FRONT LINE EMPLOYEES' EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION IN UK'S FINE DINING RESTAURANTS

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THE BURNT CHEF PROJECT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights the findings and implications of research conducted in the UK's fine dining sector. It focuses on the emotional exhaustion triggers of front-line employee's based on their experiences in the industry.

The survey was conducted in two waves between October 2023 and October 2024 generated 134 responses from FLEs and managers in the UK's fine dining sector. The respondents varied in gender, age, nationality, role and length of service within the sector.

The report findings highlight the significant emotional and psychological burden experienced by fine dining employees, driven by high service expectations, emotional regulation demands, customer incivility, workplace hostility, and insufficient managerial support. These stressors contribute to widespread emotional exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and, in some cases, substance use, ultimately threatening staff well-being and industry sustainability. High turnover rates remain a pressing concern, emphasising the need for a cultural shift toward healthier boundaries, improved working conditions, and stronger workplace support. Despite these challenges, employees adopt various coping mechanisms, including workplace camaraderie, managerial support, personal self-care practices, and external emotional networks. Strengthening social support systems and promoting work-life balance are essential strategies for mitigating burnout and fostering a more sustainable workforce in the fine dining sector.

Organisation-level interventions are likely to be the most effective approach for addressing individual, interpersonal, and organisational factors affecting mental health in fine dining restaurants, particularly when integrated into broader initiatives that prioritise employee well-being. Additionally, industry-wide policy reforms may be necessary to tackle structural challenges, including the implementation of comprehensive mental health support systems and best practices in human resource management.

INTRODUCTION

The UK fine dining sector is a dynamic and highly competitive segment of the country's hospitality industry, known for its innovation, culinary excellence, and contribution to the country's global gastronomic reputation. It encompasses Michelin-starred restaurants, high-end independent establishments, and luxury hotel dining experiences, all offering exceptional food, service, and ambiance. While London remains the epicentre of fine dining, cities such as Edinburgh, Manchester, and Bristol have also emerged as key culinary destinations. British chefs and restaurateurs continue to push boundaries, blending tradition with contemporary techniques and drawing inspiration from global cuisines. Despite the challenges posed by economic downturns, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the fine dining industry has demonstrated resilience (Statista 2025) through innovation, including immersive dining experiences, sustainability-driven menus, and digital integration. However, rising costs, staffing shortages, and shifting consumer behaviours remain critical factors shaping the sector's future.

The UK fine dining sector has undergone significant evolution over the past two decades, shaped by shifting consumer preferences, sustainability trends, and broader economic influences. The rise of celebrity chefs such as Marco Pierre White, Gordon Ramsay, and Jamie Oliver has played a pivotal role in inspiring a new generation of culinary professionals to enter the industry (Giousmpasoglou et al. 2020). However, the traditional perception of chefs as perfectionist, authoritarian, and even tyrannical figures, often depicted in Hollywood films like Burnt (2015) and The Menu (2022), as well as TV series such as The Bear (2022), continues to dominate popular culture.

While existing research on working conditions and their impact on mental health in fine dining is predominantly focused on "back-of-house" roles, particularly chefs and kitchen brigades, a significant gap remains in our understanding of front-line employees' (FLEs) experiences. These employees play a crucial role in delivering exceptional service and shaping the overall guest experience in luxury dining establishments. However, the specific factors contributing to mental health challenges, such as emotional exhaustion and burnout, in this context remain largely underexplored. These challenges have become key drivers of staff turnover and the widespread labour shortages that have plagued the hospitality industry, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report aims to examine the emotional exhaustion triggers among front-line employees in UK fine dining restaurants and explore the coping mechanisms that may alleviate these stressors. By shedding light on these critical issues, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for industry stakeholders to foster healthier and more sustainable work environments.

BACKGROUND

Working as a front-line employee (FLE) in fine dining restaurants demands exceptional precision, adherence to high service standards, and the ability to meet often unreasonable job expectations regarding service quality and standardisation. These professionals operate in a high-pressure environment where mistakes are not tolerated, intensifying workplace stress. Grimmond et al. (2024) found that individual and task-related factors, such as high emotional job demands and low job control, are closely associated with burnout and depression among hospitality workers. Additionally, hostile and uncivil interactions with customers, management, and colleagues contribute to poor mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and burnout.

