Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19

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THE MENTALLY HEALTHY WORK PLACE ALLIANCE

Overview: fatigue, burnout and COVID-19

Fatigue is a recognised risk in the workplace, with potentially significant personal, economic and organisational costs.

Pressures created by COVID-19 can contribute to a sense of fatigue. These include a sustained increase in hours worked, complexity of tasks, mental effort or emotionally demanding tasks. Extended periods of high stress or demand can lead to burnout.

Putting effective strategies in place to identify and manage aspects of work causing fatigue are important for meeting legal work health and safety obligations, preventing incidents and helping workplaces manage the impacts of COVID-19.

Introduction

For many people, COVID-19 has brought sustained pressures at work. These pressures may include longer shifts, faster and more complex decisions, supporting people in distress or juggling work with home schooling or caring responsibilities. These demands were required on top of other responsibilities such as adapting to changes in health orders, changing travel arrangements or adapting to changing work environments.
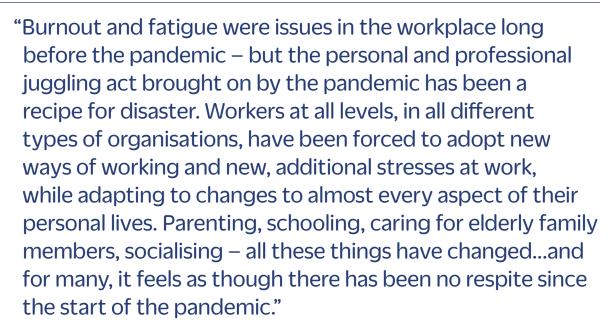
Over time, keeping up with these demands can lead people to feel fatigued. This creates a challenge for workplaces across Australia as workforces move from the initial response to COVID-19 into a new phase of adjustment. Fatigue can also pose a risk to health, safety and performance.

This guide helps organisations and businesses understand the impact of fatigue in the workplace and provides practical steps to minimise these impacts in the workplace.

"Fatigue gives rise to issues related to safety, productivity, quality, customer services and the overall health of people. All of these are business critical issues. From a business perspective, paying attention to fatigue is really important – no matter what kind of business you're in."

Dr Teri Lillington, Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM)

> "Burnout and fatigue were issues in the workplace long before the pandemic – but the personal and professional juggling act brought on by the pandemic has been a recipe for disaster. Workers at all levels, in all different types of organisations, have been forced to adopt new ways of working and new, additional stresses at work, while adapting to changes to almost every aspect of their personal lives. Parenting, schooling, caring for elderly family members, socialising – all these things have changed…and for many, it feels as though there has been no respite since the start of the pandemic."

Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society

About fatigue and burnout

Occupational fatigue is already recognised as a significant risk in the workplace, however, COVID-19 has created many additional contributing pressures, says Dr Teri Lillington, Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

Impacts of fatigue

In addition to feelings of sleepiness, fatigue can result in things like slower reaction times, poor mood and trouble focusing.

Fatigue has profound impacts on people and organisations, with issues related to:
- safety (e.g. poor relationships and conflict, physical risks with use of machinery)
- overall health of people
- productivity
- quality of work
- customer service.

Fatigue-related incidents can lead to devastating impacts for workers, families, managers and organisations, Dr Lillington says.

"There's the terrible impact it might have on the individual person, where they may have a life threatening or life changing injury. For workmates, there are awful consequences as they may have been caught up in the incident themselves or are very concerned for their workmate," says Dr Lillington.

"Clearly there's also an impact on families and having to deal with potentially a lifetime of caring for someone. And there's enormous impact on management and ripples through the organisation of all the folk who feel some level of responsibility, concern or distress at what's occurred," she adds.

There are also a lot of hidden costs to fatigue. Dr Lillington points out that fatigue reduces people's ability to work effectively in teams, their customer-facing capability and ability to make good decisions.

Scale of the issue

"We know that about 23% of motor vehicle accidents and 25% of workplace accidents are probably fatigue related. I suspect both of those are under-estimates," says Dr Lillington.[1]

Some industries and roles are at higher risk of negative impacts associated with fatigue. These include shift workers, on-call workers, fly-in, fly-out workers, those working extended hours, roles that require working across international time zones and crisis management work.

