

# Understanding job stress and an evidence-based approach to managing stress in a forensic science (and criminology) career

Conférence publique de  
l'École des sciences criminelles

20 April 2023, 16h15–17h15, Génopode Auditoire C



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## Abstract

A career as a forensic scientist/criminologist is highly rewarding, yet at various times working in forensic science/criminology can put practitioners at risk of experiencing occupational stress (e.g., job stress). The World Health Organisation notes that occupational stress (OS) is at globally endemic levels, is found in many different types of occupations (not just criminal justice roles) and is a workplace hazard that organisations must act upon to reduce.

The landscape of forensic science is shifting. For many practitioners, in addition to face-to-face exposure to crime scenes and physical traces, there has been a rapid increase in the volume of, and repetitive exposure to, explicit digital material, such as child exploitation materials, violence, suicide and death scene images. Increased exposure to this wider range of traces and digital media is linked to higher risk of experiencing OS. Research has also found that for some practitioners it is not always the type of work, but rather the policies and practices and culture of a workplace that can lead to OS.

Whether OS results from type of work or type of workplace, reducing OS risk and enhancing the wellbeing of practitioners will allow them to perform more effectively over their career.

In this presentation, I will overview what OS is, and what it means in the forensic sciences. I will cover the implications of OS for Practitioners, for their families, for forensic science organisations, and for criminal justice outcomes.

In everyday language we often use the terms “I feel stressed”, or “I feel burnt out”. In this presentation I talk about what these terms mean, and what we mean when we use terms like job strain, burnout/fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. I will talk through the stages of OS and how it can escalate. I will then overview how workplace practices can be the source of OS (work conditions/demands, type of work, agency policies, agency management styles, skills of supervisors, training, or lack of).

I finish the presentation by looking at the types of stress management practices that evidence has shown can manage the experience of OS and assist in eliminating it or stop it escalating.

## About the speaker

Dr Sally Kelty is a university academic and researcher. Her areas of expertise are forensic psychology and management & behavioural science. Sally started her career as a Registered Psychologist working for West Australian Offender Management Branch. Her PhD focused on justifying instrumental violence and mapping the interactions and stages of violent grievance escalation. She was a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) in Criminology and Policing and won a National Institute of Forensic Science Award. Currently, she is senior lecturer at the University of Canberra where she teaches forensic psychology. She also works as a consultant for the Forensic Services of the Australian Federal Police, working on two research projects: profiling the skills and attributes of top performing Digital Forensics Teams, and privacy issues and public support for using DNA and generic genealogy in missing persons and criminal investigations.