The hospitality industry, particularly the bar and restaurant sector, has long been characterised by challenging working conditions, including long and anti-social hours, job strain, precarious employment, and casualised contracts (Giousmpasoglou 2024). These factors are known contributors to poor mental health among restaurant employees. A UK survey by Stansfeld et al. (2011) reported that waiters, bar staff, and chefs were among the occupations experiencing the highest prevalence of common mental disorders, highlighting the industry's systemic issues.

Another critical concern in fine dining restaurants is workplace hostility. Negative colleague interactions, including verbal and physical aggression, as well as bullying, are frequently reported, particularly within kitchen brigades, where hierarchical structures and the occupational culture can foster toxic working environments. Managing chefs, junior staff, and apprentices often experience intense pressure, leading to widespread stress and emotional exhaustion (Giousmpasoglou et al. 2018). Research consistently shows that workplace hostility is associated with adverse mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression. Furthermore, employees with pre-existing mental health conditions are at an increased risk of experiencing workplace bullying, exacerbating their distress over time.

FLEs in fine dining restaurants are regularly confronted with emotionally charged situations and are expected to manage their emotions as part of their core responsibilities. Emotional labour refers to the process of managing emotions to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job (Hochschild 1983). It involves regulating personal feelings, expressions, and interactions to align with workplace expectations, particularly in customer-facing roles. Employees engage in surface acting (modifying outward expressions without changing inner feelings) or deep acting (genuinely aligning emotions with expected displays) to enhance customer experiences. This continuous emotional regulation can contribute to burnout, a phenomenon extensively studied in occupational psychology. According to Maslach and Leiter (2008), burnout consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion, the core component of burnout, occurs when FLEs experience extreme fatigue, emotional depletion, and physical exhaustion due to excessive job demands. The consequences of emotional exhaustion extend beyond individual well-being, affecting organisational performance. Research suggests that emotional exhaustion among hospitality employees leads to reduced job satisfaction, lower job performance, diminished organisational commitment, and heightened turnover intentions (Rathi and Lee 2016).

While the fine-dining sector presents numerous risks to FLEs mental health, social support within the workplace may act as a protective factor. Perceived organisational support, the belief that one's employer values their contributions and well-being, can mitigate the effects of workplace stress, provided employees feel they can communicate openly with management and receive necessary support during periods of job-related strain. Fine dining restaurants, by nature, rely on teamwork, collaboration, and close social interactions between colleagues. Research in high-stress professions, such as firefighting, paramedicine, and nursing, has shown that strong workplace social connections can serve as a buffer against stress, burnout, and depressive symptoms (Grimmond et al. 2024). However, evidence remains mixed regarding the extent to which organisational support is consistently available and effective within the fine dining industry.

METHODS

The research was conducted using a survey assessing the FLE perceptions on Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout in the UK's fine dining sector. The survey was distributed in two waves: the first with site visits in totally 17 fine dining restaurants in the Greater London area and Southwest England; the second wave utilised The Burnt Chef Project's network to reach a wider audience across the country. The survey questionnaire incorporated a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to comprehensively capture FLEs' experiences and perspectives. The data collection was achieved through the collaboration of researchers from Bournemouth University (project lead), Cordon Blu London, The University of West London and The Burnt Chef Project, a social enterprise focused on supporting hospitality employees' mental health. A total of 134 usable responses were gathered.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of participants (70%) were between the ages of 18 and 35, with most having worked in their current restaurant for up to three years. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 56% identifying as women and 44% as men. Regarding participants' country of origin, 44% were from the UK, 41% from the EU, and 15% from non-EU/UK countries.

Most respondents reported working between 35 and 48 hours per week, and nearly half held an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the sample demographics (N = 134).

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile (*N* = 134)

