

Professionals taking huge strain, stress index shows

● Growing concerns around fatigue and poor sleep are the symptoms that rank highest among respondents

Yvonne Fontyn

The 2024 Profmed stress index shows that stress levels among SA professionals increased considerably on the previous year.

The survey, conducted among 2,071 graduate professionals across a range of industries, was published on January 30.

“SA professionals face mounting stress levels, with financial uncertainty and workplace pressure once again emerging as primary stressors,” the study concludes.

“The findings indicate a growing concern around fatigue and poor sleep, with these symptoms ranking highest among respondents, even surpassing last year’s levels. Digestive issues have also emerged as a new stress-related symptom, pointing to the increasing toll that stress takes on a professional’s physical health,” says Profmed.

The trends in the index are:

- Younger professionals and women report higher stress levels. Millennials (aged 30-39) and professionals aged 50-59 experience the highest levels of stress. Women report higher stress levels than men, largely due to balancing multiple roles at work and home.

- Healthcare professionals and educators are among the most stressed. Long hours, emotional burnout and a lack of support systems contribute to heightened stress levels in these fields.

- Financial concerns drive stress. Economic uncertainty, inflation and job security are the top contributors, highlighting the need for financial resilience.

- Workload and work-life balance remain major concerns. Heavy workloads and difficulty maintaining a work-life balance remain significant stressors.

- Self-isolation is on the rise. Many respondents report withdrawing from social interactions when experiencing stress, a concerning trend that has increased from previous years.

DIGITAL SOLUTIONS

Partly due to time constraints, many professionals are open to digital solutions for stress management.

“However, a generational divide persists, with older members preferring in-person contact, while younger professionals are more comfortable with digital and text-based support,” the study says.

Justine Lacy, the clinical executive at Profmed, says there is a definite advantage to attending face-to-face sessions with a mental health professional, “but that shouldn’t stop anyone from seeking support, even if it is only a screen-to-screen consultation”.

She adds that leveraging technology through mobile therapy apps, virtual support groups and web-based counselling services offers exciting opportunities to expand the reach and impact of mental healthcare. Apps that offer mindfulness exercises, mood tracking or even chat-based therapy can be crucial adjuncts to traditional mental healthcare, providing individuals with tools and resources at their fingertips while offering convenient, flexible and more affordable

options. “This is especially beneficial for individuals who face barriers to traditional in-person therapy including mobility issues, time constraints or living in remote areas.”

According to the index, healthcare professionals and educators are among the most stressed due to long hours, emotional burnout and a lack of support systems. It’s clear that support systems need to be improved for professionals, and especially these vulnerable groups. Lacy says the state and the private sector, as well as the institutions involved, can and should assist.

“Mental health issues have a direct impact on workplaces through increased absenteeism, reduced productivity and increased costs to the organisation. This plays out in what professional individuals identified as pain points in the survey, namely long hours and emotional burnout,” she says.

A TOXIC WORK ENVIRONMENT CAN HAVE A SEVERELY NEGATIVE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

“For this reason, it is in the employers’ best interests to ensure that adequate support is available for their employees through employee assistance programmes.

“Whether the support offered is targeted at individuals within an organisation or open to the public, sufficient marketing is vital in improving access, with the end goal being to create awareness.”

“Education about mental health issues and the importance of seeking help can change perceptions associated with these conditions by breaking down long-standing stigma. Marketing initiatives can encourage individuals to seek treatment earlier and support efforts to allocate more resources to mental health services. Well-informed individuals may be more likely to reach out for help,” says Lacy.

Employers should strive to create a healthy work environment.

“Companies and organisations need to cultivate a work environment that demands integrity and respect among other values. A toxic work environment can have a severely negative impact on mental health and workplaces need to cultivate a safe work environment where people can share their problems without the risk of criticism, blame or judgment. Individuals also need to be assured that the confidentiality of their information is respected.”