However, Dr Lillington stresses that fatigue is relevant to all organisations and workplaces.

Demands of COVID-19 on people

The pandemic has brought a range of new and increased demands on people that may increase risk of fatigue. Examples of these demands include:

Physical demands
- Working longer or erratic hours to keep up with increased workloads.
- Extended periods of working in personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face masks.
- Changes in physical tasks due to changing or evolving workplace needs.

Emotional demands
- Supporting others who are ill and/or distressed.
- Conflict within teams or abuse from customers or clients.
- Pressure to meet tight and rapidly changing deadlines.
- Anxiety about safety or infection at work.
- Concerns related to finances or cash flow.

Cognitive demands
- Solving complex problems.
- Rapidly devising new systems or processes.
- Learning about new issues and risks.
- Adapting to evolving situations.
- Anticipating additional potential issues.

Examples of how COVID-19 has created new workplace demands

- **Manufacturing:** responding to sharp increases in demand, issues with supply chains.
- **Retail:** anxiety and aggression from customers; managing shortages of stock, working extended hours.
- **Healthcare:** greater exposure to COVID-19 infection, supporting people with COVID-19, supporting concerned families and friends, working longer shifts, concerns accessing PPE.
- **Aged care:** managing exposures and infections, workforce shortages, supporting residents, responding to distressed families and friends, concerns accessing PPE.
- **Emergency services:** responding to increased family and domestic violence, managing COVID-19 restrictions and protests, working longer hours.
- **Education:** managing rapid shift between in-person and remote learning, supporting students and parents, re-developing lesson plans, uncertainty about the future.
- **Transport and logistics:** managing sharp increases in demand for deliveries including groceries and online shopping, working extended hours, managing disruptions created through border closures and supply shortages.
- **Hospitality and Creative Industries:** restrictions and lockdowns exacerbate precarious working conditions.

Burnout

Some people may refer to fatigue and burnout interchangeably but there are some important differences. Fatigue may be a shorter-term experience that people can easily recover from with rest and an opportunity to recharge. Burnout on the other hand is a syndrome that can be harder to manage effectively.

Burnout arises from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, according to the World Health Organization.[2] Burnout is not a medical diagnosis, and it is specifically linked to the workplace.

Burnout typically has three aspects:
- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

Addressing burnout requires an organisational approach to address the aspects of the workplace that create the ongoing stress. This may include changing a range of elements of work design including resource allocation, rosters, workflows, decision making processes or supervision and support. Programs and interventions that focus on individual resilience are unlikely to address the causes of burnout.[3]

How organisations can respond

1. Identifying and managing work health and safety duties

Employers have duties and obligations under work health and safety laws to provide safe work, this includes both physically and psychologically safe work. All organisations have obligations to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise work-related risk to psychological health and safety, including any risks created by COVID-19. Organisations also have obligations to consult with workers and their representatives about health and safety.

As with obligations to identify and manage the physical risks related to COVID-19, organisations also need to identify risks to mental health, assess these risks, eliminate or minimise the risks and review intervention strategies to ensure they are effective.

Organisations can understand more about how to meet legal duties by visiting Safe Work Australia (here) or seeking advice from their state or territory regulator (here).

2. Co-designing solutions with people

Dr Lillington describes how co-designing fatigue prevention and management approaches with people across the organisation and their representatives, including unions, is an important action to take.

"Workers know their job better than anyone else, and they usually know the informal strategies they're already using to manage fatigue.

"Those effective measures should be recognised and formalised and celebrated," Dr Lillington says.

Organisations may also want to consult the companion guide in this series, *The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep* (available here).

3. Looking at safe design and systems of work

Dr Grace Vincent, Senior Lecturer at the Appleton Institute at CQUniversity, says steps organisations can take to combat fatigue particularly relating to COVID-19 may include:
* providing alternative or safe transport options
* rotating people to less demanding tasks or enabling opportunities for regular breaks, and
* conducting welfare checks/check-ins with people, such as through regular meetings, virtual meetings, phone calls or the use of apps.

"At a broader level, the organisation needs to think about how work hours and rosters are designed, and providing notice when work hours will be changing," says Dr Vincent.

When it is not possible to eliminate aspects of work that can lead to fatigue, it is important there are things in place to support the health and safety of people at risk.