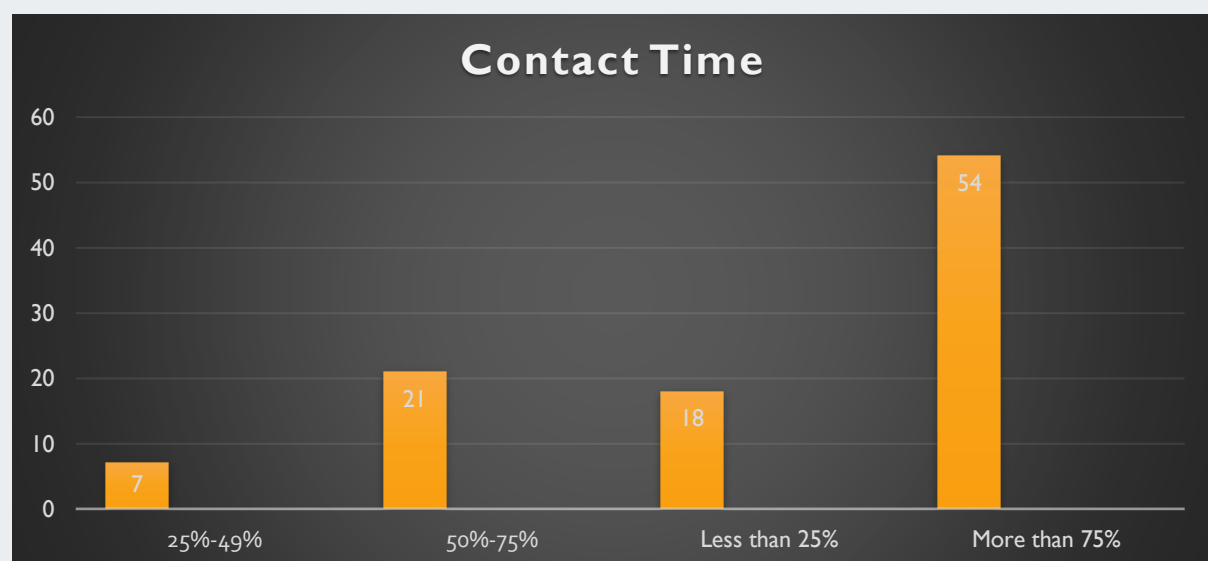| Characteristics	Category	*N*	%
Gender	Male	59	44.0%
	Female	75	56.0%
Age	18-25 years	35	26.1%
	26-35 years	58	43.3%
	36-45 years	32	23.9%
	46-55 years	8	6.0%
	> 55 years	1	0.7%
Nationality	Non-UK / Non-EU	20	14.9%
	UK	59	44.0%
	EU	55	41.0%
Educational level	School graduate	47	35.1%
	Vocational education	20	14.9%
	University degree	48	35.8%
	Postgraduate	18	13.4%
Average working hours per week	Less than 20 hours	5	3.7%
	21-34 hours	8	6.0%
	35 – 48 hours	65	48.5%
	More than 48 hours	56	41.8%
Years of service in this restaurant	Less than 1 year	47	35.1%
	1 to 3 years	46	34.3%
	3 to 5 years	11	8.2%
	More than 5 years	30	22.4%

In terms of job roles, managerial positions, including managers and line managers, comprised the largest proportion (44%), followed by waiters and waitresses (23%), and hosts/hostesses (10%) (Figure 1). The high response rate from managerial staff may be attributed to the increased levels of stress associated with their roles, as managers in the hospitality industry experience greater stress and anxiety compared to front-line employees (FLEs).

Figure 1: Participants' role in the restaurant
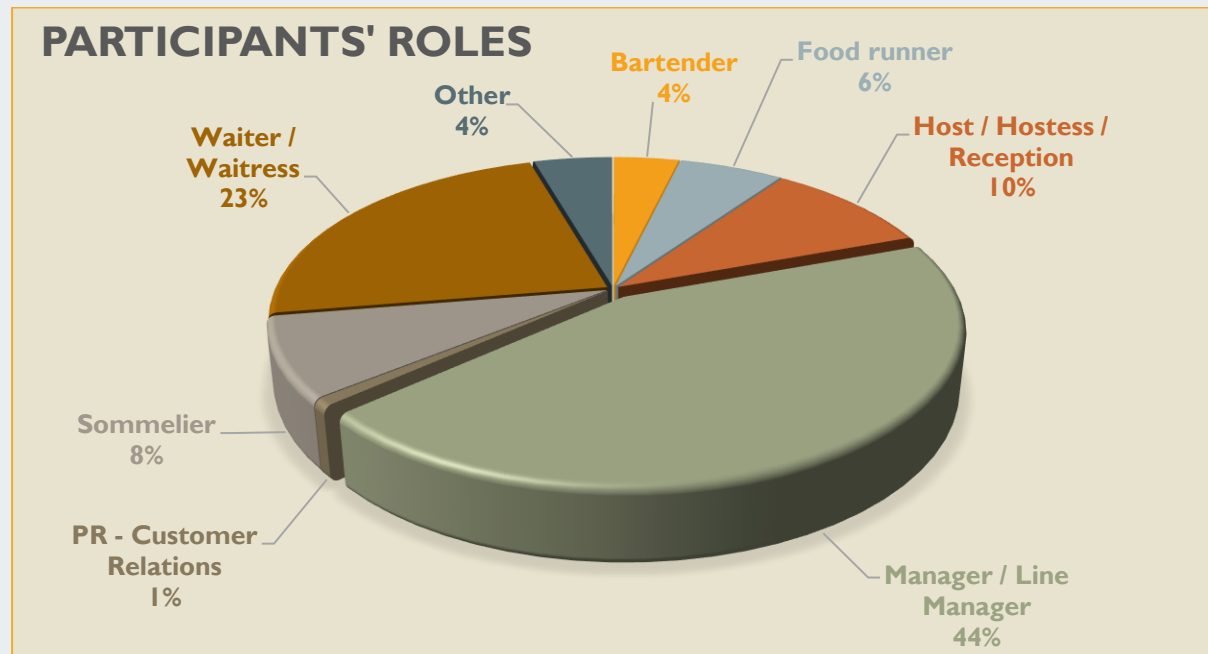
Additionally, more than half of the participants (54%) reported spending over 75% of their shift directly interacting with customers, highlighting the high emotional demands placed on FLEs in fine dining restaurants (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Count of Contact time in terms of direct contact with customers (%) per day

