

BEHIND THE UNIFORM: THE HIDDEN STRAIN OF HIGH-STAKES PROFESSIONS

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Abstract

This chapter examines the unspoken biological and psychological strains experienced by professionals in high-stakes roles. It seeks to illuminate a reality that exists behind the uniform but is rarely understood. The ‘uniform’ in this context is a metaphor denoting high-stakes professions such as healthcare, military, information technology, hospitality, aviation, and media and journalism sectors. The uniform, in this sense, is not merely something that is worn; it is something that is carried, a symbol of the responsibility and beyond. This chapter analyzes the conflicts present in various high-pressure professions, supported by relevant theoretical frameworks. These theories emphasize the psychological as well as biological consequences that are often overlooked. A common thread across these theories is that they undermine efficiency and deteriorate psychosomatic health. Finally, this chapter proposes targeted solutions at both the organizational as well as at the individual level to help curb the problem.

Keywords:

High-Stakes Professions, Biological-Psychological Strain, Circadian Rhythm, Efficiency, Vicarious Trauma, Emotional Labour

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Introduction

In a world that admires dedication, discipline and duty, certain professions symbolise strength and reliability. They represent control in chaos and stability under pressure. From the outside, they appear composed and almost unshakeable.

Yet, this image tells half the story.

Beneath this surface lies a quiet reality, which is rarely acknowledged. Constant pressure and the demand to keep going regardless of circumstances, gradually leaves a mark. Such experiences are not always visible, but they shape the way they feel, and function over time.

To explore this in a structured way, the chapter draws upon relevant psychological and biological theories. These theoretical frameworks help in explaining the deeper mechanisms through which continuous professional demands translate into psychosomatic strain.

Literature Review

In many professions especially the ones with constant human interaction, employees are expected to show emotions that do not match how they feel.

There are two strategies that are deployed by employees: surface acting and deep acting. In surface acting the outward expressions are changed without altering the internal emotions, while in deep acting the displayed emotions are genuinely felt. Both the processes demand continuous mental effort either way. Over time, this constant suppression of emotions leads to psychological strain. This internal conflict affects one's sense of identity, leading to disconnection and fatigue (Grandey et al.).

Continuous exposure to trauma and the suffering of others can have a significant psychological impact, even if one is not directly involved in the traumatic event. This repeated exposure to emotionally intense situations leads to a form of stress that closely resembles direct trauma. Over time, emotional responses may change, making it difficult to separate professional responsibilities from personal emotional experiences. This becomes especially relevant in professions where

individuals are consistently engaged with distressing situations (Figley).

Disrupted sleep patterns, often caused by demanding work schedules, significantly reduce an individual's efficiency and performance, as sleep deprivation affects mental processes such as attention, memory, and decision-making. As fatigue increases, reaction time slows, concentration declines, and the likelihood of errors rises. This becomes especially critical in high-stakes professions, where even minor lapses can lead to serious consequences (Belenky et al.).

Biological Strain

The human body functions best with balance. Irregular schedules, extended working hours, and lack of rest forces the body to go against nature leading to constant fatigue, reduced energy levels, and a gradual decline in overall physical health (Walker 2017).

When the body does not get enough recovery time, even basic systems such as digestion, and hormonal balance begin to imbalance. This is not always immediately visible, but over time, it weakens the efficiency. For example, in healthcare as well as in hospitality sector, professionals often work night shifts or long hours for extended periods. Such prolonged imbalance not only leads to tiredness, but it also gradually affects the overall health (Knutsson 2003).

Similarly, in physically demanding jobs such as military, continuous exposure to harsh conditions and limited rest leads to physical exhaustion.

These examples highlight the issue: The body when pushed beyond its limits for long durations, eventually deteriorates in both health as well as efficiency.

Psychological Strain

The way that the body experiences strain, the mind also deals with continuous pressure in high collar jobs. These roles often require the individual to not only perform their tasks but also suppress their emotions, reactions, and thoughts in difficult situations.

One of the major psychological challenges is emotional control. Many professionals are expected to project a calm, composed,

and objective demeanour, even in situations that are naturally stressful. Over time, suppressing emotions creates bottled-up stress (Gross and Levenson 1997).

The person may appear stable, but this pressure continues to build internally. For example, in the hospitality sector, professionals are expected to remain polite and welcoming at all times, always put on a smile regardless of their actual emotional and mental state. Such constant need of regulation and burying genuine feelings becomes mentally exhausting.

Long-term exposure to negative environments is another aspect. When individuals are surrounded by stress or conflicts on a regular basis, they are mentally affected which in turn leads to emotional exhaustion, reduced sensitivity, and even detachment if such patterns continue. For instance, healthcare professionals are continuously exposed to suffering patients and critical situations, which must be overwhelming and exhausting (Shanafelt et al. 2012).

In media and journalism, individuals often report on distressing or sensitive events while having to maintain objectivity, even when natural emotions arise. In the military, individuals are exposed to high-risk, conflict-driven environments, where constant alertness and exposure to danger is routine, which in turn impacts their mental well-being. They may have an internal conflict that is not just about duty, but one's identity itself. The question is not about simply following orders, but about understanding whether one's actions are guided more by human values or by nation's responsibility. This internal dilemma leaves a lasting effect on the individual's mind.

The above examples highlight that the mind, just like the body, is under constant pressure, it is just that this pressure is not always visible; rather buried.

Conceptual Framework

It is important to examine some psychological and biological theories to understand how continuous pressure and demanding work environments affect individuals. These theories help connect real-life experiences with established concepts, making it easier to understand the hidden toll on both the mind and body.

Emotional Labour Theory

Emotional labour involves regulating one's emotions as part of their job. In professions that involve direct human interaction, individuals are expected to display politeness, empathy, regardless of what they genuinely feel at that moment.

