

CPA Australia Podcast – Episode 26

Transcript

- INTRO: Hello and welcome to the CPA Australia Podcast, your source for business, leadership, and public practise accounting information.
- Jacquetta Giggs: Hi, everyone. Welcome to today's podcast. I'm Jacquetta Giggs and chair the SME Committee. We're very fortunate to have Catherine Twiss, a registered psychologist who owns her own consultancy specialising in well-being and resilience here today. We're going to talk today about how to recognise stress and avoid burnout. Thank you for coming, Catherine.
- Catherine Twiss: Pleasure. Delighted to be here.
- Jacquetta Giggs: So let's start with the obvious. What is stress and its link to burnout?
- Catherine Twiss: Thank you for that, Jacquetta. Look, a lot of people misunderstand what stress actually is, but stress is our reaction to external events. Stress is not actually the event itself, but it's us responding to our perceived pressure in the environment. So, stress is the outcome of pressure in our environment. Burnout, on the other hand, when we describe burnout we're really talking about the opposite of engagement. So when we look at people who are engaged, they are energised, they're involved, they're high-performing. Whereas when we look at, particularly employees who are burnt out, they're characterised by being exhausted, sometimes cynical, and a sense of being overwhelmed.
- Jacquetta Giggs: So from the perspective of an employer or an employee, how do we identify the signs of stress and burnout in yourself, but also in others in the workplace?
- Catherine Twiss: So there's a number of warning signals that we get when we are feeling under a lot of pressure. I think it's important to make a note that there is good stress and there's bad stress. Positive stress, positive stress is stress that actually motivates us to a challenge, to rise to a challenge. Another definition of stress is where what we're presented with is within our capacity to actually execute whatever we're supposed to be doing. When we go outside of that capacity, that's when we call it excessive pressure or stress. We all have this area, we call it our area of optimum performance, a little bit of stress but not too much stress. When it becomes too much stress, our bodies are really good at sending us warning signals. The problem is is that we are very bad at recognising those warning signals because we think that stress is something that happens to other people, not us.
- And so the key to actually managing stress is to be able to first recognise when is stress managing you, rather than you managing stress and to be really clued in to those actual warning signs.

Burnout, on the other hand, generally burnout is where people have not addressed their stress and it's just cascading and spiralling downwards. And sometimes we find that people are more susceptible to burnout when they work in a toxic environment, when there's role conflict, when they've got very heavy workloads and intense pressure.

Jacquetta Giggs: And so if we see that in someone, we're starting to see changes, how do we approach them if they appear to be stressed or burning out?

Catherine Twiss: That's a tricky question because it depends on your relationship with the individual. So if you are a manager, you need to be really cognizant of the power imbalance. But if it was a friend, for example, and you thought this friend is really not coping, it could be just as simple as asking them, "Are you okay," asking them do they want to go for a coffee, what's happening, help them out with their work if that's possible. Generally letting them know that you're there for them. Having that sense that they're supported.

Jacquetta Giggs: So you're looking for kindness and compassion in the way you're-

Catherine Twiss: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And so look, we haven't actually ... I just want to go back and talk about some of the warning signals because you'll see them in yourself and others. And in fact, sometimes we're not very good at recognising our own warning signals, but we can actually see it in other people or other people can see it in us much better than we are at diagnosing ourselves. So there's simple things, like we have physical sensations. So you might have muscle tension, headaches, you might get a skin rash, you might have chest pains, sweating, tired all the time, or dry mouth.

There are also feelings. So feeling uptight or feeling that sense that I feel overwhelmed. I might look angry. I might look miserable. So it's my facial expression. People can see that in me. Sometimes we have thoughts running around our heads like something bad is going to happen, so you have a propensity to catastrophize. Your self talk might be saying things like, "I'm a loser. I'm no good. This is so unfair. Why does it always happen to me?" Feeling a little bit like a victim or feeling like you're out of control.

And then there are other actions and behaviours that we very often see in the workplace. So things like hurrying or rushing, over eating or over drinking. Indecisiveness. So down to where I might say, "Jacquetta, would you like a latte or a cappuccino?" But you're so frazzled, you're thinking, "I just want a coffee. It's too hard to make that decision." So it's interesting, our decision making capacity is impaired when we are feeling very stressed. Also our ability to prioritise is impeded with stress. Problems concentrating and crying spells. And what we mean by crying spells, some of us cry naturally, very easily, however if you find yourself suddenly bursting into tears because, I don't know, you forgot to buy the toothpaste in the supermarket or something like that, then that might well be a stress warning signal that you're actually not coping very well.

