



### **Prioritizing Mental Well-Being Sustainability**

by Dr Praveena Nair A/P Sivasankaran

Dr Praveena is currently an Observer Member of Engineering Education Technical Division (E2TD) and a senior lecturer at the School of Engineering, Faculty of Innovation & Technology, Taylor's University.

Mental health is a common concern within the engineering industry. A recent survey revealed that engineering students and professionals are experiencing mental health issues and symptoms related to stress, anxiety, and depression at an alarming rate. The overwhelming pressure of meeting deadlines, balancing extracurricular activities, and dealing with difficult clients can all contribute to the deterioration in mental health experienced by engineers.

According to a 2018 Swinburne University study, 16.6% of Australian engineers suffer from depression in general, with the rate being higher at 25% among construction, mining, and utility workers. Also, individuals in certain industries experience around 2.5 times more emotional distress than the general population, with 45% meeting the criteria to be considered as "burned out". This number is probably even higher due to the unforeseeable changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A report by EqualEngineers in October 2019, shows 37.2% of engineers in the UK said their mental health was either "fair" or "poor". This is a problem that is seen around the world. The survey revealed that more than 61% of engineers reported suffering from physical or emotional problems which disrupted their usual social activities. Additionally, 22% had to take time off work because of their mental health, and 89% assumed that the disability was invisible to others. The most alarming statistic was that 22.5% of engineers had contemplated suicide or self-harm, with men at an even higher risk of 3.5 times.

Transforming the outlook of the field from one of high-pressure to a model of well-being could have extensive effects. How might appeals to engineering candidates become different? What would the general perception be about engineers? Other areas have experienced similar dilemmas with overwork and burnout and came up with solutions to address them. The medical field have successively deployed methods to encourage a healthy environment due to the occurrence of continuous fatigue and distress.

Apart from reinforcing health, what else must be done to devalue the sense that being under enormous strain is a socially recognized definition in engineering or necessary for success as shown by the survey done by Godfrey and Parker? They studied the normality of engineering education in 2010. They saw that many teacher-student conversations included the belief that "fatigue" was an index of excellence - if someone was able to withstand challenging tasks, it was viewed as a validation of value and status.

**Workload Balance Is Key**

Engineering requires intense problem-solving skills, along with a high level of creativity to create solutions for complex challenges. However, it's important for engineers to strike the right balance between workloads and leisure time. When this balance is not achieved, negative thoughts such as low self-esteem or guilt might arise from having too much or too little work. This can increase feelings of stress and anxiety which can lead to further deterioration in mental health if left unchecked.

### **Stigma around Seeking Professional Help**

One possible reason why mental health issues are common in the engineering sector may be due to the stigma around seeking professional help for these conditions. It is hassle-free to deal with their own problems than reaching out for advice and support. Societal perception can be a major factor. Anxiety among engineers often arises when they fail to finish tasks on time or when they make mistakes while working on projects – this sense of failure can be internalized leading them to become even more anxious about future tasks or decisions they make.

### **Having Multiple Hats to Wear**

In today's world, an engineer has various roles within an organization: being a colleague, innovator, leader and mentor are just some examples on top of their normal job duties that require dedication at every step – all while handling personal commitments as well. As engineers switch between different contexts throughout their day (work/home/other), it takes a toll on them mentally which no amount of activity outside work can replenish completely – leading many into experiencing deteriorated mental health states over time.

### **Setting Goals That Are Realistic**

It's essential for engineers to set realistic goals that are achievable rather than expectations that are too lofty in nature as this will lead towards frustration and stress very quickly thereby damaging their overall mental state. If engineers find themselves constantly failing in achieving goals this could also bring down their motivation levels which should be avoided by setting achievable targets from day one itself. By this, expectations are clear from the start of each project they take on board.

### **Lack of Support from Management**

Not receiving recognition nor do any worthy advancements; will lead towards feeling neglected & unworthy leaving some distressed. Knowing there's no viable form of upward career growth are among several other factors that can result in deteriorating mental state over time.

To address these issues, we have to start by acknowledging that mental wellbeing is an indispensable element and should be addressed as such. We ought to also understand that the engineering profession is not invulnerable to psychological challenges and it is essential to shape an atmosphere where engineers feel comfortable raising their mental health concerns. This could include organizing access to psychological well-being support, forming a secure area for open conversation regarding mental health, and increasing awareness. Here are some tips for promoting good mental health for engineers.

### **Seek Professional Help When Problems Persist**

If you experience persistent symptoms such as depression, anxiety or difficulty concentrating on tasks, it is important to seek professional help from a doctor or psychologist. Talking with a counselor can be beneficial as they are able to provide both advice and solutions.

### **Manage Stress Effectively**

Simple methods include taking regular breaks throughout the day and engaging in activities such as yoga or meditation practices to slow down and refocus regularly. Having honest conversations with managers about workloads and expectations can also reduce stress levels.

### **Find an Effective Work-Life Balance**

It's not uncommon for engineers to work 10-hour days or longer in front of their laptops without much physical activity involved; therefore, living an active lifestyle is key to promoting healthy mental wellbeing beyond just working hours. Making exercise part of your daily routine gives you more energy throughout the day. Make it a priority to get active such as running or biking several times per week; this will help clear your head during stressful times at work. Pick up hobbies that help contribute positively towards overall wellbeing.

### **Talk About Mental Health Openly With Colleagues**

Opening up about concerns with coworkers about mental health has been found to improve individual engagement levels by reducing feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, reaching out directly for support from colleagues can also prove extremely valuable in times when seeking external help isn't feasible.

Being able to recognize symptoms associated with poor mental health is crucial; seek professional help if needed because this could help restore balance within before it gets out of hand!

Lastly, do understand that mental health isn't a one-size-fit-all issue. Different individuals have diverse necessities. Be ready for exploring novel methods of aiding engineers' mental health, like providing adaptable hours of work, procuring approaches to counselling sessions, or having mentorship programs. This ensures that engineers are able to thrive while addressing their state of mental well-being.