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# CONFESSIONS OF A WORKAHOLIC

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AND AVOID BURNOUT



# CONFESSIONS OF A WORKAHOLIC

The events industry is a people business, so why do we neglect self-care?

**Lauren Arena** investigates the realities of work in this intensely demanding sector and why we need to start a conversation about mental health and wellbeing.

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**I**t's networking hour at the latest industry conference. You spot a familiar face across the room, and before you can grab another glass of wine, they ask: "Hi, how are you?" Your response, as always, is: "Great", "very busy", "business is good". But, strained eyes and clenched teeth tell a different story.

Behind the curtain, the realities of working with constant deadlines, excessive travel, and demanding clients can have serious health implications. Prolonged periods of stress can induce heart disease, back pain and headaches. Psychological implications include anxiety and depression.

The role of 'event coordinator' is continually ranked among the top five most stressful jobs according to CareerCast — and that's only after enlisted military personnel, firefighter, airline pilot and police officer, all with potential for severe injury. In a 2017 Stress Matters survey of 200 event professionals in

the UK, 71 per cent believed their colleagues were suffering from stress, with workload the biggest contributor. Forty-six per cent of event planners also stated they used alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to cope with stress, and 71 per cent experienced sleep problems.

While similar industry-specific research is currently lacking in Asia, the 2017 *Healthiest Workplace* report by AIA Vitality, which surveyed 10,001 workers in Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, revealed stress, sleep deprivation and physical inactivity are common issues across the region (see p.26 for more details).

For event planners, sleepless nights and stress-fuelled days are an ongoing challenge; and in Asia, where workplace culture remains largely conservative, many suffer in silence.

Here, five event professionals from across the Asia-Pacific region candidly share their stories and how they harness stress to not only survive, but thrive in this industry.

## Common factors of workplace stress



### Demands

Workload, work patterns and the work environment.



### Control

How much say do you have over the way you work?



### Support

Encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by management and colleagues.



### Relationships

Promoting positive work to avoid conflict and deal with unacceptable behaviour.



### Role

Understanding your role and responsibility within the organisation.



### Change

How is organisational change managed and communicated?

Source: Health and Safety Executive

## “Stress is like a virus — it can harm or help you”

**ERICA SEO,**  
Head of sales APAC, Pacific World



Erica Seo has worked in event sales for more than a decade and, as head of sales for Pacific World in APAC, her job requires regular travel and networking.

“People always say how envious they are of my life and my job — they see me wining and dining, and travelling across the region (and yes, this is a great part of my job) — but this comes at a cost.

“There are countless hours I put in behind the scenes, sleepless nights, and the never-ending workload that haunts me constantly. As a result, I occasionally get into a routine to isolate myself from everything, including my own social life.”

With events being focused on human connection, Seo spends a lot of time socialising with clients, business partners and various stakeholders — many of whom have become friends. But she also sees the downside.

“I spend so much time with ‘industry friends’ that this has become my social circle. This is a cause of anxiety because if I were to leave the industry, my social network would fall apart.”

With her hectic travel schedule, Seo admits she finds it difficult to balance work and life, but has learnt to accept stress as part of her daily routine. She now looks to harness eustress and is conscious of when this escalates into negative emotion.

“I try to channel my stress into positive energy and when positive stress brings adrenaline, I become more productive and tend to enjoy that state of mind. But when the workload builds and I can’t see any progress, stress becomes negative and leads to anxiety and depression. At this point, I re-direct my focus. For me, late-night baking and running 10km on the treadmill help to clear my mind and release stress.”

She insists: “It’s important to find your own way to turn negative emotion to positive stress.

“Treat stress as a cure for negative energy — just like a virus, stress can either harm or help you.”

## “Adrenal fatigue affects most event professionals”

**STUART KATZEN**  
Owner & creative director, Eventify



After a long and successful career in Australia’s entertainment and live events industry, Stuart Katzen remains as passionate as ever, but admits that success in events doesn’t come without sacrifice.

“Time spent away from family and friends is never recouped and, over the years, what starts out as excitement and adrenal-charged fun, becomes draining, stressful and ends in eternal fatigue. On the flip side, it’s an industry with some amazingly talented people where most participants love what they do — you have to, to keep doing it,” he says.

“As the owner of a boutique agency, my biggest challenge is personal stress and adrenal fatigue — this affects most event professionals at some point, whether they realise it or not.

“As a young person in the industry, I loved the rush and adrenalin of the event; the long hours. Building the event was exciting and I relished the high. The come down, post event was always tough, but there was always the next one to get me going. The result was a continuous adrenalin roller coaster, which ended with an inevitable crash at the end of each year. As I got older, my year-end recovery took longer and the recoup period became less effective.