FINDINGS

WORKING CONDITION STRESSORS

The fine dining sector places exceptionally high demands on frontline employees (FLEs), requiring them to maintain high service standards while catering to a discerning and often demanding clientele. Prior research has established that these work-related pressures, coupled with relentless expectations, create a multitude of stressors (Lan et al. 2022). Unlike other hospitality sectors, FLEs in fine dining must consistently deliver flawless service, often under immense pressure and with little to no margin for error.

One of the key stressors identified in this study is the expectation that employees must accommodate all guest requests, regardless of the impact on staff well-being. The prevailing culture in fine dining fosters a perception that the higher the cost of the dining experience, the more entitled guests feel to make additional demands. This can include special requests, late orders, and even deviations from the menu, placing an additional burden on employees who are already working under high-pressure conditions. The challenge for the industry lies in finding a balance between meeting guest expectations and establishing boundaries that protect employee well-being.

Another major source of stress is the emotional labour required to manage guest interactions. Employees are expected to always maintain a cheerful and welcoming demeanour, even when

facing rude, dismissive or abusive customers. The pressure to consistently project positivity, regardless of personal feelings or external stressors, can be emotionally draining.

In high-end establishments, service roles often require employees to engage in surface acting, where they must display emotions they may not genuinely feel, which has been linked to emotional exhaustion and burnout in hospitality settings. For instance, a Michelin-starred restaurant hostess described the daily toll of maintaining a cheerful demeanour despite encountering rude, dismissive, or even abusive customers:

> *"Every day with each guest, I need to act like I am excited and happy when entering the restaurant. Every time I bring a guest upstairs; I need to yell 'Welcome to the XY Room!' like it's the first time I see that room. I do this at least 17 times a day (some days 40), receiving only about 2-8 reactions from the guest a day."*

Additionally, repetitive tasks that require exaggerated enthusiasm further contribute to emotional fatigue. Employees in high-end restaurants often perform scripted greetings and interactions multiple times a day, despite receiving minimal acknowledgment from guests. This cycle of emotional labour, combined with the lack of genuine reciprocity in guest interactions, can lead to feelings of detachment and stress among employees.

Customer Incivility and Workplace Harassment
FLEs in fine dining frequently experience various forms of incivility, including customer rudeness, verbal aggression, and even physical harassment (Pu et al. 2024). The demanding nature of the fine dining environment often places employees in situations where they must endure inappropriate behaviour while maintaining professionalism. Despite the expectation that high-end establishments should foster a culture of respect, employees frequently report instances of verbal abuse from customers, highlighting the normalisation of such treatment within the industry.

Beyond overt hostility, some employees also experience a sense of invisibility, particularly those in roles with limited guest interaction, such as hosts and hostesses. Employees in these positions often feel overlooked and undervalued, reinforcing the perception that their contributions are less recognised than those of their colleagues in more direct service roles. Additionally, the widely held belief that *"the customer is always right"* further exacerbates stress levels among staff, as it creates an environment where guests' unreasonable demands and poor behaviour are tolerated rather than challenged. This raises concerns about the need to reassess workplace policies that prioritise guest satisfaction at the expense of employee well-being.

