

>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney, raising the bar in 2019, so 21 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bar across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Helena Newans' talk, When Not to Keep Calm and Carry On, Learning how to deal with Work Stress. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

>> Okay, okay. So, my mic is on. Thanks, Catherine, for the introduction. Hi everyone. Wow, what a great turnout tonight. I'm looking around the audience, and I'm really happy to see that it's not just my family and friends and colleagues but actually real people who are interested in these talks, so thank you so much for coming to see me tonight. So, as Catherine mentioned, my name is Helena Newans. I'm an academic. I'm a work psychologist, and I am a confessed stress addict. Unless I am super stressed out at work and insanely busy, I feel like I'm not achieving enough or that I'm not doing enough, and no matter how many times I tell myself that I need to just cut back and try and live a less stressful life, I don't, and instead I find myself in really strange situations like this where I'm a bar for working talking about work stress. So, this is how addicted I am to work stress. So, I'm, so as an academic, I've been really interested in understanding how work impacts our health and our well-being for over a decade now, and I work as part of an amazing team. So, team, can you please make yourself known.

>> Woo hoo!

>> Yeah, they're a rowdy bunch. Okay, so you guys, the reason why I'm addicted to work but also the reason why I experience stress at work [laughter], but so we have a shared interest and a shared passion for understanding and identifying factors that can protect employees at work, things that can make it worse, and what organisations and managers can do to make jobs more sustainable and more satisfying because we know that work is a major, major contributor to mental health. So mental health, mental health challenges, mental health problems, mental health issues, however we want to describe it, it affects all of us. So, according to statistics, and I think this is somewhat of an underestimation, three out of four people here tonight would have experienced some form of mental health or stress symptoms such as worry, sleep problems, or fatigue that affects your ability to function at work. More people have heart attacks on Mondays as they get ready to work than any other days of the week. Three out of four employees say that work is a major cause of their stress and that job insecurity is one of the biggest stressors. It's also associated with high levels of suicide, particularly among men. It's not surprising given how much time that we spend at work that work is a major source of our wellbeing and our mental health. And for those who are curious in terms of the financial costs of work stress, it is costing the Australian economy around 11 to 12 billion dollars each year and globally, the cost of mental health and stress is over 1 trillion U.S. dollars each year. So, while I have your attention, and I'm assuming while you're still relatively sober, I would like to just summarise the key three takeaways that

I hope you'd take away basically from my talk tonight. First, employees' mental health and well-being is a critical issue. It's costly for employees, it's costly for organisations, and it's costly for the economy if mental health is not made higher, is not made a national priority and a national concern. Employees' mental health and well-being should be high on every workplace strategic agenda. As a society, we need to destigmatize conversations about mental health and mental health at work so that people can more openly discuss and share the mental health experiences and challenges that they have without fear, without discrimination, and without stigma. Two out of three people with a known mental health condition never seek treatment, and yet mental health is one of the most, well mental health conditions is one of the most treatable type of conditions. My second point is that there is not doubt that work is a major contributor to our well-being. There's many things that stress us out at work, but we know that the emotional demands at work, in particular the way that we manage our emotions at work, has a huge influence on our well-being, and so tonight and later on, I'll talk a little bit about the different strategies that people use to regulate their emotions at work and how some of these strategies are more protective than others in terms of our well-being and how employees can be trained to actually use more effective ones. My third main point is relating to the importance of recovery. So, as a stress addict, the importance of recovery isn't something that I appreciated or I'm only learning to start to appreciate, and it's through my own experience of stress and in my academic research. But recovery is a critical, recovery from work stress is critical. Organisations need to provide employees with opportunities to replenish and to recover from work. And tonight, later on, I'll talk about different types of recovery strategies, but in particular, breaks and the effectiveness of breaks in terms of how different types of breaks can help employees recover and replenish as a result of stress from work. So, I'll keep going back to these three key points, but if I could just go back to my initial confession about being a stress addict. So, I have here, and you'll notice a glass of water, and I'm not going to ask you, and by the way, this is water, it's not vodka. I just had my vodka. And I'm not going to ask you whether this glass is half empty or half full, but I'm a psychologist, and I'm meant to be a little bit cheesy and a little bit cliché, so instead, I'm going to ask you how heavy do you think this glass of water is and maybe just scream it out in grammes in just estimates.

