MultiTeam SOLUTIONS



Stress & Burnout in Cybersecurity

The Risk of a Thousand Papercuts

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Introduction

> **"Burnout, for me, is when I no longer have the motivation to continue doing my job well."**



A single papercut is seemingly insignificant on its own– a small, briefly painful experience that you move past easily. Now imagine if each one never healed and more accumulated over time, hundreds of them. Suddenly, what started as a tiny inconvenience transforms into a significant wound that demands serious attention– this represents the human-centred problem we see with stress and burnout in cybersecurity.

The papercuts can come from a variety of sources, such as:

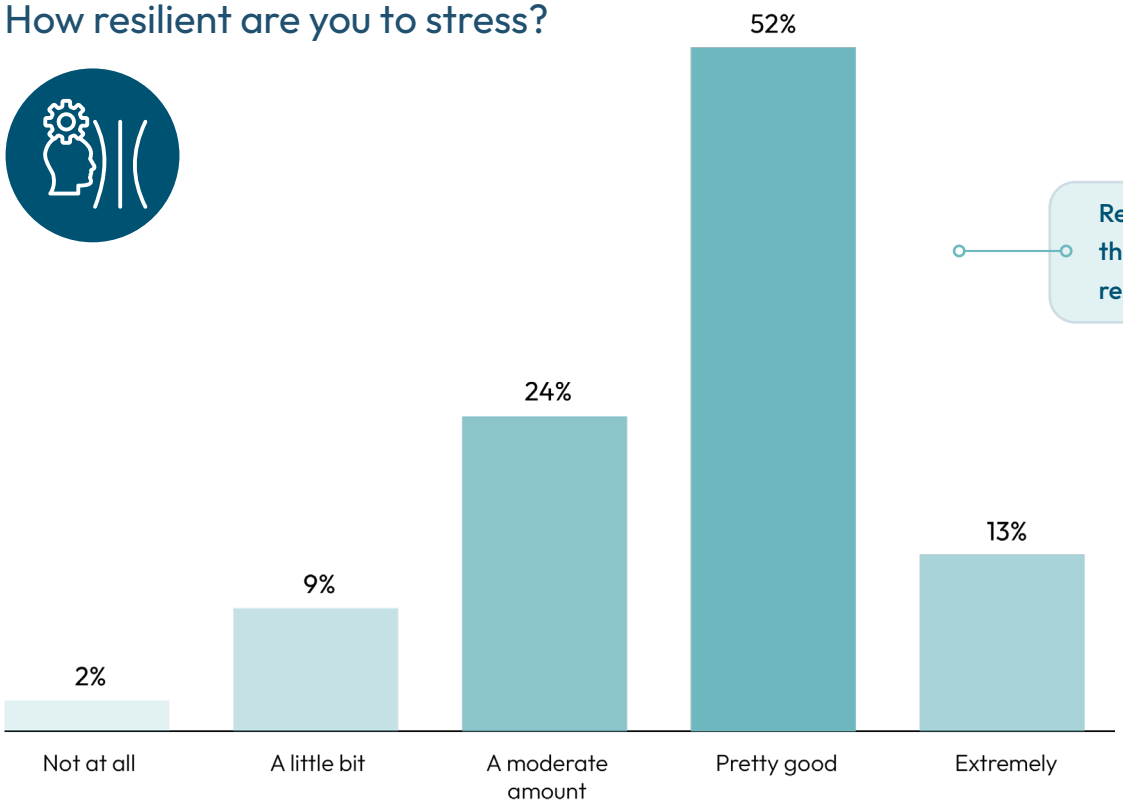
- Trying to maintain constant alertness
- Handling false positives
- Highly repetitive tasks
- Pressure to keep up with the constantly changing landscape and often feeling behind the curve
- Being regularly on-call (interfering with work-life balance)
- Not being recognized for effort and contributions
- Needing to constantly adhere to new policies and regulations

Then there are the critical incidents (e.g., breaches, attacks), which account for much more than a single papercut.

