

I am not 'always on'... for the sake of my sanity

 By [Khuthalani Khumalo](#)

10 Oct 2019

My name is Khuthalani Khumalo, and I refuse to perpetuate the 'always on' culture - for the sake of my sanity. I have worked in agencies for over 20 years and only in retrospect can I identify in myself, the PTSD-traits of a stressed agency employee.



Image credit: Sydney Sims on Unsplash.

I had learnt (probably from another stressed agency person) that this was how it was done in agencies – this was the 'agency culture'. You had to work hard, and keep taking on more.



Spring beam

Howard Feldman 14 Aug 2019



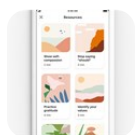
While I don't mean to say that agencies abuse the legally required working hours of their staff, far too many people in the industry follow an 'always on' approach to their work, burning the midnight oil and working over weekends and during holidays at no extra cost to their employer.

It's almost an unwritten agency rule that you have to do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes until it's done. This, in addition to the pace of agency life, and married with demanding clients and deadlines, can leave you severely stressed.

I was stressed for many years. Until one day, my body took control and forced me to pull back.

A survey was conducted (by some clever people in the first world) and they put the stress levels of a commercial pilot at the top of the list. A commercial pilot has to balance the technical requirements of operating a complex piece of machinery, with the incredible responsibility of keeping the lives of hundreds of people safe, in an environment they have no control over (the sky).

That is definitely stressful. You may be surprised to learn that working in PR was set only a few rungs below the commercial pilot! The PR industry could learn a thing or two from the heavily-regulated aviation industry.



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The pressure we feel takes its toll on us, and I would go out on a limb and say most agency staff have experienced one or more of the following symptoms that relate to stress:

Sleep deprivation

The inability to sleep is a clear indicator of stress. My limited understanding of the way the body works is that your body assumes the 'fight or flight' mode when certain triggers are activated.

These triggers indicate to your body that something in your immediate surroundings could potentially harm you and that the body must brace itself to deal with this danger.

We no longer live in an environment where we fear attacks from wild animals or predators, however, the pressures at work and in a relationship mirror the same effects on our body.

Therefore, trying to meet the demands of a difficult client can activate the adrenal glands in an effort to increase your body's ability to handle this threat. Excess adrenalin in your system limits your ability to fall asleep as the adrenalin tells your body not to fall asleep, so you can stay alert and fight off the threat.

If you're anything like me, even if you managed to fall asleep, you'd still dream about clients and deadline and status reports and pitches. Therefore, the cycle of stress never really stopped.



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25 Feb 2019



Raise your hand if you struggle to sleep because your mind won't switch off?

Depression, fear/anxiety

Have you ever felt like you just can't get out of bed, and completely lacked inspiration and the inclination to go on? Or if you managed to get out of bed, when you're driving to work, have you ever started making excuses in your head of why you won't spend the entire day in the office?

Or is your mind constantly buzzing with information and irrational fears about your ability to do your work? Do you look ahead at your work calendar and anticipate how stressed you'll be tomorrow, then get stressed because of the prospect of more stress? Are you constantly fearful of your boss, or your clients, or the media, or of how you will perform in your work?



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Raise your hand if you feel fearful and anxious about work? Raise your hand if you are struggling to find a reason to get through today?

Bullying

There are many instances of people being bullied in the workplace. The agency culture assumes that everyone will 'fit in' but when you don't, this can create an environment where bullying thrives.

Whether you are publicly shamed on things that have no pertinence on your work, such as sexual orientation, style, personal hygiene and weight, or if you are being pressured to resign as part of the domino effect of another person's resignation, or if you dare to be an individual and think independently, you can feel powerless and defeated on a daily basis.



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The process of trying to get your power back can create a vindictive and charged work environment, where you're always on the defensive. This can be heartbreaking and debilitating.

Raise your hand if you think you've been bullied at work?

Sickness and disease

I am one of those people who believes that our bodies manifest disease and sickness, based on the disease we feel in our spirit. This means that every headache, stomach cramp, back pain and sore throat can be linked directly back to your state of mental health.

If you find yourself constantly ill or booked off work (especially when it's busy), you may be harbouring some resentment and anger towards your job. When you find yourself in this state, you need to prioritise your health – both mental and physical; because while you can find another job, you only have one body.

The links between stress, digestion and nutrition





Raise your hand if you suspect your sickness is linked to how you feel about your job?

A complete breakdown

When you have pushed your mind and body beyond their respective limits by working too hard and disregarding your need to rest, your body can completely shut down. Your body can literally refuse to function and force you to rest, coming at a considerable professional and personal cost.

A mental breakdown is not something that is easy to disclose to others on your return to work, because co-workers may give you that 'Agh, shame' look, and start to tip-toe around you like they think you'll fall apart when the stapler's out of staples. This creates an uncomfortable working environment that leaves you feeling ostracised.

While we would rush to comfort a co-worker who has been physically hurt, with a broken limb in a cast, we tend to judge those co-workers who suffer from a mental illness.

Raise your hand if you are on the verge of a breakdown?

If you raised your hand, even once, take solace in the knowledge that you are not alone.

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Let's recognise the importance of talking about mental health every day, but especially today on #WorldMentalHealthDay 💎💎

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I am of the opinion that too many agencies gloss over how stressful this industry is, but don't take accountability for the casualties of the industry. Many agency employees are struggling with the pressure of their workload. Many feel unseen and unheard when they ask for help. Many are afraid to be seen as too weak to handle the pace of agency life.



#SheSays: It's okay not to be okay

Juanita Pienaar 30 Aug 2019



If you're an agency boss reading this, check in with your employees today. Ask if anyone has trouble sleeping, or feels bullied, or works in anxiety and fear, and find a way to help them. Don't do it only because it's World Mental Health Day; do it because it's about time.

ABOUT KHUTHALANI KHUMALO

Khuthalani is a communications strategist, voice over artist, freelancer, proof reader, self-proclaimed CANVA-guru.

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