>> Four hundred.

>> Four hundred grammes. Anything upper or lower?

>> Two hundred.

>> Two fifty.

>> Two hundred. Okay. Two fifty. I feel like this is a bit of an auction. If it was vodka, you'd totally go for more. Okay, so some of you might have heard this glass of water story before, and so you might know that it doesn't matter how heavy this glass of water is in absolute weight. What matters is how long

I hold it for. So, the longer I hold it, the heavier it will feel. So, if I hold this glass of water for the duration of my talk, it will feel heavier by the end of my talk. But if I take a break and I put the glass of water down, and I give my hand and my arm a rest, then it will feel less heavier. And this is like work stress, and for me, the most important part of this glass of water story is that last bit, and that really highlights the important need for us to be able to recover from work stress. So, that's what my talk will be about tonight. It will be about work stress, and it will be about recovery. So, as I mentioned, I've been really driven to understand how work impacts our well-being and our mental health for a long time now. And being a work psychologist and doing what any good work psychologist would do who is interested in stress, I started to look for really stressful workplaces to do my research. And so, I'd like to share with you a story about a participant that I met. So, her name is Karen, and Karen is a head nurse of a large emergency department in a large public hospital. Now, when I first met Karen, my first impression of her was I wouldn't want to mess with her, but if you know me, you'd know I wouldn't or couldn't mess with anyone to be honest. So, but really, she was just really strong, this robust-looking woman, and she had this stereotypical matron-ness vibe, and she was in totally control of the environment, and she had no visible signs of stress. And as we sat down and she did the interview, she started to tell me about her day. And she told me without really much emotions at all how she had to deal with a really angry parent, a mother and a father, who were very upset and angry with her because she had to reschedule a planned procedure for their child. So, it was a really bad day, that day, in the emergency department. There were a lot of, there were quite a few accidents and incidents, and she had to basically make room in the operating theatres. And they were very, very upset and angry with Karen because, well, they'd been waiting for a very long time. They had been concerned and anxious about their child. They've had to deal with a really fussy child because they've had to prepare this child and had to fast the child for about six to eight hours, and so to be told that they now had to go home and it had to be rescheduled, they just lost it. And then, she proceeded to tell me about how immediately after this encounter she had to deal with a distressed family of the patient, the critical patient who was rushed into emergency. And in the middle of telling me all this, she suddenly stopped, and she started to cry. And the tears flowed, and as sudden as they came out, suddenly she zipped it all up and had wiped away the tears, and then she was immediately back to her strong, her calm, her very stereotypical matron-style nurse, and she proceeded to carry on with the interview without another hint of emotion or distress in sight. And so like Karen, many of us don't look visibly stressed at work, and like Karen, when we have to deal with really stressful situations at work, we often manage our emotions by hiding and by suppressing how we truly feel. In the case of Karen, she felt immense sadness and sorry and pain, but she felt like she had to tuck it all up and zip it all up. And the reason why is often in the jobs that we do, and that's the case in service jobs in particular as well as in jobs in sales or basically where you have to deal with people, there are strong norms, and there are strong expectations

about how we should act and behave and the emotions that we should display. And I'll give you some examples of this. So, for example, feeling like you have to serve customers with a smile all the time or feeling that you always have to care for patients with as much empathy as possible or feeling that when you're teaching students that you have to teach them with a lot of enthusiasm. Or when you have to do a raising the bar talk, and you have to be totally energetic and excited or when you're having to stay really calm and professional and when your boss is swearing and screaming at you, and you feel like you want to give it to them, but, you know, you can't because you're scared and you're worried that it might jeopardise your career. So, when you're constantly having to regulate your emotions at work as part of the cool part of what you do at work, what you're doing is known as emotional labour. A large proportion of our time at work is spent on emotional labour. Unlike physical labour where you're having to work super hard and super fast, for example, to try and meet a deadline or cognitive labour, which is the amount of mental effort that you put in the job. So, for example, trying to solve a really complex problem at work or dealing with a really difficult dataset that you're trying to analyse. So, unlike the physical and the cognitive labour, emotional labour is often overlooked, and that is the most, one of the most stressful and most straining components of what we do, but it's the least, well, it's the least well compensated, it's not well compensated at all compared to the other types of labours. And so, the research and emotional labour has been, it's really, it's quite well established now. It's been over two decades of research on emotional labour now, and the evidence is very well established and compelling that when employees perform emotional labour chronically over time that it takes an enormous toll on their mental health and their well-being, and it's because it's very draining, it's very exhausting, and it absorbs and it takes resources, these important resources that we need to keep well.