We heard from **173 cybersecurity professionals** at Black Hat Europe in December 2023. Most respondents indicated that they see themselves as being **quite resilient to stress.**

Survey data from 173 Black Hat Europe attendees

How resilient are you to stress?



Respondents saw themselves as being quite resilient to stress.

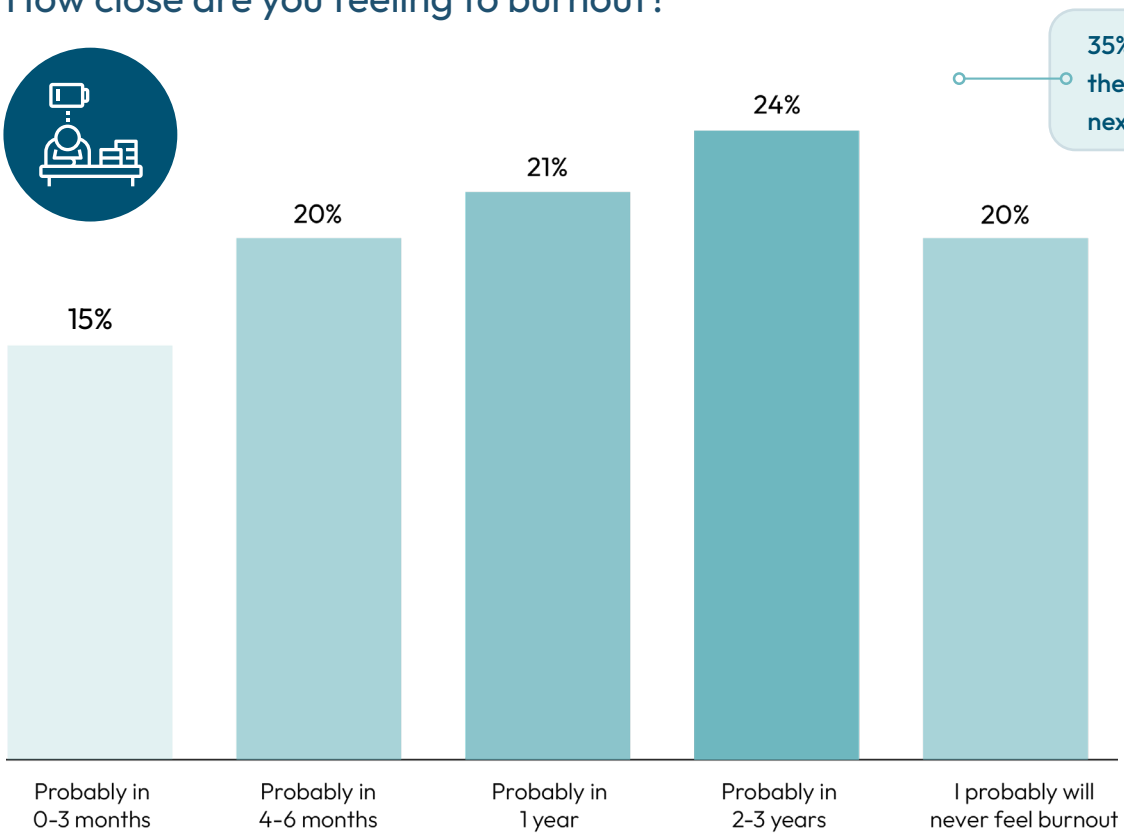
This, however, seems to be resilience to single papercuts. Do they have resilience to accumulating papercuts? The data suggests they do not.

+50%



Despite their self-perceived resilience, more than 50% of those same respondents said that within the next year (or sooner) they are going to reach a point of burnout, which they generally defined as **"lacking the motivation to do their job effectively"** and, in many cases, that burnout is paired with a plan to leave their organisation.

How close are you feeling to burnout?



This includes 35% of respondents who are going to reach burnout in the next 6 months. No matter how resilient you think you are, the papercuts add up.

More broadly, each person leaving a team (and an organisation) is one big papercut for everyone. Overall, 80% of respondents indicated they'll hit burnout in the next 3 years or less.