“I had to come to terms with the fact that my body and mind could not keep that up. I had to reevaluate my work life and how I lived it.”

Katzen then restructured his business and also decided to pursue his long-time passion for cooking.

“I took a six-week job as a pasta chef at a small Italian restaurant in Sydney... four years later, I’m still cooking pasta two nights a week. I turn off my phone, step into the kitchen and from 3pm–9pm I read dockets and put pasta on plates. It’s fast and furious and at the end of each night I feel like I’ve run a race; I feel lighter and relaxed. It’s my time, my way of switching off, my meditation.”



## “Good is never enough. You have to be brilliant”

**DAMION BREUST**  
CEO, Directions Conference and  
Incentive Management



After more than 25 years working in the business events industry across APAC (including almost 10 years leading event marketing and corporate relations for Barclays investment bank in Singapore), Damion Breust has seen it all. He contends that heightened competition in APAC is putting additional pressure on event professionals.

“The companies we deal with know that they have to be exceptional to succeed in this market, and they expect the same standards from us when we plan events. That puts a lot of pressure on us at all stages of the process, from the first concept discussion to the final delivery of the event. It means we have to get every detail right — and then make every detail even better. In a demanding market like Asia Pacific, good is never enough; only brilliant will do.”

He adds: “To deliver at that level, you really need two things — passion and creativity — supported by a relentless drive. This is where we need to strike the right balance and ensure our drive doesn’t make us flat.”

Breust says this ‘work hard, play hard’ approach can have negative implications on staff wellbeing — and managers need to be aware.

“This is an industry where you can burn out easily, and if that happens, your creativity and passion start to fade. It’s game over.

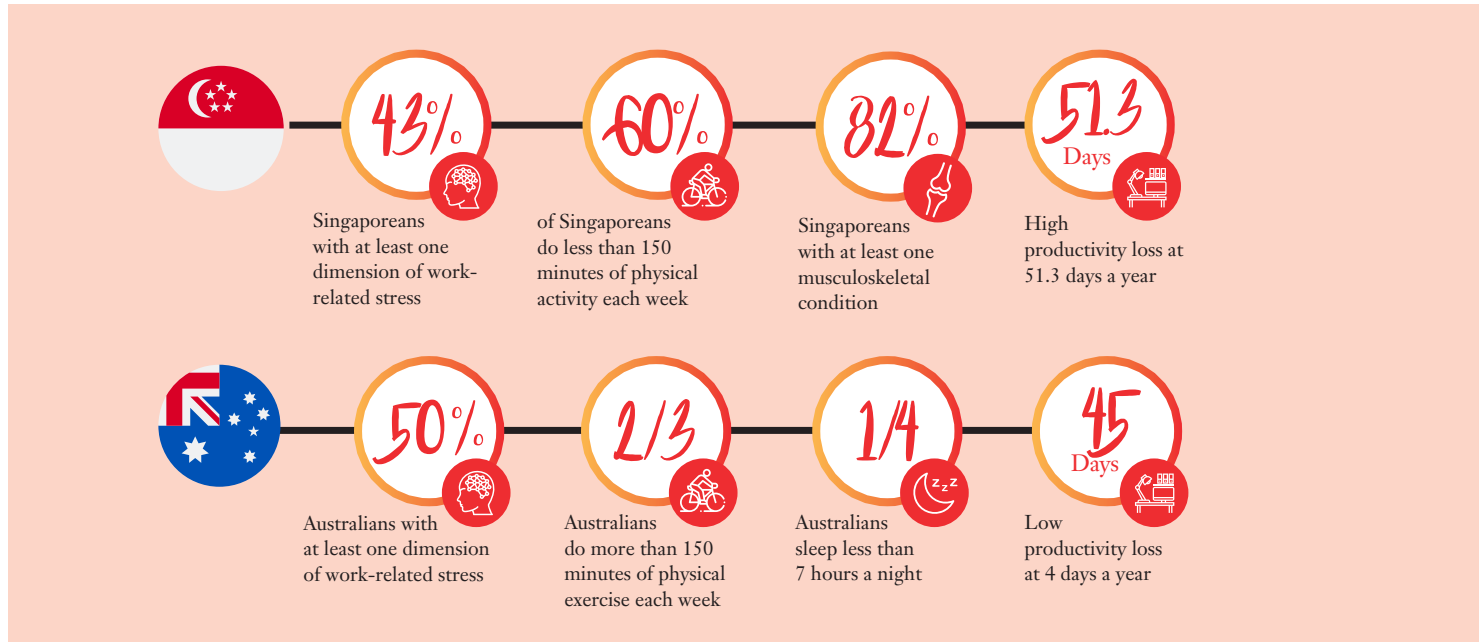
“As head of the agency, my role is to ensure that the talented and motivated people on the team manage the pressure. We have honest conversations and I try to create an environment where people feel it is OK to openly discuss the way they feel. The people I work with need to have private lives and personal time — I must respect and protect that.