Jacquetta Giggs: I really appreciate those, that insight into recognising in yourself and in others.

Catherine Twiss: Yes and I think a good example is I'm actually not very good at recognising my own stress, but my warning signal is when other people say to me, "You look very tired," or, "Have you been crying?" So that's a classic example of I haven't got time for stress, but other people around me notice it. So I'm very appreciate when people highlight that you're not coping or you're not firing on all cylinders. So coming back to how you would approach your friend, I would do it gently and just see how they're going, ask them how they're travelling.

Jacquetta Giggs: And that can be more than once.

Catherine Twiss: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Jacquetta Giggs: It's constant where you would notice it on certain days.

Catherine Twiss: Yes.

Jacquetta Giggs: They may say, "No, no, I'm just busy."

Catherine Twiss: Yes.

Jacquetta Giggs: You do need to follow up with them if you don't see them revert back or that behaviour continuing.

Catherine Twiss: Absolutely, yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Because very often people are not ready to acknowledge it within themselves, so they need that time to process it themselves. Sometimes there is a sense of shame that comes with feeling stressed. So people might be thinking, "Oh, are people looking at me? Am I not performing? Why are they picking on me?" So it is that gentle checking in with them and showing compassion.

Jacquetta Giggs: So when we are looking to manage stress, do you have some tips or tools and techniques to avoid being stressed and burnt out?

Catherine Twiss: Yes. Yes. And look, I think it's important to note that it is a little bit horses for courses, so what might work for me as a de-stressor might be the complete opposite, might actually cause you stress. So for example, some people like to be by themselves when they are wanting to de-stress. Other people want to be in company with other people. So there's a number of things that we can do. One of the best things that we can do, which is free, is engage in some deep breathing. We call it abdominal breathing. You might want to try this while you're listening to this podcast. Put your left hand on your stomach and your right hand on your chest. Take a deep breath in. As you take the breath in, your stomach should be inflating, so you're pushing out your stomach. It's not chest breathing; it's stomach breathing. That's great, Jacquetta.

Jacquetta Giggs: I'm practising for anybody who's listening.

Catherine Twiss: So you take a deep breath in to the count of three. Then you hold the breath to the count of three. Then you gently let it go to the count of five. So the rationale in engaging in breathing ... We know everybody breathes, otherwise you wouldn't be joining us if you weren't breathing. But the rationale behind deep breathing is that what it does is it enables more oxygen and blood to circulate around your brain. So bringing the oxygen and blood from the fear part of your brain to the thinking part of your brain. So it actually helps you to think and to think your way out of your situation.

So people can engage in breathing. Some people enjoy going for a walk in nature. Other people like to do exercise. We know that at an intellectual level, diet, exercise, and sleep is very important as de-stressors. But we're learning a lot from the neuroscience just how important sleep, diet, and exercise is in terms of releasing neurochemicals that help us to regain our balance and help us to feel good about ourselves. So they're the standard, the diet, exercise, and sleep. But there's numerous other things that you can do.

Jacquetta Giggs: Are there any things that you can do while you're sitting at your desk without trying to be obvious, apart from the breathing? Is it close your eyes for a moment or is there anything else that you can do that you didn't want to be obvious to your colleagues?

Catherine Twiss: Yes. Good question. So we call this cognitive overwhelm. When you're feeling completely overwhelmed, there's a couple of things that you can actually ... It happens at our desk quite often, as we're being bombarded with information coming through. One of the things that we need to recognise is that our brains are not capable of multitasking. So one of the things that's likely contributing to overwhelm at work is working on too many different things at once. So what you might want to do, if you're feeling flustered or feeling overwhelmed, you might just want to take out a piece of paper or take out your phone and say to yourself, "What are two things I need to get done by five o'clock today?" You can switch your brain from feeling frazzled into action mode. So just by simply saying that question, "What are two things I'd like to get done by the end of the day," can be really helpful.

Breathing, of course. Put your hands on the edge of the desk. Push away, take a deep breath. Just like we practised. That is also really helpful.

You might want to distract yourself. Sometimes we call it changing the channel. So if you've got these thoughts going around and around in your head and you're just wanting to give yourself a break, and you can't leave your desk, you might want to just say to yourself something like, "If I could go anywhere in the world, where would I go?" Then just look up, I don't know, Venezuela on your computer. So that can be a good distraction. Take a break. I know we talked about sitting at your desk, but take a break. Go to the bathroom. Go make a coffee. It's amazing the amount of people that will tell you that, "Oh, I didn't

even get a chance to have a bathroom break today." So that's contributing to your sense of feeling overwhelmed and feeling stressed.