Lacy says SA has a unique demographic and set of factors that contribute to poor mental health. “Mental disorders account for a significant portion of disease burden.”

“The private and public sector need to prioritise mental health in their budgeting, with a collaborative focus on improving access and resources to mental healthcare that is affordable for all as well as improving the quality of that care.”

COMMITMENT

She adds that the health department’s national mental health policy framework and strategic plan 2023-30 emphasises the advances in scientific evidence on prevention, diagnosis, care, treatment and rehabilitation of mental illness.

This data has assisted in providing the tools to work towards attaining the goal of improving the mental health of the population. The activities and targets contained in it demonstrate a commitment by the department to further improve access to quality mental health services in collaboration with stakeholders.”

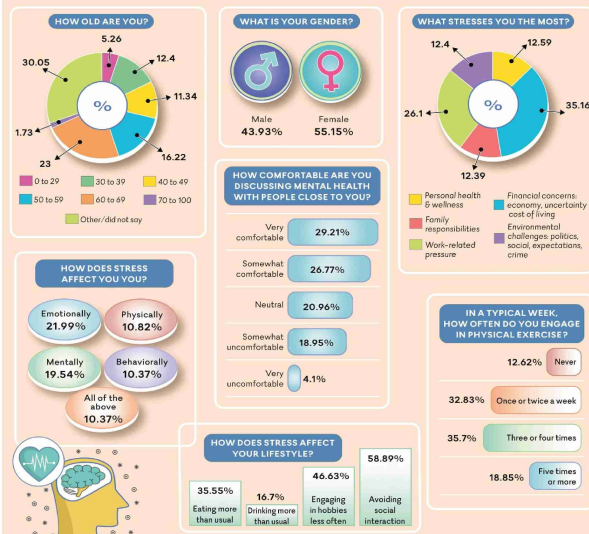
Private healthcare plays a pivotal role for those who have the means. “Medical schemes play a crucial role in helping individuals manage stress and burnout and prevent these conditions from developing by providing comprehensive healthcare support and access to essential resources.”

Nonprofit organisations such as the SA Depression and Anxiety Group offer support and care, while Masivive, a consortium of organisations led by the Foundation for Professional Development, provides a vital platform for

MANAGING STRESS

PROFMED STRESS INDEX SURVEY 2024

Examples of questions put to 2,071 South African graduate professionals, across a range of industries



Graphic: KAREN MOOLMAN, Source: PROFMED MEDICAL AID

mental health issues.

Lacy says it aims to “improve knowledge about mental health, break the stigma and increase access to mental health services and [help] for access and support for all. They say that they are making sure they reach people who are overlooked or not often heard.”

“That is why they have a specific focus on the integration of mental health support into HIV and TB services as well as on caring for the mental health of healthcare workers.”

Financial stress can be reduced with better management, says Stewart McFarlane, an executive

financial adviser for Momentum and founding partner at Secure Insurance Brokers.

Referring to the 30-39 age group, which is particularly vulnerable to financial stress, he notes that is when many people are establishing themselves by buying property, for example.

The next group, 50-59, is composed of people who are creating wealth but heading for retirement. “They’re worrying about what they’ll be doing after that.”

Simple ways to invest and have a better retirement are to reduce your debt and increase your savings, he adds.

“A retirement (RA) is

the main vehicle and provides wonderful tax relief. You can access the money until you’re 55, which is a safeguard, and it will provide you with a cash sum and a pension for the rest of your life.”

In addition, there are considerable tax concessions on your contributions. Say you put in R10,000 a month, you could be saving 45% of that so it costs you only R5,500. Then you would get your 8%-9% interest on your investment as well.”

Lump-sum and monthly savings investments are another option, but none of this means anything without the will to save and invest, and to start early.

On the whole, SA lacks a savings culture and individuals need to create their own savings habit, says McFarlane, but the government has an incentive in the tax-free savings plan with a limit of R36,000 a year or R500,000 in your lifetime.