The post-COVID-19 era has further intensified workplace stressors, particularly due to ongoing staff shortages. Many employees report an increase in workload and extended hours, leading to heightened levels of burnout. The pressure to maintain high service standards despite limited staffing has made it increasingly difficult for employees to balance their professional and personal well-being. Moreover, the expectation to present a positive and welcoming demeanour, even in the face of exhaustion or personal stress, adds another layer of emotional labour that contributes to long-term fatigue and job dissatisfaction. A bartender highlighted how these pressures contribute to ongoing stress:

> *"Well, it's just classic industry burnout, even after Covid. Expected to work a lot of the time, even when over the hours, feel guilty for leaving the team in the sh*t if you do leave, and constantly having to put a smile on for customers regardless of how bad yours or even their evening is going. Never mind the late nights and early starts, not enough time to recover."*

Bullying and Discrimination

Workplace stress in fine dining restaurants is not solely driven by customer interactions but is also influenced by internal factors such as managerial pressure, colleague relationships, and organisational culture. A persistent *"old-school"* mentality among some senior staff continues to foster an environment where verbal and physical mistreatment is normalised under the guise of *"building character."* This outdated approach can create a hostile work atmosphere, exacerbating emotional exhaustion and negatively impacting employee morale.

Discrimination within fine dining restaurants also emerged as a significant concern, with employees reporting bias based on physical appearance, age, and ethnicity. Such experiences contribute to heightened stress levels, alienation, and a diminished sense of belonging in the workplace. The sector's emphasis on aesthetics and guest perception may further perpetuate these biases, affecting career progression and overall job satisfaction.

Additionally, salary disparities were identified as a recurring issue, with employees performing the same roles receiving unequal compensation. This lack of pay equity has been noted in previous research (Baum et al. 2023) and remains a critical challenge within the sector. Inconsistencies in remuneration can lead to frustration, reduced motivation, and increased turnover intentions, particularly when employees perceive unfair treatment in comparison to their colleagues.

Long Working Hours and Lack of Work-Life Balance

Excessive working hours emerged as a significant stressor for fine dining employees, with prolonged shifts negatively impacting their emotional well-being and overall quality of life. The demanding nature of the industry often requires employees to work beyond standard hours, leading to chronic fatigue, stress, and reduced job satisfaction. Research has consistently linked long working hours in hospitality to higher turnover rates and increased job dissatisfaction (Giousmpasoglou 2024).

Concerns about the intensity of work schedules have prompted calls for regulatory intervention, with suggestions that any workweek exceeding 45 hours should be deemed unlawful. However, despite the evident strain of extended shifts, some employees accept long hours as an unavoidable aspect of the profession. The deeply ingrained culture of fine dining often normalises working weekends, sacrificing personal time, and enduring high levels of stress. As an experienced line manager described:

> *"We deal with problems people have no clue about. We work weekends when friends and families are having time off. Does this sound like a complaint? It's not! When I chose this path, I knew I would work long hours and weekends under huge stress."*

This perception of long hours as an inherent part of the sector highlights the broader challenge of achieving work-life balance in fine-dining restaurants. While some employees advocate for change, others remain resigned to the expectation that success in the field requires extreme commitment. The normalisation of these working conditions raises questions about industry sustainability and the need for reforms that promote healthier work environments.

Lack of Managerial and Team Support

A significant stressor for fine dining employees is the lack of adequate support from both management and colleagues. This issue is widespread across the hospitality industry and has a considerable impact on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being (Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou 2019). In high-pressure environments, particularly during

peak service hours, the absence of managerial support can leave employees feeling overwhelmed and undervalued. Instances where staff feel unsupported often contribute to job dissatisfaction and, in extreme cases, resignation.

A strong workplace culture rooted in teamwork and mutual assistance has been shown to help mitigate stress and burnout (Chen and Eyoun 2021). However, many fine dining employees reported that such a support system was often lacking in their workplaces, exacerbating emotional exhaustion. Even the most resilient employees experience difficult days, and management plays a critical role in providing both professional guidance and emotional reassurance. Without this support, employees are more likely to struggle with the high demands of their roles, leading to increased job strain and dissatisfaction.

Employee Turnover

The high-pressure working conditions in fine dining establishments remain a primary driver of employee turnover, a challenge that has become more pronounced in the post-COVID era (Oh et al. 2023). Many employees reported leaving roles due to burnout, citing emotional exhaustion as a key factor in their decision. While some individuals acknowledged that their struggles were cyclical, where periods of high stress would eventually subside, the ongoing nature of workplace pressure often led to long-term dissatisfaction and an increased likelihood of seeking alternative employment.

