

Overworking - killing me softly with this work

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By Dr Brighton Chireka

I remember dosing off as I was suturing a wound of a patient who had just been involved in a road traffic accident. I had been on call for 72 hours non stop as a Junior doctor and was exhausted. The patient I was suturing felt pity for me and even suggested that I stopped suturing her so that I could get some rest. That was back then and today the situation is still the same as we continue to overwork ourselves.

Overworking

We could not and cannot continue to work like this and we tried without success but should continue to highlight the toll of long hours on our health. According to many studies , working too much is not good for your body or mind. Most studies conclude that the greater the number of hours worked per year , the greater the likelihood of premature death and poor quality of life . Overwork doubles the risk of heart attack and stroke and significantly ups the risk of depression.

I am seriously concerned at the number of sudden death that are occurring in the Zimbabwean Diaspora Community. Sadly these people are young and heart disease seems to be the cause of these premature deaths. We need a study to look at why we are having a rise in sudden deaths. Whilst we are waiting for that study I saw it fit to look at our lifestyles and the results of similar studies carried out so far.

From a frying sauce pan into fire

Some years ago I decided to join the exodus to Unit K (UK) for a two week vacation. That two week vacation has turned up to be at least sixteen years in the UK. Before I came to UK I used to hear about how easy it was to work and save money for a better future in Zimbabwe. We were being told stories of people who had come to the UK for six months only and managed to change their lives. As with many stories the devil is in the detail as I soon realised when I came to the UK.

On arrival into the UK I was welcomed by my brother at the airport . My brother had taken a few days off to be with me before returning to his working routine. I soon found myself spending a month staying at home watching television. I felt bad that I was not working like " everyone" else that was in the UK. I was eager to join in so that I could earn some monies towards my future.

I found myself working as a health care assistant popularly known as BBC (British Bottom Cleaners) in a nursing home before I finished my medical registration exams with the General Medical Council. I was keen to work as many hours as I could so that I could earn enough money for personal use and be able to send some to my parents and siblings back in Zimbabwe.

Let me digress by looking at the working time regulations in the United Kingdom so that you will understand my personal story and also do something about your situation.

The working time regulation in the United Kingdom

You cannot work more than 48 hours a week on average - normally over 17 weeks. For those under 18 they cannot work more than 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week. If one is over 18, can choose to opt out of the 48-hour week.

Opting out of the 48 hour week

This option has resulted in many of us overworking ourselves as we are allowed to choose to work more than 48 hours. An employer can ask an employee to opt out but cannot sack or treat that employee unfairly for refusing to do so. An employee can opt out for a certain period or indefinitely. This must be voluntary and in writing. Some workers cannot opt out such as those in the airline industry or ship crew to just name a few.

Cancelling an opt out agreement

If after reading this article and you want to stop overworking yourself you can cancel your opt-out agreement whenever you want - even if it's part of your employment contract. You must give your employer at least 7 days' notice. You may have to give more notice (up to 3 months) if you have a written opt-out agreement.

Personal experience with overworking

I was a very "flexible worker" in that I did not mind the shift pattern and was available at short notice to cover shifts if colleagues reported sick for work. One week I worked for about 18 hours daily. I would do a night shift from 8pm to 8am and during handover in the morning, there was always at least one day staff member missing due to illness. I would be asked to help cover the shift resulting in me doing an extra "half shift" from 8am to 2pm. I would then use one of the empty rooms to sleep and be ready to start another shift at 8pm.

This went on for six days working eighteen hours daily. On the seventh day I then decided to go home to collect new set of clean clothes. I was so tired that I was even dosing whilst waiting for the train. I missed my destination twice as I found myself sleeping in the train. Eventually after a struggle I managed to get off at my destination and went home for a quick nap. I remember being awoken by my phone around midnight. It was workplace people calling me as I had not turned up for the night shift. I was so exhausted to even be able to open my eyes. I apologised and told the manager that I was not feeling well and she understood why I was in that state.