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And then, each of those people who are already burned out, still trying to heal from many papercuts, go and join the cybersecurity team at a different organisation. This is how the unavoidable risk, the accumulation of too many papercuts, pervades the industry, and it will continue to do so if nothing changes about how we support cybersecurity professionals.

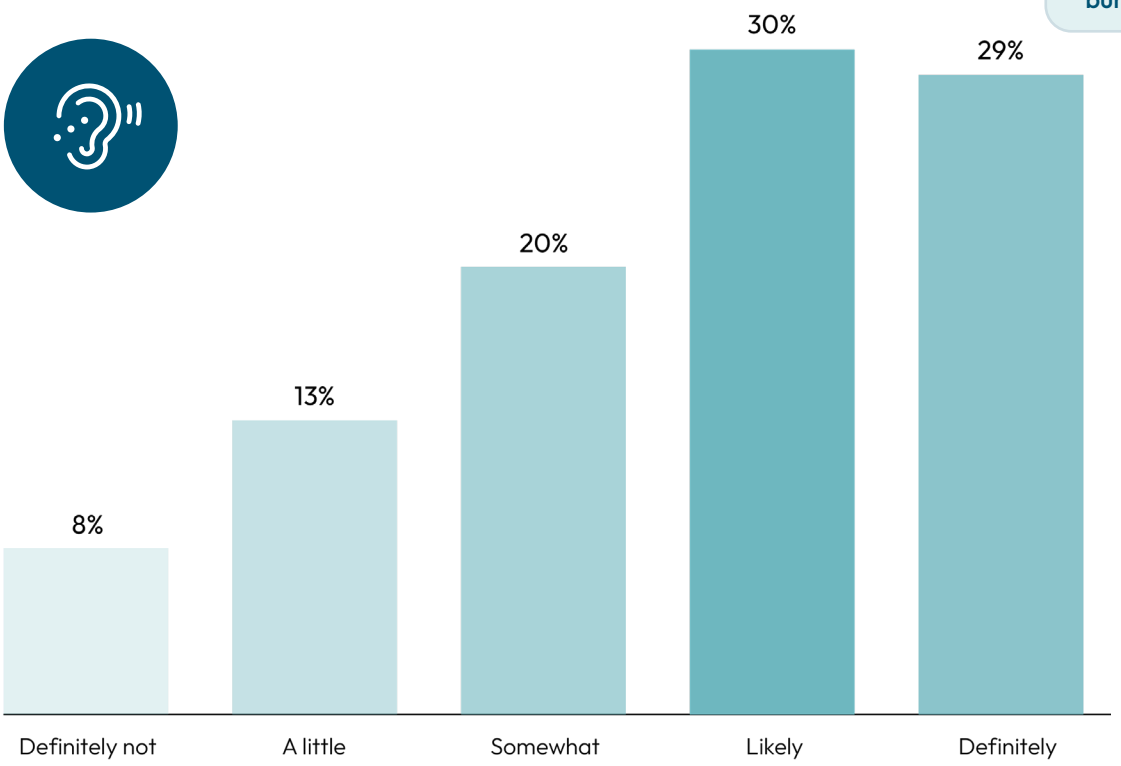
Who can help treat the papercuts?

First Responders

The first responders for papercuts are direct supervisors (e.g., team leads). Survey respondents indicated that supervisors are very likely going to be hearing from their team members about their papercuts:

If you were feeling burnout, how comfortable would you be to tell your supervisors?

79% of respondents indicated they are at least somewhat comortable sharing about burnout with their supervisors



And the fact that team members will readily share with their supervisors is a very positive sign.

