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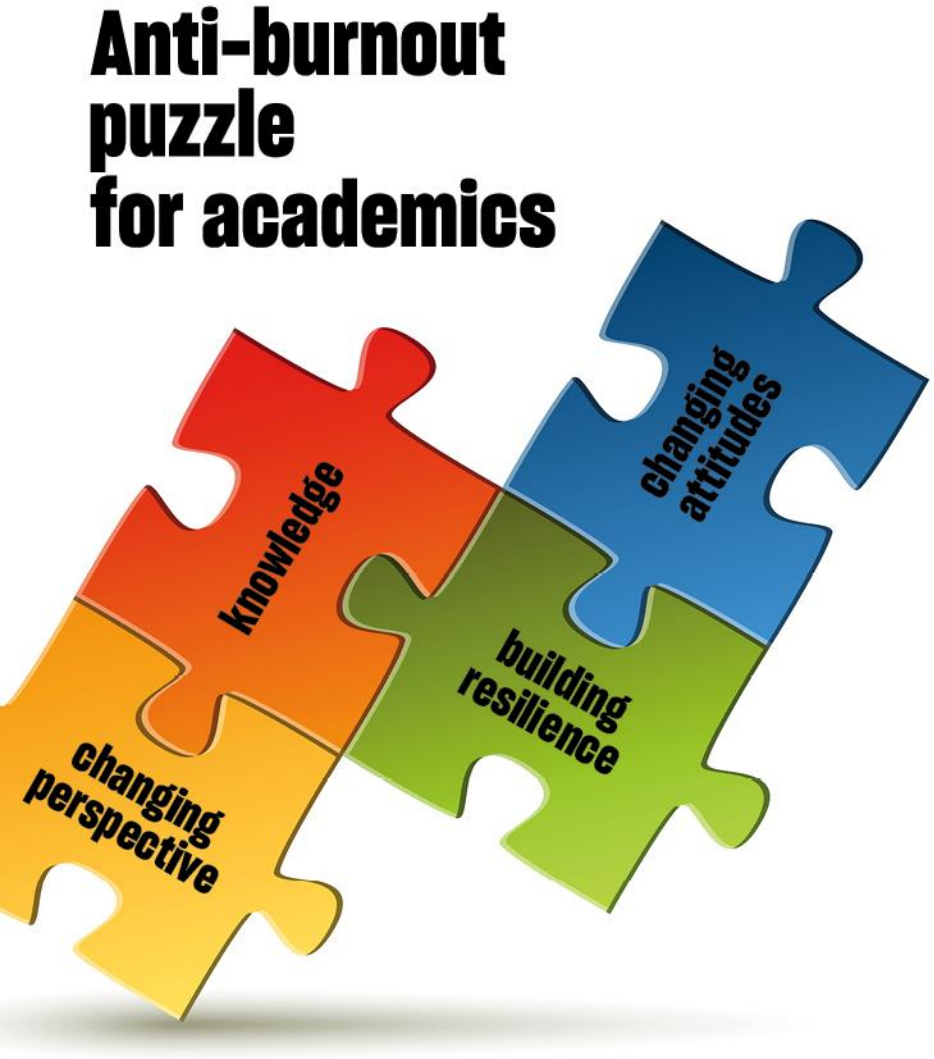