These findings underscore the need for structural changes within the fine dining industry to improve managerial support, foster stronger team dynamics, and implement strategies that reduce employee burnout. Establishing a culture of open communication, prioritizing mental well-being, and ensuring that employees feel valued could play a crucial role in improving retention rates and overall workplace satisfaction. A waiter candidly described the cyclical nature of their struggles:

> *"I sometimes feel on the verge of quitting because I am at the end of my rope, but it is just temporary, it gets better."*

THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES' MENTAL HEALTH

The emotional toll of working in fine dining restaurants was a prevalent concern, with many employees describing feelings of depletion, emptiness, and burnout due to the continuous need to regulate their emotions. The expectation to maintain unwavering enthusiasm and professionalism, regardless of personal challenges, emerged as a significant source of stress. Employees reported that this emotional investment often left them feeling drained, negatively impacting their overall well-being and personal lives.

The Emotional Taxation of Excellence
The relentless pursuit of excellence in fine dining was identified as a major contributor to emotional exhaustion. The meticulous attention to detail and the constant pressure to meet guest expectations create a work environment that is both physically and mentally demanding. This phenomenon, often referred to as emotional taxation, affects all employees, regardless of their role or seniority, aligning with findings by Ye et al. (2024).

In addition to emotional strain, the extended recovery time required after long, uninterrupted shifts, was another key concern. Employees indicated that recuperation could take several days or even weeks, highlighting the long-lasting effects of high-intensity work periods. Furthermore, the emotional demands of the job often resulted in feelings of loneliness and helplessness, underscoring the broader psychological impact of fine dining roles. As a sommelier poignantly expressed:

> *"The emotional investment needed means you go home bankrupt and drained, so your own personal life is in tatters."*

Lack of Managerial Support and Psychological Impact
A lack of managerial support was another significant factor contributing to employees' emotional distress. Instances where employees felt unfairly blamed for workplace incidents, despite following company procedures, led to severe psychological consequences, including heightened anxiety, stress, and the need for emotional leave. Employees who experienced such situations described feelings of isolation and helplessness, further exacerbating their mental health struggles.

Sleep Deprivation and Substance Use as Coping Mechanisms
The psychological strain of working in fine dining also manifested in physical symptoms, with many employees reporting sleep deprivation due to stress and anxiety. Workplace fatigue, which has been widely documented in hospitality research, was commonly linked to disrupted sleep patterns (Ye et al., 2024).

Additionally, alcohol and drug consumption (AOD) emerged as a prevalent coping mechanism among employees. The high emotional demands of the industry can lead to substance use as a means of managing stress and burnout, with some individuals developing dependencies over time. A waiter suggested that:

> *"Even if the emotions are not forced and caring is what some industry workers feel naturally, it is draining for some to give so much of it all the time. I believe alcohol and drug consumption in the industry can be also related to this, unfortunately."*

Emotional Exhaustion Among Managers
The impact of emotional exhaustion was not limited to frontline employees; restaurant managers and line managers also reported significant stress due to the immense pressure of overseeing teams. Managers often bear the burden of ensuring smooth operations while also handling employee concerns, yet they are expected to manage these challenges without additional support. Some managers expressed frustration over the lack of recognition from employers despite years of loyalty and personal sacrifice. The overwhelming workload expected of restaurant managers further exacerbates stress levels, making burnout a persistent issue even at higher levels of the organisation.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com/gr_en/images/employee-woman-with-tired-and-sick-expression/255425937

COPING STRATEGIES

FLEs and managers in the UK fine dining sector employ various coping strategies to manage emotional exhaustion and sustain their well-being amid demanding work conditions. These strategies primarily revolve around three key support networks: co-workers and managers, personal self-care practices, and friends and family.

Peer Support and Team Camaraderie

Co-worker support emerged as the primary coping mechanism, with many employees viewing their colleagues as an extended family. The intense nature of fine dining fosters strong bonds between staff members, creating a support system where employees can openly share their experiences, challenges, and frustrations. Recognising that others are facing similar difficulties offers reassurance and helps employees manage workplace stress more effectively. Open and honest communication among colleagues allows employees to feel heard and understood, reinforcing the importance of mutual support. A line manager captured this sentiment by likening their daily work experience to a battlefield:

> *"Hospitality has this 'we're all in the sh*t together' mentality as well as a 'whatever it takes to get the job done' ethos. It's like going to war every day. Your co-workers are your allies, and you all work to get through the long, stressful day, every day."*

Post-shift discussions serve as informal debriefing sessions, enabling employees to reflect on both positive and negative aspects of their day (Kim et al. 2023). This practice resembles group therapy, fostering a supportive work environment where employees can process their emotions collectively. The shared challenges of working in fine dining create deep connections among team members, often extending beyond the workplace (Wang et al. 2018). Many employees maintain close relationships with former colleagues who understand the emotional demands of the industry, highlighting the long-term importance of these support networks. A waitress highlighted the depth of connection formed through shared challenges:

> *"…after a rough service, we just look at each other and say 'trauma bonds.' Only the people who have been in those situations can truly understand, and they do their best, but sometimes that's not even enough."*

One common way employees decompress and strengthen team camaraderie is through post-work socialising, often involving alcohol consumption. This aligns with existing research highlighting the frequent use of alcohol and other substances as a coping mechanism in the hospitality industry (Giousmpasoglou et al. 2018). While these social interactions provide short-term relief, they also underscore the need for healthier and more sustainable coping strategies.

Managerial Support as a Coping Factor

Workplace culture plays a crucial role in mitigating emotional exhaustion. Employees emphasised the importance of working in environments with supportive managers who understand their challenges and motivate them to improve. Research suggests that positive workplace interactions reduce exhaustion and cynicism while lowering turnover intentions (Chen and Eyoun 2021).

Managers who actively support their teams contribute to a more positive work environment, helping employees manage stress and build resilience. Employees highlighted the importance of having managers who prioritise their teams' well-being, recognising that strong leadership fosters a culture of trust and motivation. Conversely, some managers adopt a more formal

approach, maintaining professional boundaries in accordance with workplace policies and restaurant culture. While professionalism is essential, timely managerial intervention in conflicts and workplace issues can prevent escalation and reduce stress within teams. Ensuring that managers are equipped with the skills to provide emotional and professional support is essential for improving job satisfaction and reducing burnout in the fine dining sector. A line manager described her approach as a team leader:

> *"I've worked in the industry for 14 years, and unlike my previous bosses, I make sure that my team is my number one priority… My team knows I have their back."*

Self-Care Practices

Many FLEs and managers also rely on self-care strategies, both during and outside of work, to manage emotional exhaustion. Taking short breaks during service hours provides momentary relief from workplace stress, allowing employees to reset and regain focus. Practicing self-reflection and learning from past experiences emerged as another effective strategy for coping with workplace challenges. Employees who actively engage in self-reflection reported feeling more positive and resilient in handling job-related stress. An experienced manager highlighted the necessity of using days off for recovery:

> *"…I make sure to use my days off wisely… I've realised the only way to succeed is to make sure you take rest when you can. 70-hour weeks will never end, but your 48 hours off can be so restorative if you allow yourself to rest and regroup."*

Stepping away from the restaurant environment was identified as an essential way to recover mentally and emotionally. FLEs and managers emphasised the importance of taking periodic breaks to maintain perspective and avoid burnout. Given the long and demanding work hours in fine dining, prioritising physical rest is critical. FLEs who maximised their days off for recovery reported feeling more prepared to handle workplace challenges. Research indicates that structured rest periods and effective time management contribute to improved well-being and job performance.

The effectiveness of self-care practices, however, depends on an individual's willingness to engage in them. FLEs recognised that while external support is valuable, taking personal responsibility for managing stress is crucial. As a hostess explained:

> *"You have to want to help yourself. Others can try to guide you, but ultimately, it's you who has to want to change."*

Support from Friends and Family

Beyond workplace relationships, employees also rely on friends and family for emotional support. Talking to loved ones about workplace frustrations helps employees decompress, even if they are not necessarily seeking solutions to work-related issues. Emotional support from family members provides a sense of comfort and reassurance, allowing employees to navigate workplace stress more effectively. A waiter expressed how family support played a crucial role in their emotional well-being:

> *"After work, my family listens to how my day was, and if it was a hard one, they just give me all the support and love."*

For some employees, external support networks are indispensable, particularly when workplace relationships do not provide sufficient emotional validation. Employees who lacked strong workplace connections relied heavily on friends and family for emotional stability.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com/gr_en/images/elegant-server-lifting-a-silver-cloche-in-a-sophisticated-dining-setting/1055119815

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights the significant emotional and psychological burden placed on fine dining employees, from frontline staff to managers. The relentless demand for emotional regulation, combined with high service expectations, customer incivility, workplace hostility, and inadequate managerial support, contributes to phenomena such as widespread emotional exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and, in some cases, substance use. These challenges not only impact employee well-being but also threaten the long-term sustainability of the fine dining sector, making staff retention a growing concern.