I have given a personal experience so that my readers realise that I am not making up the story or that I have heard of it at a social gathering. This is the tip of the iceberg and fortunately for me I managed to reduce my working hours. Me passing my medical registration exams meant that I could follow my medical career. The reduction in my working hours was short lived as I am now struggling with the need to earn more. I have to discipline myself otherwise you will soon be saying, "rest in peace Dr Chireka".

Reality in the United Kingdom

We work very long hours and in addition some of us have parental care making our weeks very arduous . We sometimes drink a lot of alcohol as coping mechanism but it is likely to aggravate rather than alleviate our problems.

Read my personal story with alcohol .

<http://docbeecee.co.uk/a-personal-story-about-drinking-alcohol/>

We sometimes do shift work with frequent changes of shift between early , late and even night work. The role of the pineal gland and circadian rhythms is very interesting but, constantly changing the pattern of waking and sleeping with frequent changes of shift upsets the functioning of the brain and endocrine system.

<http://docbeecee.co.uk/lets-talk-about-sleep-problems/>

What does other studies have to say?

A study reported in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine found that people who worked in excess of 60 hours a week , but few than 70 hours , increased their risk of developing coronary heart disease by 63% compared to those who worked lighter schedules. Those who worked over 80 hours a week increased their risk by a shocking 94% . This study was based on 8350 participants in Korean National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey who were followed over a 10 year period.

This study is worrying to me as I know that some of friends in our community are working these hours. When workers spend so much time in the office or nursing homes, they may not have time to cook at home and so grab meals on the go. I remember surviving on take away foods as I did not have time to cook. We know that when we overwork we hardly exercise and also that excess working is stressful. We become overworked and stressed which is not good for our health.

Other research links long hours on the job to increased depression, anxiety, and insomnia, as well as weight gain and higher divorce rates. This is also true in our communities marriages are not lasting that long resulting in many single mothers struggling to cope with small children and a demanding job.

A Japanese study of 238 clerical workers published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine found that employees who put in more than 60 hours a week had 15 times the rate of depression one to three years later, compared to their coworkers on more moderate schedules. A Kansas State University study of more than 12,000 participants also found increased depression among those who worked 50 or more hours weekly.

Benefits of working

I do not want people think that working is bad for their health. My message is that overworking is bad for our health . Studies have also found that those who work less hours like less than 30 hours a week actually have higher blood pressure and cholesterol levels than those who work between 31-60 hours.

It seems that staying at home without doing anything puts us too close to the fridge and the food cabinet. We may end up overeating without exercising as well . However some of these studies may not be 100 % true because some of the people stay at home due to ill health. This may mean that some of these people working less hours are already unwell and not that working less hours is making them ill. However in some it does as they do not eat healthy food, they smoke a lot and abuse alcohol .

In conclusion

Some governments and employers may not support healthy working schedules for employees so it's up to the employees to make sure that their health is not put at risk. Some people will work right through their vacation. This may lead to higher earnings but less time to spend enjoying it . We need to get the balance between work and life otherwise our family and health will suffer. If you're locked into a job that causes you stress and demands that you work excessive hours, at the least you need to make every effort to fit in exercise, eating well, and doing some form of mental activity such as meditation that de-stresses you. Remember you can reduce your working hours without losing your job.

The bottom line, according to these and many other studies, is that working too much generally isn't good for body or mind. The greater the number of hours worked per year, the greater the likelihood of premature death and poor quality of life as well as increasing the risk of developing heart attack , stroke and diabetes. Could it be one of the reasons why we are having high numbers of sudden death in our communities? I do not have the full answer but I am persuaded that overworking is part of the problem and the sooner we address it the better.

This article was compiled by **Dr Brighton Chireka** , who is a GP and a blogger based in Kent in the United Kingdom. Feel free to contact him at info@docbeecee.co.uk and you can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

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