Stress and Occupational Burnout

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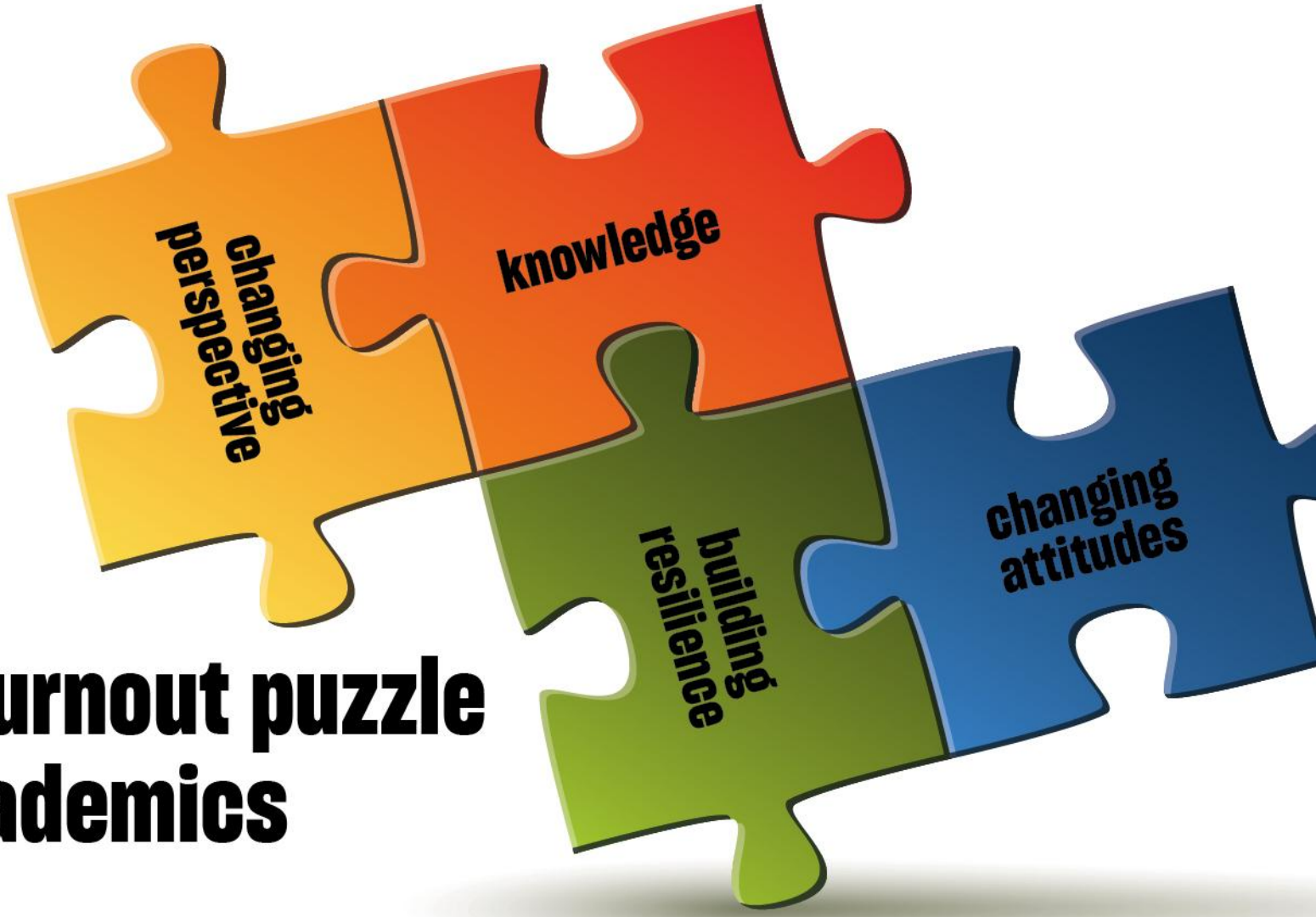

Anti-burnout puzzle for academics

Introduction

The academic environment is dynamic and highly competitive. Academic roles require continuous learning, teaching, research, and intense information processing. Irregular hours and constant interaction can be stressors. Stress is a key factor leading to occupational burnout (OB) and serious physical and mental health problems. Prevention focuses on understanding causes and building strategies to reduce stress in higher education.

Objectives

- Show the relationship between stress and professional health.
- Consider various causes and types of stress.
- Explain psychosomatic mechanisms of stress onset and course.
- Understand the impact of stress on health (nervous, endocrine, and immune systems).
- Understand the impact of stress on mental health problems.
- Measure stress using standard scales.
- Identify causes of stress at work and in the social environment.
- Know mechanisms for preventing stress in the workplace.
- Apply effective strategies for preventing and reducing stress at work.

Expected Results

- Gain knowledge and skills for diagnosing and measuring stress.
- Identify workplace and social stressors.
- Develop self-management strategies to reduce negative impacts.

Methods

- Problem description;
- Brainstorming;
- Discussion;
- Graphical cause–effect analysis;
- Synthesis of solutions.

Workshop Methodology

- Groups are formed randomly across universities.
- Participants complete a brief stress self-assessment. Using flipcharts/large paper, groups formulate proposals and design a visual presentation.
- Each group presents its situation analysis and proposed solutions.