Jacquetta Giggs: That's great. So those lists that you do make actually really can be quite helpful in managing the stress of your day. You don't have to achieve everything on that list, but that ability to cross something off as it happens and move onto the next task can help you manage your day to day stress.

Catherine Twiss: Yes. Now there's a couple of caveats with that. The jury is out. You'll read some articles that will say to do lists are not good, and then you'll read other articles that will say to do lists are the way to go. So it can be confusing with the information that we're presented with outside. So if you are doing a to-do list, it's important that you write down maybe only three or four things that have to be done and have to be done by the end of the day. And then maybe batching your time so that you can devote time to do that can be really helpful.

But if you put too many things on your to-do list, what it can do is feed into your sense of feeling overwhelmed because you're looking at this big, long list and then you're thinking, "Oh, I'm a loser. There's no way I'm going to ..." So it can backfire on you.

Jacquetta Giggs: Right. And who are the most at risk of experiencing stress or burnout?

Catherine Twiss: That's an interesting question. Now do you mean gender or ...

Jacquetta Giggs: So do you have some statistics to share around males, females, parents, age bracket, working in certain industries, different life stages?

Catherine Twiss: Yes. It's interesting. With the statistics on stress, there's not really much around the gender split between whether males suffer from more stress or females suffer from more stress. There is information around certain occupations are more stressful. So any occupation, such as the legal fraternity, they have high stress levels. People who are engaged in repetitive work, that can exacerbate stress. Medicals. A lot depends on the environment that you work in, but also the perceived support that you have. We do know from the statistics, for example, women are better at managing stress than males are. And one of the reasons given for that is that women tend to reach out and seek support more. So coming back to who's more vulnerable, people that isolate themselves when they are sensing that they're not coping, they're more vulnerable to poor mental health, but also to not overcoming their stress or their feelings of stress.

People who work long hours. People who don't take breaks. We know that parents, it is a stressful job being a parent. However, it is temporary. And so we also know that when it comes to stress, we don't get to choose between stress-free and stressful. So a lot depends on our mindset and the narrative that's going around in our heads. So if I say to you, "I'm a mum, Jacquetta, and I'm so

stressed," in my mind I'm saying, "I am stressed," and therefore that determines how I think, how I behave. So our mindsets can be quite important.

Jacquetta Giggs: On that, it's really important that for people that are isolated, whether it be because they're parenting a young child or running their own consulting business and working for themselves, it is important to be able to reach out and keep different networks open to keep conversation going.

Catherine Twiss: Absolutely. Absolutely. And what's interesting is the research in this area says that you actually don't have to have many supports, but as long as you perceive you have support networks around you, that's what's really, really important. So if you are running your own business or you are in a job where you don't get that day to day contact, try and see can you get it in other aspects of your life. Because that human contact ... We're hardwired to connect, and so if we don't have that connection, it's easy to spiral downwards.

Jacquetta Giggs: Of course it is. So networking and someone to go home to at the end of the day. So in my case, my husband runs his own business, so it's important that after I've had a busy day I need to engage in how his day has also gone.

Catherine Twiss: Yes.

Jacquetta Giggs: So that he has that ability to talk to his day, as well.

Catherine Twiss: Yes, yes. So just having that sense of support really, really important.

Jacquetta Giggs: And so as we move onto this, how do we establish some boundaries to achieve that work-life balance of managing stress and hours and everything else that you having going on in your life?

Catherine Twiss: In your daily lives. It's interesting, and I'm so pleased that fewer people are, they're talking about work-life balance. It's a misnomer. It's so difficult to get balance between work and life. What people are talking about today is work-life integration. And I think that makes so much sense, in that how can I integrate my work life with my home life. Because many of us have to take work home in the evenings. It's not possible for us to say at five o'clock, "That's it. I'm not going to do anymore work," particularly if you run your own business. Sometimes you feel like you're switched on 24 hours a day. So how can I integrate my work and my life?

One of the things that we know from the research is it's important that we manage the transition between work and our home life. And so creating a buffer between our work life and our home life can be really, really important. So for example, most of us we have to be nice everyday in our jobs.