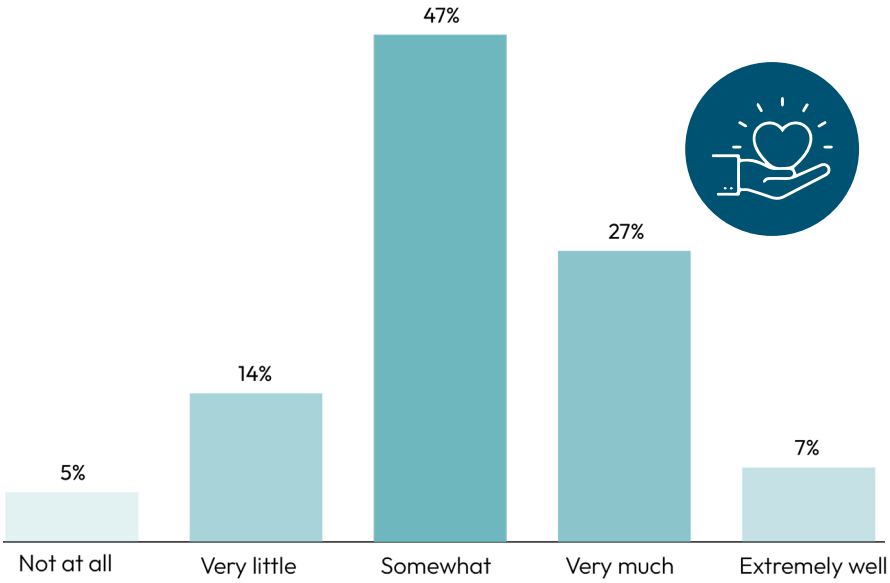
Yet, most supervisors in cybersecurity have not been trained on the proper skills for responding to and supporting the social-emotional needs of their people, AND, supervisors are also accumulating their own papercuts.

If supervisors don't know, or can't give, a supportive response, then salt is added to the wounds—not feeling heard, not feeling valued, not having anything change about the situation that is causing the stress—and the papercuts never heal, which ultimately results in burnout.

Second Responders

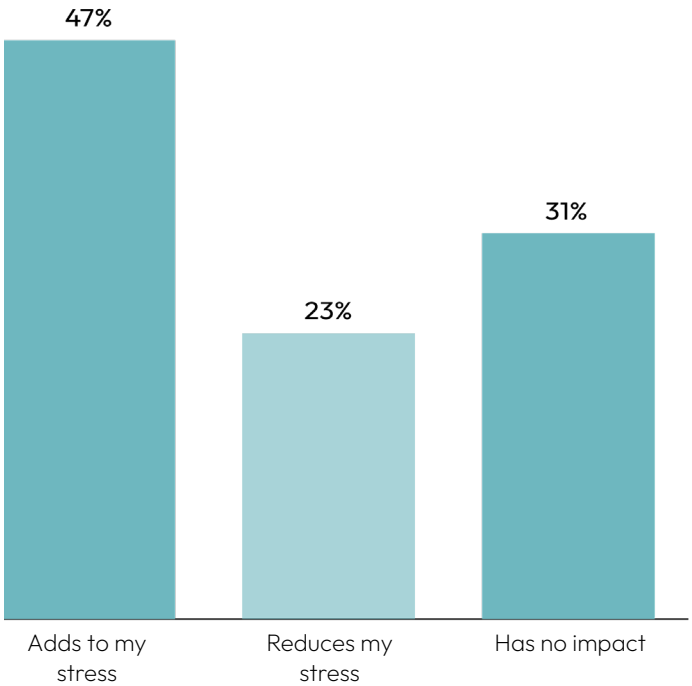
The second responders, those supporting first responders, are Senior Level Management (SLM), and survey respondents felt like SLM has at least some understanding of their stress:

To what extent does Senior Level Management (SLM) understand your stress?



81% of respondents indicated SLM at least somewhat understands their stress

What impact does SLM have on your stress?



*percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding

Yet, nearly 50% of respondents indicated SLM adds to their stress

Yet, **only 23%** indicated that SLM actively works to reduce their stress, while **nearly 50% indicated SLM**, despite their awareness, **adds to their stress**.

Similar to supervisors, most SLM in cybersecurity have not been trained on the proper skills for responding to and supporting the social-emotional needs of their people, AND, they are also accumulating their own papercuts–likely getting similar added stressors from their Board members.