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>> So, how do we reduce, I guess, the toll that emotional labour has on our well-being? Well, for employees, first we can look at the types of strategies that we're using when we're regulating our emotions at work. So, there is a range of strategies, but there's this one type of strategy known as surface acting. Now, when you surface act, what you're doing is similar to what Karen was doing where she really felt all these negative emotions around sadness and sorrow, but she zipped it up. So, when you surface act, you hide and you actively try to suppress the real emotions that you feel, and you may end up having to fake the emotions that you have to show as part of your job. And so pasting on that smile, for example, and the evidence around surface acting and its detrimental effects on employees health and well-being is very compelling and very well established. Employees who engage in chronic surface acting over time and that's their default strategy, experience a host of negative outcomes such as they will feel, and they feel higher levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout. They will feel more depersonalised and less authentic. They start to feel that they're not doing well in their job, and so they experience less job satisfaction,

this becoming less committed to what they do, less work engagement. Others around them start to see them as poor performers because of their perception of their customers rating them as well as their peers saying that they're not delivering the service quality, and then overall they actually start to withdraw in different ways, often behaviorally by taking sick leave and then eventually quitting. And there are these, another set of strategies that have contrasting effects according to the evidence that we have, which are known as deep acting. So, deep acting strategies is when you actively try to change the way you feel in order to produce the emotion that's more in line with the situation. So, for example, when you try to take the perspective of the other person, to try and generate those more authentic feelings that you feel that you need to display as part of your job. Or when you try to see the situation in a different way, also known as cognitive reframing, again as a way to try and generate these more authentic feelings. And again, what we know is that the difference between surface and deep acting in terms of the effects on employees, is very, it's quite distinct. Deep acting, as compared to surface acting has a much more protective effect because we can maintain our authenticity. We don't feel like we're depersonalising things, and therefore, all that has replenishing functions and over time it doesn't have the detrimental effects that surface acting has. So, between, surface acting is what I would also describe as the Elsa strategy from Frozen. So, it's the, you know, don't, you know, conceal, don't feel, don't let it show. I have children, I know that movie so well, perhaps too well. I know all the lyrics. Okay, so this is all from the employees' perspective, right, but what about, what managers? What about organisation. Sure there are many managers here tonight as well. Why should managers and organisations care about the effects of emotional labour on employees' mental health and well-being and the types of strategies that employees are using to regulate their emotions at work? Well, again, the evidence here is very well-established and compelling because it makes good business sense. Besides from being a good person and from being a good organisation, it makes good business sense because it's costly. It's harmful. It causes the organisation, it hurts the organisation's bottom line, and it affects the organisation's ability to perform. So, if I can give you just one example. In one study, we calculated the direct cost of replacing and absent employee as a result of an increase in surface acting. Because basically they're feeling the toll of emotional labour, right, so they're having to actually take some sick leave. And in this dataset and in this study, it was easier for us to [inaudible] the direct cost of increased surface acting, of having to replace absent employees because it was a sample of nurses. So, in hospitals, when a nurse is absent, there is a need to replace that nurse on that day to maintain the patient-nurse ratio. And for what we did when we calculated for small to medium-sized organisations, the cost of surface acting and having to replace a nurse who was engaging in increased levels of surface acting and therefore having to take a day off, was around 100,000 a year. It doesn't sound a lot maybe to some people, but that is just the direct cost, and it's just a cost of one dysfunctional strategy. There is a host of hidden costs, of indirect costs such as where by for example perhaps that nurse goes to work or that employee

