stretching towards our fullest potential whilst being cautious never to cross the tipping point of burnout.
In this interview, Prof. Fred Long shared his personal journey as the founding president of SPS and a pioneering clinical psychologist in Singapore. Prof. Long is currently a member of the Panel of Advisors for the Singapore Police Psychological Services Division. Following his retirement in March 2002, Prof. Long took up teaching appointments with the SIM Open University Centre (2002-2003); Department of Psychology, NUS (2003-2005); School of Social Sciences, SMU (2006-2008); and since 2006 as an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences, NTU.

Q: What was the psychology scene in Singapore like? How has that changed over the years? How is psychology today?

FL: From the outset, I found my Woodbridge Hospital colleagues (psychologists, psychiatrists, medical officers, nurses, psychiatric social workers, occupational therapists) very congenial. Many of them had chosen to work in a mental institution caring for people with mental disorders, in spite of the stigma.

In bygone years, hospital facilities were, in fact, mental asylums. Ward gates and windows with metal bars or grilles and wire-meshed corridors were a common sight. The main approach to patient management was incarceration and custodial care. ECT was used regularly. The common belief then was that mental patients were violent. People who had mental disorders were generally believed to be possessed by spirits, and they much preferred seeking help from traditional healers like temple mediums, bomohs and priests.
Psychiatrists and psychologists were the last people they wanted to see. It was after better medications and treatment methods were introduced that greater emphasis was placed on rehabilitation and other community mental health programmes.

In the 50's and 60's, my two predecessors' (V. W. Wilson & M. K. Wong) main role as psychologists were mental testers and psychology teachers to nurses. Their work extended beyond Woodbridge Hospital to Singapore General Hospital's Paediatrics Department, School Health Service and various welfare institutions.

They also provided advisory services to several voluntary welfare organisations. M.K. Wong played a key role in the then Singapore Association for Retarded Children (now MINDS). There was not much emphasis on research at that time, but some of us nevertheless managed to publish a few articles in local journals.

After the first wave of behaviour therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in the 90’s became more predominant and favoured by our psychologists who had returned from their training in Australia and the UK.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy and projective techniques became passé; Rogerian counselling has been taken by other professionals. Today the third wave of mindfulness-based therapies appears in vogue although CBT continues to be our psychologists' preferred evidence-based treatment approach. Unlike in bygone years, people today in general have little or no hesitation in seeking psychological help, even more so than seeing a psychiatrist.

Q: The above was retrieved online. It was from the New Nation papers, dated 22nd January 1979. Tell us more about what you had wanted to do, and how it has progressed over the years.

FL: It appeared that over a period, the Government became rather wary of people who called themselves "psychologists"! It took quite a long time before the Authority could be convinced of what psychologists could contribute to nation-building.
After our *Singapore Psychological Society* was formed in 1979, we published the first issue of the *Singapore Psychologist*. As President, I penned an article: "Singapore Psychologists in Search of a Role". During that period, many people had the misconception that psychologists only worked in mental hospitals.

Some people even confused psychologists with psychiatrists. Moreover, psychology as a discipline/profession was (and is) pluralistic with its members of different hues engaged in diverse roles in a variety of work settings (clinical, educational, social, correctional / forensic, military, industrial/organisational, academia, etc.). My effort was to see if we, as a learned Society, can find a common identity to be readily recognised by others.

Over the years, people have realised that psychologists are behavioural scientist-practitioners who provide services in many settings other than mental health institutions. Currently, it is still a challenge to have the psychology profession regulated mainly because we are not a homogeneous group. As Chief Psychologist, my own effort in the early 90's to regulate the clinical psychology professionals was rebuffed with the unanswered questions: What about those psychologists who are not working in the clinical setting? Do non-clinical psychologists in other sectors want to be regulated? If so, how could it be done to everyone's benefit?

**Q: What were some of your dreams for the SPS? How have some of them been realised and how have some of them been limited? What kept you hanging on to these dreams?**

**FL:** Frankly, I did not entertain any grand vision when our *Singapore Psychological Society* was formed in 1979. I harboured no dreams of making Psychology First or making Psychology Great, but to make Psychology useful! With a membership of 40 from various service settings, my main concern was how to sustain interest and commitment from the different members with different expectations and needs.

The AGM was the occasion for the various individuals to meet and build some kind of professional solidarity. The Society served as a vehicle in which various psychologist members could find a professional identity. As a down-to-earth person, I was only hoping that succeeding Society leaders would continue to sustain the Society and keep it going and growing, which they did, to their credit.