Tending to the Papercuts

So that you don't overwhelm the infirmary



Particularly, think about how to train supervisors (i.e., first responders) on these soft skills

Being realistic, the process of strengthening the responses to address papercuts must be built around incremental shifts rather than radical change. We recommend focusing on the following 5 Impact Areas, and taking a strengths-based approach by giving priority to the area that is already the strongest.

1

STRENGTHENING INTERPERSONAL CONNECTIONS BUILT ON AUTHENTICITY

Fostering an environment where genuine communication and vulnerability are valued. Supervisors and SLM can lead by example, sharing their own experiences authentically and encouraging employees to do the same.

2

REPLACING JUDGMENT WITH CURIOSITY

Supervisors and SLM can emphasize the importance of open-mindedness and learning by reframing challenges, mistakes, and failures as opportunities for individual and collective learning. This shifts the focus from criticism more toward understanding.

3

PROVIDING FEEDBACK WITH A SUPPORTIVE, GROWTH MINDSET

First, identifying when feedback is evaluative vs. developmental. Then, especially for the developmental feedback, offering both positive and constructive criticism with an emphasis on growth and learning. Supervisors and SLM can also work to approach the provision of feedback from more of a coaching and mentoring standpoint.

4

ACTIVELY LISTENING

Not only having supervisors and SLM hear the words being shared, but also share back what they heard to ensure proper understanding and align perspectives. Active listening also includes maintaining eye contact and non-verbal behavior that indicates genuine interest.

5

PROMOTING SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Encouraging team members to prioritize self-care and seek assistance when needed. Supervisors and SLM can lead by normalizing discussions around stress and mental health while also encouraging team members to openly communicate their needs. Initiatives such as wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, and designated spaces for relaxation demonstrate a commitment to employees' well-being.

How to Heal and Prevent the Papercuts?

We can help!

Become part of the Mental Health in Cyber Security (MHinCS) community

Join the MHinCS LinkedIn Group
(https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12989900/)

Join an MHinCS monthly Community of Practice virtual conversation
(email rebecca@mhincs-foundation.org for more information)

Create a MHinCS Charter for your organisation
(email charter@mhincs-foundation.org for more information)

Team up with QA Ltd. & MultiTeam Solutions

Conduct a free organisational assessment around employee well-being and leadership capacity.

Register by emailing Dr. Daniel Shore at Daniel@MultiTeam.solutions.

Start training leaders and teams in your organisation

Learn about training opportunities and course options from QA Ltd. by visiting https://tinyurl.com/ReduceStressAndBurnoutWithQA

MultiTeam Solutions' Credentials

An NCSC Assured Program in the Human Factors knowledge area

UK partners with QA Ltd.

$3mil and 56,000 hours of research funded by the US and European Governments

Grounded in social-behavioral science

Prior Funding Partner-Clients

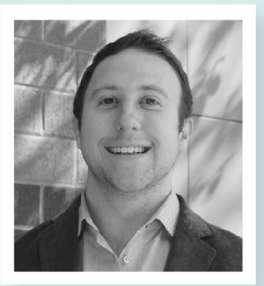
US Government

Dutch Government

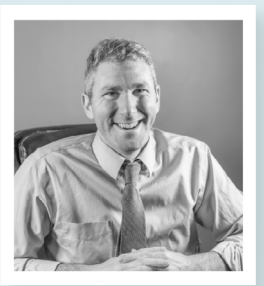
Swedish Government

About the Subject Matter Experts

DR. DANIEL SHORE has a PhD in Workplace Psychology and specialises in building connectivity within and between cybersecurity teams. Dr. Shore's 5 years of US and European Government-funded research on CSIRTs and SOCs are the foundation for his consulting around team dynamics, organisational culture, and leadership development that spans a decade of working with cybersecurity teams.



ZAC BROOMFIELD is devoted to helping teams and multi-team systems enhance communication skills, collaboration, and workplace performance. With a decade of experience working with diverse professionals, designing training curricula, and coaching, Zac has immersed himself in understanding how people from different backgrounds perceive the world, interpret challenges, and find solutions.



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Please reach out if we can support you!

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