Actions to prevent fatigue

* **Acknowledge the stress and potential for increased fatigue** (both mental and physical fatigue) risk that is caused by COVID-19. Make people aware of fatigue and how it impacts their health and wellbeing.
* **Develop a comprehensive approach** at the organisational level (involvement of people in all stages of responding to fatigue), and the individual level (e.g. promote wellbeing through activity, diet and sleep). This may be formal (e.g. an organisational Fatigue Risk Management System) or informal (team discussions on how they will manage identified fatigue risks) depending on the size and complexity of your business.
* **Develop systems to enable and support people** to self-report fatigue and ensure effective responses when people report they are fatigued.
* **Adequate training** to deal with different and new job demands or extra decision-making authority due to increased work demands. This training may be peer-to-peer or supervisor-led informal training or more formal online or face-to-face courses.
* **Management at all levels and workers should commit to working together** to manage the risk of fatigue and to protect the health of all people in the organisation.
* **Look to work design** to ensure systems, processes and ways of working are still effective at protecting people and meet new demands in the changing COVID-19 environment. This step may include looking at rosters and work time arrangements, how tasks are allocated and how teams are assigned.

4.   Monitoring and reporting

Professor Sally Ferguson, Director of the Appleton Institute, says that supporting people to report when they are fatigued is critical. "That needs to be reinforced within teams and across the organisation so that people feel safe and supported to report," Professor Ferguson says.

At the individual level, people can be encouraged to have action plans too, which may include telling a co-worker when you are tired, taking a break or changing tasks, according to Dr Vincent.

5.   Measure impact

Organisations will also want to understand the impact of steps they take to prevent or manage fatigue.

"There are a number of measures you can put in to work out if your system is working the way you intended," says Dr Lillington.

6.   Understanding fatigue

Dr Lillington advises organisations have a good understanding of fatigue, including the science behind it and how approaches might work in practice.

"It is a complicated field so it can be useful to get advice or support from an organisation that knows the science and has specialists who can advise."

Organisations can access the below resources to better understand the science of fatigue.

Examples of measuring impact of actions:

1.   Look at whether people are self-reporting fatigue when they are provided the opportunity, as well as what measures have been taken to support these people. This shows whether:
     - People trust the system and the organisation to report fatigue.
     - The organisation took effective action to prevent or manage fatigue, or whether improvements are required.
     - There is likely to be a reduction in the number of errors, need for re-work, or incidents as a result of effectively and respectfully managing alternative work for people who self-report fatigue.
     - There are patterns of work or rosters that appear to increase risk of fatigue.
2.   Look at the contribution of fatigue to workplace errors. The need for re-work, or incidents can also show up gaps in the system.

Where organisations can get support

Sleep Health Foundation, Fatigue as an Occupational Hazard

Safe Work Australia, Guide for managing the risk of fatigue at work

Safe Work Australia, Fatigue management - a worker's guide

Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice

Safe Work Australia, National guide for safe workplaces – COVID-19

Victorian Trades Hall Council's (VTHC) Occupational Health and Safety Unit, Fatigue, Impairment and Shift-work

Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, Managing Fatigue in Emergency Response.

The Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Find a consultant

Appleton Institute

Australian Sleep and Alertness Consortium

Comcare, COVID-19 Safety systems and safety culture (webinar)

References

1   Deloitte. Asleep on the job: costs of inadequate sleep in Australia, Sleep Health Foundation. 2017, August. Available from http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/files/Asleep_on_the_job/Asleep_on_the_Job_SHF_report-WEB_small.pdf

2   World Health Organization. Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases. 2019, May 28. Available from https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases

3   Leiter M. Preventing workplace burnout: Why resilience is not enough. InPsych, 2018, 4(3). Available from https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/inpsych/2018/june-issue-3/preventing-workplace-burnout-why-resilience-is-no

About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and, links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Dr Teri Lillington,** Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).
- **Professor Sally Ferguson,** Director, Appleton Institute, CQUniversity Adelaide.
- **Dr Grace Vincent,** Senior Lecturer, Appleton Institute, School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences, CQUniversity.

Read more

- The guides in this series include:
    - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
    - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
    - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
    - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
    - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
    - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
    - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- Visit the Commission's website to download the series.

National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- Visit the Commission's website to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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