Jacquetta Giggs: [inaudible 00:19:11]

Catherine Twiss: Correct, yes. Sometimes what happens is we're all used up by the time we're finished work. So we go home and then we're less nice to the people that are closest to us. And the problem with that is what we end up doing is we end up pushing away the people that really care about us. So they'll say things like, our kids will say, "When is Mom home or when is Dad home," because the fun police, they're the fun police and it all stops when they come in. Because they're tired and they're grumpy. So managing that space between work and home is really important.

So one of the things that we can do is create a buffer. Maybe if you commute to work by train, you can, I don't know, watch a TED talk, watch some YouTube, just something that's going to give your brain some downtime. Read a book. Talk to the person sitting next to you on the train. Neuroscientists say that if you do have images or interactions and encounters replaying in your head over and over again, to avoid that rumination, is what we call it, find a different route home, can be really good. Our brains are not good at doing two things at once. So we can't be thinking about a bad interaction with our boss and wondering, "If I turn left here, how am I going to get home?" So that's a good way to help you to switch off. If you can do it, find a different route home. Do something that's going to relax you.

I remember working with a lady who had a very stressful job. I think she was the head of trauma at one of the hospitals here in Melbourne. And she had this thing with her family where when she had a bad day, she would come straight home from work into her bedroom, put on her running gear, which was her cue to the family that she's had a bad day. Then she would go running for an hour, come home, and then she was at peace with the world.

You've got to try and find what is it that's going to help you down-regulate from your work and then get ready to interact with your family.

Jacquetta Giggs: I think that's excellent. One of the things that I have done recently was introduce my children to my workplace, so that when I have gone home at the end of the day they're aware of where I have been and what I have done. So that it has taken that stress away of why haven't you been here, because they know exactly where I have been and what I have done. And it was just about giving that information and awareness because I could be anywhere as far as they were concerned. And that's me giving context to my day to them, and that has really helped them to know that that's where I do go everyday and that is the hours. So that was just-

Catherine Twiss: Fantastic.

Jacquetta Giggs: ... something that was really worked for that particular, for my role.

Catherine Twiss: Yes. Fantastic. That's fantastic. Another thing that you can ask yourself is, "How do I want to show up? Do I want to show up as the grumpy, grizzly, tired worker

or do I want to show up as the most important person in these people's lives," whoever you're living with. So being conscious about it. One thing that you can do that some people find helpful, when you put your key in the door, just engage in some self talk. Say, "Okay, Catherine, you need to reset." So just telling yourself, "I've got to reset because I'm going into another part of my life," can be really helpful.

We also know managing that work-life integration, trying to establish predictable times off from your devices is also really important. So if you are bringing work home, as we said earlier, one thing that you might want to consider is maybe zoning your time at home. So I might get home at six o'clock and I'll say to myself and my family, "So between six and eight, I'm present. I'm with my family. I don't have my device turned on. I'm not checking emails. I'm not doing anything like that." Once the kids go to bed or once I finish watching whatever show I'm watching on TV, so between eight and nine, I'm going to answer emails. So have those predictable times off can be really, really helpful.

Jacquetta Giggs: And in follow on from that, is stress and burnout more likely to come from things in the workplace or at home?

Catherine Twiss: That's a tricky question because it really does depend on what's happening for you in your life. One thing I've known through my practise is that bad things happen to good people. And so if you have challenges in your home life, things such as illness, looking after elderly parents or young children, or you're dealing with people that might have disabilities, that can cause some stress. And that sometimes can impact how we do our work. But vice versa, if we're dealing in an environment where there's a lot of pressure, where we don't feel we have that security and tenure, where we don't have clarity around what we're supposed to be doing, that can create that conflict at work and that can spill into our work life. So it really depends.

Some people go to work for refuge. Other people go to work just to put food on the table. It's tricky to be definitive about whether one is worse than the other, but certainly if work is challenging it can make home life challenging. If home life is challenging, that can make work challenging as well. We need to be kind to ourselves and cut ourselves some slack, give ourselves some space.

Jacquetta Giggs: And how hard is it then to implement some of those stress management strategies in our day to day life?

Catherine Twiss: Well of course, knowledge doesn't equal understanding. We come up with this all the time. So at an intellectual level, we all know that we need to sleep more, we need to exercise adequately, we need to have a good diet. But we don't do it. So the key is for us to try and figure out what's actually going to work for us. So one thing that we generally say to people is, "Is how you're living your life at the moment, is that working for you?" And if your answer is yes, then keep doing what you're doing because if it ain't broke ... That's one thing. But if there are elements of your life that are not going so well ... Maybe you are putting on

some weight, maybe you are feeling like you are a little bit stressed out at work or at home, then something has got to change. Because what you're doing at the moment is not actually working for you. So the key is to actually find something that's going to work for you.