Dabbling in shares in the hope of high returns is too risky for the average individual, he says.

With regard to achieving greater work-life balance, certified master coach Warren Munitz, founder of Integrative Coaching, says that it begins with self-awareness.

“Most people struggle with balance because they operate from unconscious patterns that drive them toward overworking or avoidance. At Integrative Coaching, we guide individuals in deep relaxation techniques that release tension and promote equilibrium.

Practices like progressive muscle relaxation, breathwork and meditation help regulate the nervous system and reduce stress.”

STRESSED OUT: Financial uncertainty and workplace pressure are primary stressors — but there are ways to develop the resilience needed to cope better. —ZARF/istockphoto

Physical strategies include

- Movement and energy awareness, which incorporates mindfulness movement, whether through yoga, stretching or walking. It helps to maintain a grounded state if done with mindful awareness. Becoming aware of how your body responds to stress before the symptoms escalate is key.

- Deep restorative sleep. “Quality sleep is vital for emotional and cognitive balance. Our process is to help clients identify unconscious beliefs that cause stress and interfere with deep rest.”

Mental and emotional strategies include

- Self-inquiry and awareness. “Revealing and resolving or dissolving limiting beliefs that fuel burnout is critical. We guide our clients to uncover unconscious drivers behind their stress, allowing them to shift these and move towards more sustainable and healthier behaviours.”

- Emotional integration. “Stress often stems from suppressed emotions. By developing the ability to sit with and process emotions without judgment, individuals can move from reactivity to responsiveness.”

“As the quote from Victor Frankl goes: Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to

choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

● Identity transformation. “Many people attach their self-worth to productivity or other such external things. We guide clients through dis-identification to help them release attachments to external validation and rediscover their authentic self.”

Munitz believes that achieving balance does not entail perfecting a routine but rather developing awareness, inner resilience and adaptability. “When individuals cultivate presence and inner stillness, they naturally make better decisions regarding their time, energy and commitments everything in their life.”

The increase in self-isolation as a coping mechanism is a worrying trend. Munitz says “Self-isolation, while sometimes necessary for introspection, can become a harmful pattern when driven by fear, unresolved emotions or a lack of connection to one’s authentic self. Some of the negative effects include emotional numbness or overwhelm, as suppressed emotions may lead to a sense of disconnection or, the opposite, heightened emotional distress.”

As a result, the person may develop a distorted self-perception.

“Without external feedback, the untrained mind can easily create limiting narratives that reinforce feelings of unworthiness and separation. Isolation can also disconnect people from life’s deeper purpose, leading to stagnation and existential crisis.”

Methods for breaking out of this vicious cycle include inner work and awareness practices, he says.

“Forced social engagement is not the answer. We first encourage deep self-inquiry. Understanding the unconscious reasons behind isolation helps individuals reclaim their sense of agency, their inner power.”

The staff at Integrative Coaching also help people to expand their emotional capacity. “Many personality types withdraw due to past emotional wounds. By working through these, individuals can develop resilience and the ability to deeply connect.”

AUTHENTIC

Mindful engagement is the way to recovery.

“Reintegrating into the world doesn’t mean overwhelming oneself with socialisation of what was normal in the past because that might not actually have been healthy.”

“We advise clients to start small — mindful interactions with nature or simple conversations can begin the process of re-engagement.”

When connections are made, they should be as authentic as possible. “Connection isn’t about quantity but depth. We help individuals develop the ability to engage meaningfully with others while maintaining their own sense of presence.”

Munitz concludes: “The key is to move from unconscious withdrawal into conscious solitude, where isolation is a choice for self-nourishment rather than avoidance. Once individuals reconnect with themselves, they can naturally re-enter relationships and environments from a place of wholeness.”

External factors may play a role in driving up our stress levels but developing the resilience needed to face them is an inside job.

WITH REGARD TO ACHIEVING GREATER WORK-LIFE BALANCE... IT BEGINS WITH SELF-AWARENESS