“Personally, I handle the pressure by exercising, taking long walks to clear my mind, and always trying to stay one step ahead of the work, so I am acting rather than reacting. But even so, this industry can be a high-wire act; without balance, you fall.”



**High-wire act...** In a demanding market like Asia Pacific, event planners must have passion and creativity, supported by relentless drive.

# Employee health and wellbeing in Asia



**“Always reach out if you need support”**

**MARTIN ENAULT**  
CEO APAC, C2 International\*

The old adage ‘if you love what you do, then you’ll never work a day in your life’ rings true for Martin Enault, who has more than 18 years’ experience in entrepreneurship and event.

He says tapping into your passion (and the passion of your employees) is key to survival.

“In the events industry, we very quickly learn that being ‘values-driven’ is the best way to survive the potentially high-stress work environment,” Enault says. “The success of C2 is that our people are inspired to be a part of a movement that is a catalyst for change.”

Enault is also chairman of mental health advocacy group, Revivre (based in Canada), and regularly shares his personal journey with anxiety and depression, and how it has shaped his success.

“It took many years to realise how much anxiety and depression affected me. I started having panic attacks more and more frequently, and having episodes where all I wanted was to disappear from the world, and not see anyone. What truly changed my life was when I realised that instead of trying to treat my anxiety and depression, I could change

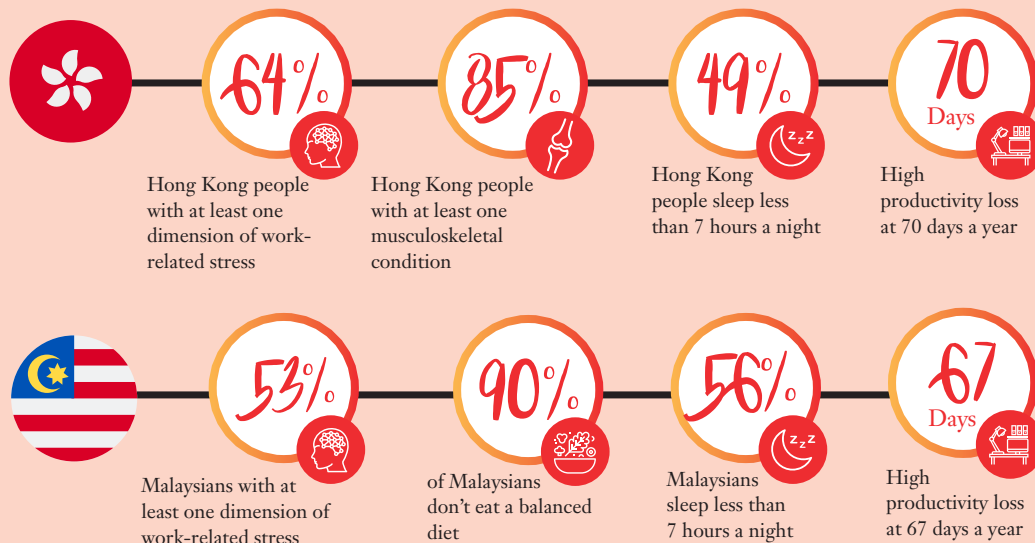
my state of mind by being conscious of the physical manifestations and mental effects.”

Enault says the ability to read warning signs and recognise triggers has helped him to embrace mental health as a part of his “day-to-day personal management”.

“I learned about the effect of food on depression and anxiety. I discovered the kind of environments to avoid. I recognised the early warning signs of panic attacks... This new understanding brought me a new way of seeing the world. For example, I can associate how anxious someone makes me feel, with how likely I am to achieve a business deal or friendship with that person. The sensitivity that accompanies anxiety and depression can actually be an acute advantage in reading relationships and potential encounters.”

He adds: “The important learnings are to speak out, to find the tools to manage your life in a way that works for you, and to always reach out if you feel like you need support.”