is there but what's known as presenteeism where they're there but they're not really there, and so there's this huge amount of loss productivity, which is the indirect cost that we haven't yet been able to calculate in our data. All right, so just keeping up the organisational level, what is the effect of working for really negative, for organisations with really negative workplace cultures, where there are high levels of emotional sort of toxicity you call it where it's high levels of workplace aggression or conflicts and bullying and harassment and abusive supervision. What do you think the effects are on employee' mental health and well-being working in such an organisation? It's harmful, right. So, it's harmful to the employees that work there, and we know and hopefully I've been describing it, that it's harmful to the organisation's bottom line in terms of sick leave and turnover, reduced performance, and so forth. But we actually also found that it's harmful to the customers and to the patients that the organisation is serving as well. So, in this study, and in a more recent study, what we did was we looked at a sample of over 100 hospitals, and there we found that for hospitals where staff reported higher levels of workplace aggression and this is both insiders' and outsiders' aggression, so both by you colleagues, your bosses as well as patients and so forth, that those hospitals, there was a significant relationship between higher levels of workplace aggression and lower levels of staff engagement. Not that exciting, but we also found that those hospitals with higher levels of workplace aggressions were associated with higher levels of hospital-acquired infections. Now, you don't know what hospital-acquired infection is. That's a good thing in some ways. So, it's when you go into the hospital and you get an infection that's got nothing to do with your medical condition. It's basically poor hospital hygiene. And so, in this study, what we're finding is that workplace aggression has a negative impact that spills outwards and spills over to the patient, in this case, that the organisation is meant to protect and take care of. So, it was compromising patient safety. It's all very depressing, isn't it? This is the effects of emotional labour. Oh, my goodness. So, I might now just switch gears a little bit and turn my attention to recovery. So, how do employees recover from work. So, it's a very natural and it's a very strong human tendency to try to protect and to conserve our resources when we're under threat and when our resources are lost or at threat. And the most common, the most dominant employee response to work stress in the way that they most often tried to recover is to withdraw, to withdraw from work. Now, withdrawal is a process. It often starts with more psychological forms of withdrawal such as an employee who is experiencing a lot of chronic levels of work stress is related, for example, to emotional demands at work. We'll start to reduce the amount of efforts they put into their job. And then, they start to feel less satisfied with what they do, and so they start to withdraw psychologically in terms of reducing their commitment and then reducing their engagement, and then, they start to withdraw physically from the work environment, so that's when you see higher levels of sick leave and turnover. And that's why it's not surprising that in industries like in health care, there are schedule high levels of nurse turnover and in general just in healthcare there's high levels of turnover as well as in say hospitality or other service industry, where there is generally very high levels of

turnover compared to other industries. So, thinking about these recovery strategies. They're all pretty bad, they're all pretty negative from the organisation's perspective in particular of reduced performance in sick leave and in turnover. So, are there any sort of healthier forms of recovery because keeping in mind, these are just responses from the employees that try to recover to protect and to conserve whatever energy and resources they have left. And there are, there are strategies that are not only just, not only more adaptive, but they actually can make money for businesses, not just to lose money. And then, so these strategies we started looking, that they're called what we call short-term withdrawal. They're micro breaks. They are breaks that you have during work hours, and they're vital rest opportunities for employees to replenish and to recover from work. In this recent study, it's actually quite a recent study, what we did was we compared the effectiveness of two types of strategies. When employees engaged in what we, as I said, micro breaks, where they actually remove themselves physically from that stressful customer encounter, and they went and they did something like have a drink of water and had a snack, talked to a colleague or go for a short walk and get some fresh air. When we compared those strategies to the strategies where employees in our sample were saying that they stayed on the job, they continued to serve the next customer, but in order to protect and conserve whatever resources they had left, they markedly reduced the amount of effort that they put in that job and that service encounter. Not surprisingly, we found that the replenishing effectiveness of engaging in these micro breaks where you're removing yourself and you're giving yourself this opportunity to replenish, that was a lot more protective than the strategies when employees were saying actually I stayed on the job, I just really reduced my effort. And what was really interesting is that employees, when they said they stayed on the job but just reduced their effort, that they actually experienced even more customer mistreatment afterwards. So, it was inviting more mistreatment because of the reduced effort, and actually they were just having, they were so depleted that having to keep carrying on was not helpful. So, this is sort of this vicious cycle. So, what are the implications of this study in particular around finding that these micro breaks had this vital, replenishing function? Well, first of all, breaks on the job are not lost productive time, you know. They're vital replenishing, recovery mechanisms for employees. And the second implication is that some organisations are developing what's known as the always on culture, which is when employees feel like they need to constantly check their emails, to respond to customers, to clients, to students, even after work hours. And then what this is doing is that it's taking away these vital opportunities to replenish and to recover from work. So, these are some of the implications, and in terms of just to keep on with the technology theme is we know technology is changing the way that work is being designed and redesigned and the way we're doing work. And in particular, digital technology. And I don't think we've thoroughly thought through yet what the implications are for how technology is changing the way we work and the implications for employees' mental health and well-being. So, you might think that as there's a trend towards replacing more and more human to human interactions with human to AI or human to robot in-