*The first issue of Singapore Psychologist (Sep 1980)*
Q: What were some of the external resources and help that you had tapped on to grow the society?

FL: Not many among the psychologists in Singapore know that our late PM Mr Lee Kuan Yew was instrumental in expediting the growth and development of psychology (both professional and academic) in Singapore.

Since the mid-70’s, Mr Lee had shown keen interests in how American astronauts underwent psychological assessment as part of their selection process. He prompted the PSC to include psychological assessment, in addition to the students’ school reports, 'O' and 'A' level results, in the selection of President’s and Overseas Merit Scholars.

Further to this, he also initiated psychological evaluation for candidates earmarked for political office. During meetings when we presented our reports to him, he would also question about the teaching of psychology at the university and the manpower strength (or the lack of it) of psychologists in Singapore.

As a sort of spin-off effect, the Psychological Service (in the likes of then Medical Service, Legal Service, etc.) was established in 1984 within the Civil Service (except SAF and MOE which had their own scheme of service) with MOE as the Central Appointing Authority.

In 2000, the Psychological Service was disbanded following the corporatisation of all Government hospitals into restructured health institutions. This made SPS again the common vehicle for all psychologists to find a common face and identity.

In 1987, I arranged a meeting for PM when Prof Hans Eysenck visited Singapore. Mr Lee was interested in Eysenck’s viewpoints on the nature vs nurture debate. At that meeting, the need for psychological manpower was also touched upon.

Our Singapore Psychological Society, as a community of psychologists, owes the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew our thanks.

Q: Looking at the current state of psychology in Singapore and internationally, can you share your astute observations?

Psychology in the 60’s and 70’s was predominantly a male profession. More ladies joined the service in the 80’s, and by the early 90’s, there was a balance of both genders in the clinical service. Today, the pendulum has swung to the other end. By the next decade, I hope male clinical psychologists will not become an endangered species.

Internationally, psychology seems to becoming more specialised and even “fragmented” into diverse sub-specialties. This is both a boon and a bane. In a positive sense, psychological knowledge and related methodologies have advanced tremendously. So Psychology must be able to link up effectively with other disciplines for us to be relevant.
To make an impact on society, we need to recognise the importance of teamwork, not only among the diverse groups of psychologists but together with other occupational groups and professions (e.g., lawyers, sociologists, political scientists).

**Q: What, in your opinion, are the few critical issues that the Singapore Psychological Society should focus on now?**

**FL:** The one most critical issue our Society should focus on is the statutory regulation of Psychology as a profession. At present, anyone can practise professionally in Singapore as a "psychologist" without even becoming a member of the Singapore Psychological Society, let alone as an SRP.

Pending formal regulation, our Society should continually and significantly increase efforts in raising public awareness and public education about seeking psychological services from qualified practitioners. For example, our Society should not hesitate to respond to certain outfit’s advertisement claiming to be able to improve children’s IQ, e.g., from 75 to more than 140!

When the occasion requires it, our Society leaders at their discretion, like we did in the past, could voice our opinions, suggestions or viewpoints on any issue of public interest in nation building.

**Q: How do you think psychology in Singapore is likely to evolve in the next 10 years culminating in SPS50?**

**FL:** My fear is that psychology as a science of behaviour, and psychologists as scientist-practitioners, may become too technical and skewing towards the use of sophisticated technologies (e.g., fMRI) in understanding complex human behaviour, that we lose sight of the whole person as a being. Yet, we need to embrace the new digital technologies, including the use of AI, virtual reality, augmented reality, social robots and come up with more effective learning and training tools as well as psychosocial interventions for people suffering from psychological disorders.

Can AI help develop far more sophisticated or better tests and measures of intelligence, personality and cognitive functions? Can psychology make use of social robots to execute some of our more mundane tasks?

**Q: In our attempt to celebrate the contributions of psychologists, what do you think is a meaningful way forward?**

**FL:** It would be fitting if SPS can organise and publicise a major national conference to showcase the contributions of our SPS members from the various disciplines to the betterment of Singapore and the world-at-large, in the past, present and future. The challenge for the Society in the foreseeable future is to carve out a role that the community can understand, benefit and appreciate.
Visit our website and social media platforms for more information on upcoming psychology-related events, training & development, and career opportunities.

Join us today as an SPS member and be a part of our growing community of psychologists and psychology students, right here in Singapore!

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