

Tackling stress and burnout in cyber security

The cyber security industry has long been associated with excessively high levels of stress. This frequently leads to feelings such as being out of control, vulnerability, a constant need to be on the defensive, a fear of failure, not feeling valued or supported, and many more. Add to that, anxiety, uncertainty and pandemic fatigue that has resulted from COVID-19 plus an exponential rise in home working. The result is the creation of a giant pressure cooker.

Here are some top tips from CREST, identified during its Access to Cyber Security workshops last year, that will help to prevent and mitigate stress and burnout when working in cyber security.

Set yourself small achievable goals

Taking small measures to control and decrease stress, will improve your health and enhance your sense of identity. Our brains need concrete goals to work towards, otherwise they stay trapped in recycling past problems rather than moving on. Setting goals and thinking about what you can do today, rather than what you cannot, enhances creativity and encourages better cognitive function.

Create a better work/life balance and define your boundaries

Reduce stress by setting boundaries between your work and personal life. The more you can disconnect from your job and enjoy other parts of your life, the more effective you'll be when back at work. Nurture your outside relationships, interests and abilities. Work regular hours and try to take the breaks and holidays you are entitled to. If things get too stressful, book a day off or a long weekend.

Use known stress management techniques

Identify and understand what's stressing you out and look out for warning signs that you or others may be excessively stressed, including sleeping difficulties, increased irritability, overeating or abusing drugs or alcohol. If excessively stressed, try the following: reach out and talk to friends and family or someone else you trust; develop a healthy lifestyle including regular sleep, drinking enough water, a healthy diet and physical exercise. Also, try various forms of relaxation exercises such as meditation and yoga. There are also some very good internet self-help programmes and phone apps available. Helping others, as in volunteering, can also help reduce stress.

Constant communication

Online or phone meetings need to take place, and a finger must be kept on the pulse of employee feelings and morale. Wellness Action Plans (WAPs) are a great way to enable this. Managers cannot let communication suffer in a remote-working world and need to create an inspiring WFH culture and motivate employees through encouragement, praise and recognition. Companywide communication platforms can be a good way of doing this.

Help create a supportive work environment

Whether a manager or not, make people feel valued and secure, and take account of their individual needs. Wherever possible,

employees should be given access to sources of advice on mental health issues and resilience training tools. Everybody has a responsibility to do this. Employees shouldn't be expected to take on more work than they would in an on-site setting, and managers need to have honest and frequent conversations about an employee's workload, goals and achievements.

Cultivate compassion

Listen with empathy and imagine things from others' viewpoints. Try to be helpful rather than harmful, recognise that cooperation often has better outcomes, practice being non-judgemental and develop emotional intelligence. Compassion helps prevent burnout and builds a culture of wellbeing. Giving and receiving compassion also has major health benefits on the immune, cardiovascular and neurophysiological systems. Also, be kind to yourself. Although during the pandemic life has felt very unstable, many people are asking meaningful questions about how to live life and what is important. Answers to these questions will serve people well in the future. Self-compassion reduces anxiety, rumination, perfectionism, and leads to lower levels of fear of failure and depression.

Explore creativity and live for the moment

'Keep mentally alive'. Hostage victim Terry Waite's wise words about how to avoid becoming too introspective and subsequently depressed when feeling isolated and stressed have been particularly relevant in lockdown, Terry Waite felt his five years in captivity were wasted but has since changed his mind upon realising that he had developed creative abilities that he didn't know he had. With no books, papers or natural light, he used his imagination to write a book in his head, write stories and keep his mind going. This current situation may seem like a waste of time but it is not if you can draw on it at a later stage. Also, learn to live for the moment – you cannot think too far ahead.

Express gratitude

When you are feeling stressed, irritated or frustrated, try and find the positives in any given situation and be grateful for them, concentrating less on what you may have lost and more on what still remains. At the end of each day, try making a list of all the good things that happened that day, or things you're thankful for or proud of. Reflect on these good things and congratulate yourself for achieving them.