This constant regulation creates an imbalance between internal feelings and external expression. Over time, this gap becomes mentally exhausting, as they are required to suppress their natural emotions. This effort to consistently present an appropriate emotional image adds an invisible layer of work.

In professions, where maintaining composure is essential, emotional labour becomes a regular, unavoidable part of the job ensuring professionalism (Hochschild).

Burnout Theory

Burnout refers to the long-term effects of continuous stress in the workplace. It is a gradual process that builds over time due to prolonged exposure to stress.

It is characterised by three main components: emotional exhaustion, where individuals feel drained; depersonalization, where they begin to feel detached from their work; and reduced personal accomplishment, where efficiency and productivity declines.

In professions where individuals perform under challenging conditions, it leads to decline in motivation and energy over time. Tasks that were once manageable may begin to feel overwhelming, and the quality of performance may decrease (Maslach).

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma, also known as 'the cost of caring' or 'secondary traumatic stress', refers to the psychological impact experienced by individuals who are regularly exposed to other's suffering, trauma, or distress. Unlike direct trauma, this is caused through repeated interaction with emotionally intense situations.

Over time, such exposures influence individual's thoughts, emotions, and perception of the world. They may begin to experience emotional strain, or a sense of helplessness. Although they are not

experiencing the trauma first-hand, but the continuous exposure leaves a lasting impression on their mental state.

In professions where dealing with difficult situations is routine, vicarious trauma becomes an important concept just like a therapist who regularly listens to client's traumatic experiences, a doctor treating afflicted persons, or a journalist reporting from conflict zones may begin to experience emotional distress themselves (Pearlman and Mac Ian).

Circadian Rhythm Disruption

Circadian rhythm is the body's internal clock that regulates sleep, energy, and different biological processes over a 24-hour cycle helping in maintaining balance and ensuring efficient and timely bodily functions.

In professions with irregular schedules, night shifts, or extended working hours, this rhythm is disrupted. When the body functions when it is naturally meant to rest, it creates a biological imbalance leading to fatigue, reduced concentration, and a decline in overall health. Repeated disruption of this cycle makes it difficult for the body to regain balance (Halberg).

Recommendations

Organizational Level

Supportive Policies

By implementing policies that prioritizes the mental and emotional well-being of employees such as providing access to counselling services, offering flexible work arrangements. In addition to policies that ensure extra working hours are compensated, either through overtime pay or additional time off, so that employees do not feel overburdened. Also, by establishing clear communication channels, employees feel safe expressing their concerns which creates a sense of fairness and security, leading to reduced psychological burden.

Emotional Regulation Training

Organizations should provide training in stress management, mindfulness, and cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) to help employees handle pressure. These sessions should be conducted by

trained professionals. Since emotional regulation is a continuous process, regular follow-ups are essential.

Recognition, Rewards and Appreciation

Recognizing and appreciating employees boosts their morale. Organizations should acknowledge and provide rewards and incentives that value not only the outcome but also the efforts. Such initiatives make the employees feel respected, reducing feelings of exhaustion and detachment.

Workload Regulation

Workload management prevents burnout and maintains efficiency. Organizations should fairly distribute work so that the employees don't feel overburdened. Also, providing regulation of working hours, adequate breaks, and proper shift rotations balances work and health without compromises on either side.

Individual Level

Healthy Lifestyle

A timely and a well-balanced nutritious diet, regular physical activity, and adequate sleep supports both physical and mental health. When the body is well-nourished and rested, individuals are better equipped to handle demanding situations.

Social Support

Building strong social connections provides emotional support and creates a sense of belonging. Sharing experiences and venting feelings acts as a release, preventing the build-up of internal pressure (Cohen and Wills 1985). Such healthy social interactions act as a barrier against feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion.

Time Management Strategies

Developing effective life skills such as time management allows individuals to endure pressure. Learning to prioritise tasks, through approaches like the 80–20 rule, helps channel energy productively while reducing unnecessary stress.

Relaxation Techniques and Short Breaks

Practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing,

meditation, or simply just mindfulness helps reduce stress and regain mental clarity by allowing the mind to pause and recover from continuous pressure. Moreover, taking short breaks during work also helps prevent mental fatigue and improves concentration.

Limitations

Ambiguity in Parameters for Work Distribution

While workload regulation has been recommended, the chapter does not establish universally applicable parameters for equitable distribution of work. Variations in job roles, skill levels, and situational demands make it challenging to define a standardized model for fair workload allocation.

Complexity of Human Behaviour

Human behaviour is highly complex, dynamic, and influenced by multiple internal and external factors such as personality, personal life circumstances, cultural family background, interpersonal relationships, stress levels, individual coping mechanisms etc.

Influence of Favouritism and Personal Rapport

Work environments are often shaped by interpersonal relationships. Factors such as favouritism or personal rapport between employee and employer can influence workload distribution, opportunities, and emotional expectations.

Lack of Empathy from Customers and Employers

The absence of empathy, understanding, or emotional support from stakeholders can intensify stress and reduce the effectiveness of the coping strategies .

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the ‘uniform’ in high-stakes professions conceals significant biological and psychological strains. Drawing on emotional labour theory, burnout theory, vicarious trauma and circadian rhythm disruption, it has shown how continuous professional demands translate into psychosomatic deterioration.

A certain level of pressure and emotional strain is an innate part of these professions. Acceptance, therefore, becomes just as

important, recognizing that not every challenge can be eliminated, and that some strain is inevitable. At the end of the day, those behind the uniform are human first. By combining acceptance with active efforts, can we truly sustain the people who carry the weight of such responsibilities. Showing simple acts of respect, understanding, and gratitude makes a difference.

Only when acceptance is combined with action and appreciation can we truly support the people who carry such responsibilities.

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