

# Feeling Deadly, Working Deadly



NCETA  
Australia's National Research Centre  
on AOD Workforce Development



## W1. Worker Wellbeing: Working Deadly: A Guide for Workers

*Theory Into Practice (TIP) sheet for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander AOD workers*

This TIP sheet is for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander<sup>1</sup> alcohol and other drug (AOD) workers. It is part of a series of resources produced by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University. These TIP sheets aim to enhance Indigenous worker wellbeing and reduce work-related stress. The TIP sheets were developed in consultation with Indigenous AOD workers and other groups. Quotations from the consultations appear in italics in the TIP sheet.

### Introduction

Indigenous AOD workers often have high levels of work-related demands and stressors which make them more likely to have problems with stress and burnout. This TIP sheet aims to help Indigenous AOD workers prevent stress and burnout and recognise when they are occurring.

<sup>1</sup> The terms Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this document. We understand that some people have a preference for using one term over the other and we have used the terms interchangeably to be sensitive to these differing perspectives.

### Why is worker wellbeing important?

From an Indigenous perspective, health and wellbeing is more than just about the physical wellbeing of the individual. It is also about the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community (Office for Aboriginal and Torres Islander Health, 1989). For most Indigenous AOD workers, their main aim is to improve the health and wellbeing of their communities with whom they feel unified in heart and spirit. In doing this, it is important for workers, their supervisors and managers to understand what they (i.e. the worker) can do to improve their own wellbeing by reducing and preventing stress and burnout.

It is also important for workers to recognise how they personally respond to stress in their work role. This is different for each person. Understanding the factors and events that trigger stress and applying strategies to lower stress levels is essential for worker wellbeing.

In spite of the stress, pressure and demands placed on them and the conditions under which they are often required to work, many Indigenous AOD workers feel rewarded and satisfied from the work they do.

## What is Stress and Burnout?

*Stress* occurs when people feel they can't cope with the demands placed upon them. Work stress refers to what happens when work demands get too much over a short-term period.

*Burnout* is different to stress (but it may include signs and symptoms of stress). Burnout is a longer-term process where workers don't function well at work and develop negative and cynical attitudes towards clients and work in general. Stressful working conditions and job demands can result in worker burnout over time.

When people are burnt out they:

- Feel emotionally exhausted (feeling overextended and emotionally and physically drained)
- Have a negative, detached or cynical view of their work
- Feel like they are not accomplishing much at work
- Feel they are stupid or that nothing they do has any effect

*"Burnout, believe me, is shocking. I laid on the floor, and I was sleeping with my eyes open. I couldn't think, and I didn't want to go to work, you know. I didn't want to walk out that door. And your life becomes unmanageable."*  
(Indigenous worker)

Stress and burnout can lead to:

- Reduced job satisfaction
- Lower job performance (quality and quantity of work)
- Increased absenteeism and turnover
- Reduced commitment to work and the organisation.

## Strategies to address stress and burnout

The best strategy to prevent (or reduce) stress and burnout is to take a two-pronged approach that focuses on both:

- Organisational responses
- Individual strategies.

### **Organisational responses**

Organisational responses can start by addressing the aspects of the work situation that cause stress for workers. This could be things like:

- Heavy workloads
- Not having enough time off work to deal with problems at home, or loss, grief and Sorry Business
- Work conflicts
- Work pressure from communities
- Not being sure about work roles
- Stressful work events
- Poor physical working environment
- Lack of supervision, support and opportunities to use skills
- Being on short-term contracts
- Poor pay or other rewards.

*"We should pat ourselves on the back for even a little job."* (Indigenous worker)

## **Individual strategies**

Individual workers can do a lot to reduce their stress and risk of burnout including:

- Having close family bonds, telling and hearing cultural stories, having close connections and spirituality
- Laughter can also be used within the workplace as a way to manage distressing events and not letting minor irritations get out of hand
- Having realistic expectations about what they can and can't do, and being aware that it is not possible to help everyone
- Prioritising work to manage the demands and expectations from communities, co-workers and managers
- Focussing on successes, no matter how small
- Doing traditional things
  - » Taking time out to participate in traditional activities
  - » Going home to their communities
  - » Practicing their spiritual understanding of the world
- Doing recreational things
  - » Taking time out to participate in an enjoyable activity like listening to music
  - » Meditation, yoga, breathing exercises
  - » Going for a walk with a friend/dog
  - » Having a regular massage
- Doing social things
  - » Sharing knowledge
  - » Learning new things
  - » Having a close personal support network
  - » Spending time with family
  - » Visiting friends
  - » Eating well, going out for dinner
- Doing domestic/personal things
  - » Taking a nap
  - » Turning off the phone, lights, TV; spending time alone
  - » Not answering the door
  - » Enjoying a movie or favourite TV show
  - » Going for a long drive
  - » Gardening
  - » Having regular medical checks
  - » Practicing healthy living (i.e., do not smoke, drink, use illicit drugs)
- Doing work-related things
  - » Having a coffee and debriefing informally with work mates
  - » Having a routine
  - » Taking one day at a time
  - » Considering things from another perspective
  - » Accepting their limitations
  - » Looking forward to the end of the working day and not taking work home.

*"Aboriginal people joke all the time. It could be about a death, but we try and make something funny about it, just to cheer everyone up. It's good to have a cry, but you have to laugh too." (Indigenous worker)*

*"Have to learn your limitations and learn to enforce them. Cannot help everyone. Have to remember that work is a priority and that you are helping people there as well. Have to take time for yourself as you cannot help others unless you are well." (Indigenous worker)*

## Feeling Deadly/Working Deadly TIP Sheets

This is the first in a series of TIP sheets for Indigenous AOD workers. A series of TIP sheets have also been developed for supervisors and managers. The complete list is as follows:

### *Worker TIP sheets*

- W1. Worker Wellbeing: Working Deadly – A Guide for Workers
- W2. Mentoring – A Guide for Workers
- W3. Clinical Supervision – A Guide for Workers
- W4. Goal Setting – A Guide for Workers

### *Supervisor TIP sheets*

- S1. The complex personal lives of Indigenous AOD workers
- S2. Indigenous ways of working
- S3. Rewarding workers
- S4. Mentoring
- S5. Recruiting and retaining workers
- S6. Clinical supervision
- S7. Developing teams



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Copies of resources developed as part of the 'Feeling Deadly, Working Deadly' Resource Kit are available for download from the NCETA website: [www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)