So the basics: We know that you do need a good diet for good not only gut health, but mental health. Sleep is incredibly important from a neurological level. So we know that if you don't get enough sleep, you have the propensity to be more rigid in your thinking. But it's really unfortunately, Jacquetta, it's about you finding what's going to work for you and then starting slowly. So if, for example, you decided that you were going to turn off your mobile phone between six and eight, take the pressure off yourself. Decide that you're just going to do that one day a week and see how you go. If you decide that you're going to have a lunch break ... I know many of us don't have a proper lunch break. Rather than us saying you need to have a lunch break five days a week, and that's going to cause you more stress because you're not getting your work done, just say to yourself, "You know what? I'm going to have a lunch break one day a week. And during that time, I'm going to walk around the block, take in some nature." We know that there's huge benefits to our mental health and well-being by exposing ourselves to nature. So just start slowly.

There's lots of different things out there, lots of conflicting advice where people will say you just have to do something three times and then it's a habit. You've actually got to do it for longer than that. I'm not even going to put a number on it. But you've just got to try and integrate it into your everyday life.

Jacquetta Giggs: So we spoke about identifying the signs and talking about it for colleagues and others and we spoke about kindness and compassion. So for yourself, be kind to yourself is the message.

Catherine Twiss: Yes, absolutely, and I'm so glad that you've raised that because in the show notes, you will see a link to one of the leading researchers in the area. Her name is Kirstin Neff. And so Kirstin Neff specialises in self-compassion. She believes it's an essential ingredient in our very busy, very stressful lives to actually show ourselves some compassion. And so she likens it to, I don't know, if you think about on the aeroplane, for example, when they say, "If pressure drops in the cabin, you'll get an oxygen mask. Put your own on first before helping others." So it's important that in terms of compassion, it's very hard to show others compassion if you're not showing compassion to yourself. So it's important that we take some time out and be kind to ourselves, reward ourselves.

If you do implement some stress management strategies, build in some reward for yourself.

Jacquetta Giggs: So possibly buy yourself that bunch of flowers on the way home from work, if that helps.

Catherine Twiss: Absolutely, absolutely.

Jacquetta Giggs: And furthering this techniques to prevent burnout, are there any techniques for preventing burnout?

Catherine Twiss: Yes, there are. Generally burnout is more serious than your just feeling that you're stressed. It's normally accompanied by that sense of total exhaustion. So the first thing we would say is that if you feel you are burnt out, you really do need to go and see your GP and have a chat to your GP. You might also want to look at your working environment. What are the aspects of your working environment that you believe are causing you to disengage? Is your workload too high? Is it too much pressure? Is there somebody that you can talk to at work that can either temporarily help you with the huge workload that you've got? And then coming back to that connection, the connection is incredibly important in terms of having that support network for you both in and outside of your work.

And then the final thing is if you believe that you are suffering burnout and it's because of your work, it might be time to reassess is this job really right for me? Because from my perspective, you have one life and you really don't want to keep going when your body is physically and mentally not able to keep going. Because the consequences of not looking after yourself can be lifelong health implications such as heart disease, hypertension, high blood pressure. So there's serious health consequences to actually not looking after yourselves. So I would certainly reach out and talk to your GP in the first instance, but also look at your colleagues. Maybe talk to a boss if you've got a sympathetic boss and see what can you do that can help you to manage what you're facing at work at the moment.

Jacquetta Giggs: And is there any other treatment for burnout before it does become the physical symptoms of heart related and exhaustion?

Catherine Twiss: And so the key, coming back to where we started, the key to avoiding burnout and your stress is to recognise when is stress managing you rather than you managing stress. So what are your warning signals? So being really in tune with what are these, what's your body telling you when you are going over and above the limits, your own limits, is really important when you're going into that excessive pressure.

Jacquetta Giggs: Thank you, Catherine. And thank you for rounding out our stress and its link to burnout today. We really appreciate your time and thank you.

Catherine Twiss: Pleasure. Thank you, Jacquetta.

Outro: Thanks for listening to the CPA Australia Podcast. To download a transcript and find more information on today's episode visit www.cpaustralia.com.au/podcast/26.