

Stress bragging may make you seem less competent, less likable at work

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Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

While work is occasionally stressful for everyone, some people wear stress as a badge of honor. They're taking one for the team and want to tell you all about it.

New research from the University of Georgia Terry College of Business found people who brag about their stress levels are seen as less competent and less likable by their co-workers. The study is [published](#) in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

"This is a behavior we've all seen, and we all might be guilty of at some point," said Jessica Rodell, lead author of the study and a professor of management in UGA's Terry College of Business. "When I was wondering about why people do this, I thought maybe we are talking about our stress because we want to prove we're good enough. We found out that often backfires."

In an initial survey, 360 participants compared statements from imaginary co-workers who just returned from a conference. Participants rated their imaginary co-worker on likability, competence and the likelihood they would help the co-worker at work.

In the survey, the stress-bragging colleague described the conference as "just one more thing on my full plate. And I was already stressed to the max ... you have no idea the stress that I am under."

Participants rated that person as significantly less likable and less competent than someone who said work had been stressful or who just talked about how great the conference was. Participants also said they would be less likely to help the complaining co-worker if they were overburdened at work.

"People are harming themselves by doing this thing they think is going to make them look better to their colleagues," Rodell said.

Rodell's team found similar results when surveying an additional 218 real-life employees about their experiences with stress braggarts. But the researchers also found employees with co-workers who stress brag often

reported higher levels of personal stress and burnout.

Bragging about stress creates the perception that chronic high-stress levels are an expected and normal part of the work culture, Rodell said.

"When somebody is constantly talking about and bragging about their stress, it makes it seem like it is a good thing to be stressed," Rodell said. "It just spills over onto the co-worker next to them. They wind up feeling more stressed, which leads to higher burnout or withdrawal from their work. Think of it as this spiraling contagious effect from one person to the next."

Equally important, Rodell said, was what they didn't find. People who discussed their [stress levels](#) in passing or employees perceived as being stressed didn't generate the same ill will from their coworkers. And they didn't stress their co-workers out.

"It's not the being stressed part that's a problem," she said. "We found that if I perceive you as stressed, I actually see you as more competent."

The takeaway for employees is to think twice before boasting about their heavy workload or overloaded schedule, Rodell said.

"If you genuinely feel stressed, it's OK to find the right confidant to share with and talk about it," she said. "But be mindful that it is not a badge of honor to be bragged about—that will backfire."

It might be more important for managers to recognize the behavior, Rodell said.

"It's not benign," she added. "It not only harms the bragging co-worker. If [employees](#) see somebody bragging about their stress, it will have a spillover effect that can have bigger implications for the workplace."

More information: Jessica B. Rodell et al, "I'm so stressed!": The relational consequences of stress bragging, *Personnel Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1111/peps.12645](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12645)

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