teractions, maybe that's the magic bullet to just dealing with stressful people and stressed out people and stress-related at work, right. Maybe when we're having more robots perhaps in automated systems that this is our solution to emotional, the emotional toll. It's not, and the evidence is suggesting in fact it's the exact opposite. If not, it's going to exacerbate current problems. Just think about who [inaudible] when there's a system malfunction. Think about a time when you had to navigate a series of automated phone menus, and then you had to wait about 30 to 40 minutes to finally get ahold of a real person. How angry or frustrated were you? How nice and how kind were you to that person? Often, it's the immediate human operator that cups the full force of a system malfunction. And we also, there's some evidence to suggest that actually the more that we interact with machines, it may actually inspire us to be less human with each other. So, there are implications around technology, and there are many, I think many opportunities that technology can actually really help us in terms of helping us to have better health and better well-being, but there are also some real threats, and I don't think we've completely unpacked it yet in terms how technology is going to change. We know that it's changing the future of work but how it's going to impact employees' mental health and well-being. So, I'd like to just, before I conclude, just maybe go back to my original key points and just so that I can emphasise that more in your take-home message. First, again, employees' mental health and well-being is such a critical issue in that it needs to be much, much higher on our national priority, our national concern. Organisations need to do more than just provide a physically safe place for employees to work. They need to provide a psychologically safe place for employees to work. And for managers, you need to take into account the cost of emotional labour and think about how you can better support employees in terms of the types of strategies that they're using to manage their emotions at work, and this could be in terms of training or better awareness around the different, and the range of strategies that can be used. And that is around increasing confidence. It's around increasing self-efficacy, around different types of strategies. And also to increase the range of resources and tools that employees have to be able to better recover at work. And the other point, I mean the main point here is also that it shouldn't be up to just employees to manage their mental health because we know that work contributes to mental health, and so organisations and government needs to do more to improve the mental health of its people. And in terms of recovery, recovery from work is so critical. As I spoke about in this talk, you know, breaks, it's so simple of a strategy, but breaks are not lost productive time at all. They are productive in a way, and they are replenishing and they assist with recovery. And not to just think of breaks in terms of physical removal of an employee from a workplace like taking a holiday leave or some annual leave but actually to encourage more breaks while on the job. And because we know some of the evidence is there, it's actually having a lot of replenishing functions. It's like putting your phone in recharge when you're at work. You're able to recharge while you're still at work. So, I would like you to think in terms of recovery. Now, just before I finish up, if I was, I did a quick calculation, but it basically costs about \$105,000 per employee to replace

someone who quits, and I just did that based on the average Australian salary at the moment and adding about 33 percent of the cost to hire on that. So, if I was to say to you, it's going to cost you 105,000 to replace one employee that you burnt out, how does that compare to the loss of productive time if you were to give your employee an extra five to ten minutes of breaks during their work hours? It's quite cost effective. It's really easy to implement. And you can do it tomorrow when you go back to work and implement these strategies, and I really hope that there are things that you have taken away from this talk, very simple things that you can take away that you can actually go back tomorrow and give all your employees a stress-free day off work. So, that's my hidden agenda. So, okay, so I'm going to finish up. I'm not sure how long I've been talking for, but I'm pretty certain I'm at my 30 minutes mark. I have a final confession to make, and I started with a confession, and I'd like to finish off with a confession. So this is not water. It's a mix, is a vodka mix. It is my replenishment, and I feel that I need to recover and replenish from this really stressful work situation, and I'm going to enjoy and replenish. And I want to thank you for your attention and your time, and I welcome any questions that you have. Thank you.

[Applause]

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