Group Tasks (I)

- Identify causes and types of stress in professional and social environments.
- Measure the level of stress using a standard questionnaire.
- Depict a 5-year psycho-emotional/physical trajectory from –5 (very bad) to +5 (very good).

Group Tasks (II)

- Mark ups/downs/stable periods and events influencing the trajectory.
- Describe typical and individual stress situations at work and socially.
- Map the relationship between different types of stress and occupational burnout.
- Propose strategies to prevent and reduce stress at work and socially.

What Is Stress?

- Stress is any change causing physical, emotional, or mental strain—your body's response to anything requiring attention or action. It can contribute to frustration, worry, fatigue and burnout.

Types of Stress — By Impact

- Eustress (positive stress): enhances performance and focus (e.g., pre-race adrenaline, challenging deadlines).
- Distress (negative stress): overwhelms and leads to fatigue, exhaustion and ill health due to sustained pressures.

Types of Stress — By Duration

- Acute stress: short-term, common; not necessarily harmful though upsetting.
- Episodic acute stress: frequent short-term episodes; ongoing distress and overwhelm.
- Chronic stress: prolonged, seemingly inescapable stress with detrimental effects.

Types of Stress — By Origin

- Psychological/Emotional: sadness, irritability, guilt, worry; relationship/financial problems.
- Physical: illness, injury, intense exertion, hormonal imbalance, unhealthy diet/sleep.
- Cognitive: heavy mental demands, multitasking, distraction, overload.
- Social: public speaking, networking demands, lack of support, isolation.

Recognizing Stress — Cognitive & Emotional

- Cognitive: difficulty concentrating, worry, anxiety, memory problems.
- Emotional: anger, irritability, fearfulness, mood changes.

Recognizing Stress — Physical & Behavioral

- Physical: high blood pressure, headaches, sweaty hands, muscle tension, neck pain, weight changes, frequent infections, teeth grinding, digestive issues, cycle/sex-drive changes.
- Behavioral: poor self-care, reduced leisure, reliance on alcohol/drugs to cope.

Mechanisms — Psychological

- Threat/challenge perception (work pressures, expectations, negative thoughts).
- Activation of autonomic nervous system and HPA axis.
- Sympathetic arousal (epinephrine/norepinephrine) prepares for action.
- Cognitive narrowing and reduced executive function.

Mechanisms — Physiological

- Homeostatic disruption from physical stressors (injury, illness, sleep loss).
- Direct activation of autonomic and HPA pathways.
- Hormonal release: epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol.

Unified Stress Response

- Fight-or-flight response initiated by psychological or physiological stressors.
- Hormonal cascade raises heart rate, blood pressure; mobilizes energy.
- Chronic activation → adverse physiological and psychological outcomes.

Stress & Health — Key Points

- Acute stress can trigger intense autonomic reactions; in vulnerable individuals it may precipitate cardiac events. Chronic stress keeps the autonomic system overactive, damaging bodily systems and worsening mental health. Originally adaptive, fight-or-flight now activates in modern contexts where neither running nor fighting is appropriate.

Stress-Influenced Conditions

- Cancer; Chronic pain; Diabetes; Fatigue; Inflammatory diseases; Hair loss; Heart disease; Thyroid dysfunction;
- Obesity; Sexual dysfunction; Skin problems; Sleep disorders; Dental disease; Ulcers.

Self-Assessment — Stress Scale

- Use a brief job-related screening (e.g., Workplace Stress Scale™).
- Directions: rate how often statements describe how you feel at your current job.
- Share results in pairs/small groups; identify priority stressors to address.

Stress Solutions — Education & Assessment

- Educational media on stress mechanisms and management (short series).
- Validated self-assessments (e.g., Rosch Stress Profiler, Stress Mastery Questionnaire).
- Structured courses/guided practices (e.g., meditation, cognitive strategies).
- Ongoing resources (articles/podcasts) for reinforcement.

Stress Management Techniques

- Guided imagery; Meditation; Progressive muscle relaxation; Deep breathing; Walks;
- Social support; Hugs; Aromatherapy; Creativity; Leisure activities; Healthy diet;
- Exercise; Yoga; Gratitude; Positive self-talk; Evaluate priorities; Eliminate stressors; Supplements (prudently).

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