*\*Enault stepped down from this position in mid-August.*



Source: The Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality 2017

## “Don’t lose yourself amid the chaos”

**MARINE DEBATTE**  
Head of events APJ/China, BI Worldwide



As a working mum, Marine Debatte says setting priorities and recognising the importance of rest is crucial. She likens the physical and mental strains of executing large-scale projects to pregnancy.

“We run an annual four-day programme for a client in the automobile industry. It includes up to 600 delegates from 20 countries — it’s a huge project and takes nine months to plan. Every year when we win the tender, there is excitement and joy, then the workload gets heavier and you lose sleep. When the big delivery day arrives, it’s painful, but by the end you’re so proud with what you have achieved.

“After delivery, however, you need time to recover. In the events industry, there is never enough recovery time, and often you’re juggling multiple pregnancies at any one time.”

To avoid burnout, Debatte says everyone needs a strong support system. “We have this image of ‘Wonder Woman’ at home and in the office, but we don’t do it alone. I have a great support system at home and at work, where my boss and my team allow me to be flexible and trust me to do my job. Mutual trust and

respect are so important. But in agency life, that is not always the case, especially in Asia.”

Debatte, who has worked in the events industry across Asia for more than 10 years, says entrenched cultural norms often inhibit employees from asking for help.

“Cultural traditions in many Asian countries often focus on community and family, so there is no room for the individual and, therefore, not a lot of self-awareness,” she says.

“It’s important to take time for yourself. As event planners (and women) we wear so many hats, but we only have one head. Self-awareness, self-respect and self-love are crucial. You don’t want to lose yourself amid the chaos. There is not enough self-care in Asia.”

Debatte says the inability to disconnect is another challenge that is magnified in Asia.

“There’s no set workflow pattern in Asia, where you can gear up for busy periods and rest during the festive season. Projects always pop up that disrupt the flow and if you work in a regional role, there is no downtime — you’re constantly juggling different rhythms.”



### Holistic approach to mental health

Business leaders and associations within the events industry need to adopt a proactive approach to dealing with mental health.

C2's Enault says companies must be proactive in educating their leadership teams about the benefits of addressing mental health at work. "By promoting wellness, listening to employees and creating outcomes through systemic change, we are able to use positive education to encourage self-management of mental health. Correct management also represents a significant opportunity to address productivity and maintain talent."

Eventify's Katzen says business owners can begin by making small changes. "We insisted on staff not eating at desks, taking a full hour for lunch and taking regular 'movement' and coffee breaks. We also engendered an atmosphere of family and held regular performance reviews as a platform for two-way communication with staff."

Brisbane-based leadership coach, Belinda Brosnan, says high-performing teams require 'psychological safety' in the workplace.

"The key for leaders is to create an environment that gives equal voice to everyone and allows people to speak up without the fear of being shut-down and ridiculed. This also requires leaders who are adept at asking questions and listening deeply — the ability to ask questions and build trust through courageous and caring conversations is key to an emotionally healthy workplace."

She says it's important to understand the basic neuroscience of the brain during periods of extended stress. "Our field of vision narrows and our thinking becomes binary — we start to believe that only two options exist ahead (e.g. I can leave my job, or I can stay)."







## World Mental Health Day

World Mental Health Day 2018 is on 10 October. Join us in raising awareness about mental health in the events industry as we launch the **#Eventprofscare** initiative to encourage event professionals in Asia to have open conversations about stress, anxiety and depression in the workplace.

Join the conversation **#Eventprofscare**  
**#worldmentalhealthday**

In the UK, workplace health and safety regulator Health and Safety Executive (HSE) offers step-by-step advice on how to implement stress management procedures in the workplace, and focuses on six key areas that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing (see common factors on p.23).

Meanwhile, advocacy groups like Mind HK and Silver Ribbon Singapore run regular mental health awareness workshops, events, and Mental Health First Aid training courses in an effort to destigmatise mental health and facilitate greater understanding among the local community.

Silver Ribbon Singapore is hosting the first **Global Summit for Mental Health Advocates** in October, which will serve as platform to connect all stakeholders — business, government agencies, mental health professionals, and caregivers — to share knowledge and promote an integrated approach to mental health awareness.

But there is still much work to be done. “Too many people are still afraid to talk openly about mental health,” Enault says. “I hope more voices will join the call to bring mental health out into the open and to recognise the far-reaching evidence of how many people are affected.

“I look forward to a day when we perceive suffering from depression as no more shameful than breaking a leg. But for now, in the events industry, the show must go on.” ■

## Work-life balance

High-performing teams require ‘psychological safety’ in the workplace, where leaders are proactive in dealing with mental health.