The findings reinforce that prolonged exposure to emotional stressors, including the need to regulate emotions under pressure, extended working hours, and a lack of workplace support, leads to high turnover rates. Addressing these issues requires a fundamental cultural shift within the industry, emphasising the establishment of healthier boundaries, improved working conditions, and the creation of a more supportive work environment. Investing in employee well-being and mental health is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for sustaining the quality and reputation of fine dining establishments.

Despite these challenges, frontline employees adopt various coping strategies to navigate emotional exhaustion. Workplace camaraderie, managerial support, personal self-care practices, and external emotional networks, such as friends and family, play a crucial role in mitigating burnout. While burnout remains a persistent challenge in the hospitality industry (Lee and Suh 2020), strengthening social support systems and enhancing work-life balance can alleviate its effects. Figure 3 illustrates the key stressors contributing to emotional exhaustion in fine dining restaurants, their impact on employees and managers, and the coping strategies used to manage these challenges.

Figure 3: Emotional Exhaustion in UK's fine dining restaurants
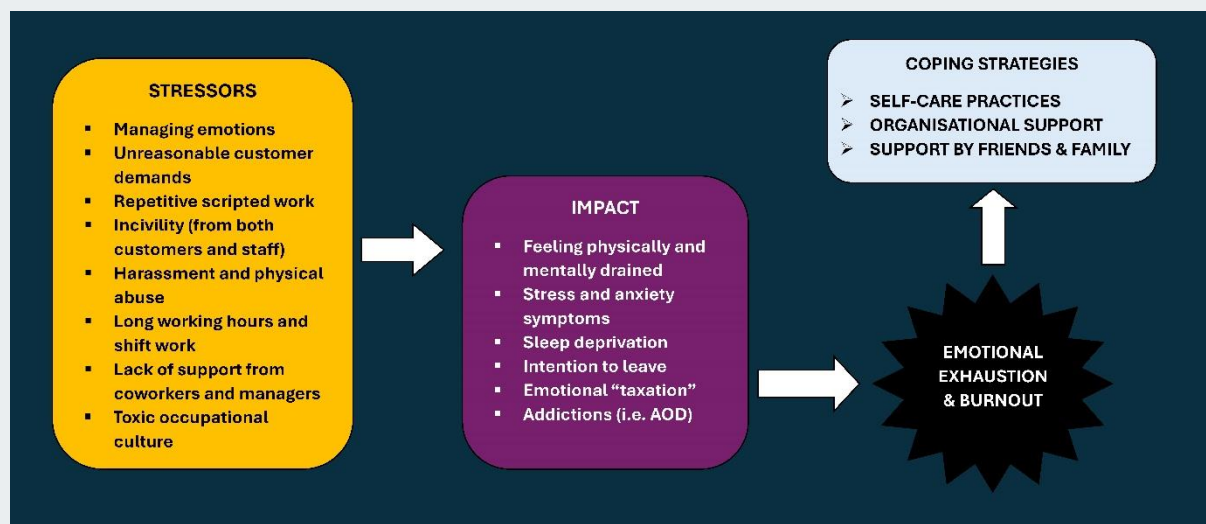
To mitigate emotional exhaustion (EE) and burnout in fine dining restaurants while improving employee well-being and service quality, the following strategies should be implemented:

- **Mental Health and Stress Management Support:** Monitor stress levels, offer paid leave or reduced workloads when needed, provide access to professional counselling, and collaborate with mental health support organisations like The Burnt Chef Project.

- **Supportive Work Environment and HR Practices:** Foster open communication, empower employees in decision-making, ensure fair compensation and job security, and provide physical facilities such as rest areas and safe work environments.

- **Team Bonding & Workplace Culture:** Implement debriefing meetings, encourage social and recreational activities outside of work, and promote a high-commitment HR approach to enhance workplace relationships and well-being.

- **Emotional Intelligence Training & Coping Strategies:** Train FLEs and managers on emotional intelligence (EI) and mindfulness practices to manage stress and regulate emotions effectively.

- **Hospitality Education and Industry Training:** Integrate EI, emotional labour strategies, and personal development training into hospitality curricula to prepare future professionals for the demands of fine dining environments.

In conclusion, this report adds valuable insights to the existing literature by offering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of FLEs and managers in the UK's fine dining restaurant sector. It underscores the urgent need for industry-wide initiatives aimed at supporting employee mental health, implementing sustainable work practices, and fostering resilience among hospitality professionals. By prioritising emotional well-being, organisations can reduce emotional dissonance, lower stress and burnout rates, and cultivate a healthier, more engaged, and sustainable workforce in the fine dining sector.

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Notes

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