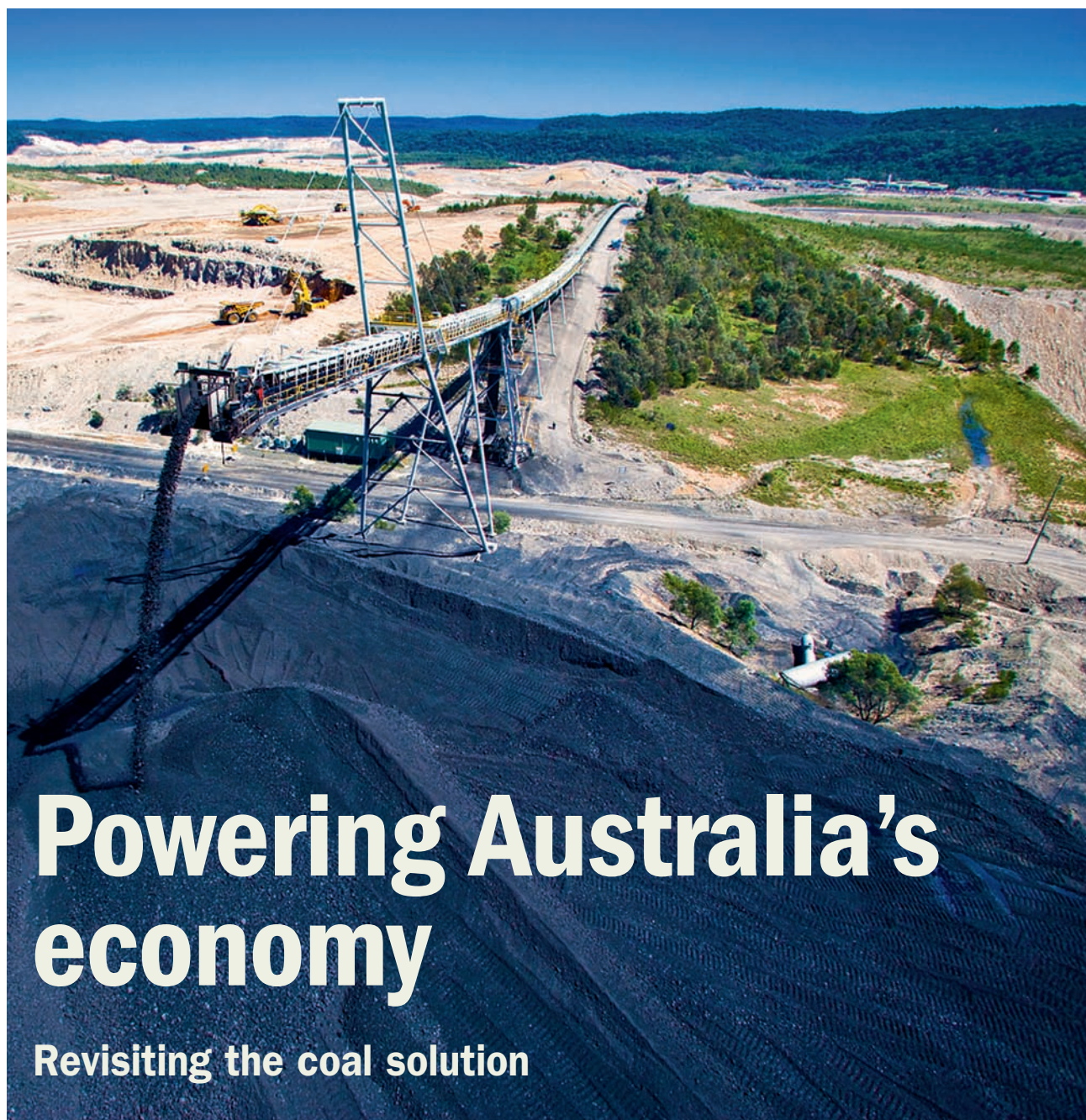


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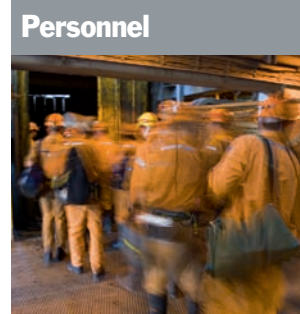
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STRESSING an alternative

For many workers engaged in the mining industry in Australia the experience of work stress is a very personal and private issue.

Behind tough exteriors, many share the experience of difficulty sleeping, fatigue, feelings of anxiety, loneliness and depression.

This often goes hand in hand with physical symptoms such as an exacerbation of musculoskeletal problems and other existing health complaints.

Making good money has bitter sweet consequences.

For some workers, the dangling carrot encourages them to put up with a working environment they are having trouble adapting to even though they might be better suited psychologically to working in a lower paid job closer to home.

Ultimately both the organisation and the worker may end up paying a price for their

stoic endurance as the stress begins to undermine their health, relationships and ability to function across both work and personal domains.

This work stress is also behind the relatively high attrition rate in workers in their first year in the industry.

Surprisingly, research into the implications of work stress in the mining industry on the physical and psychological health and work performance of the workforce is still in its infancy, behind that of research into other high risk industries where there is a clearer understanding of the nature of the relationships between work stress, mental and physical health, and work performance.

Based on Australian mental health statistics however there are irrefutable indicators that the mining industry in general needs to embrace a broader context to the notion of 'zero harm'.

Dealing with work stress in silence is no longer the only option.

With more than one million Australians suffering from either depression or anxiety in a given year and with research showing that both depression and anxiety increases the likelihood of workplace accident or injury, it is clear that mining companies need to develop further their understanding of

Occupational Health and Safety Issues as it relates to stress and overall fatigue.

There have been many incidents where mining stress or fatigue has been directly related to an injury or even death, both on and off mine-sites. Long hours and hot seat changeovers have seen cars

crushed and people injured, and have lead to threats of strike action at coal mines such as Collie, where workers are up in arms over the potential hazard it poses.

Two fatalities involving drive in drive out workers in Yeppoon and Dysart in 2007 and 2008 were caused by

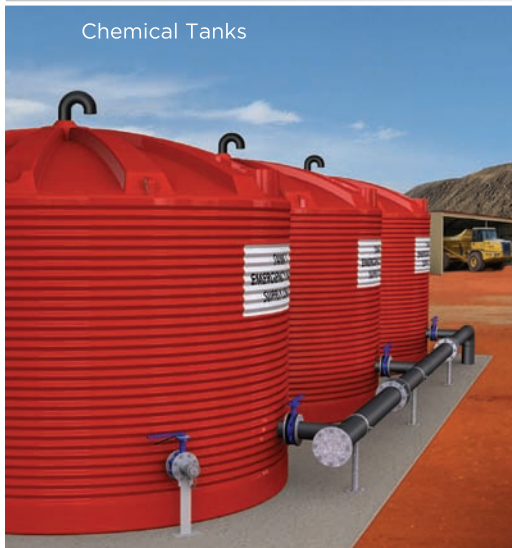


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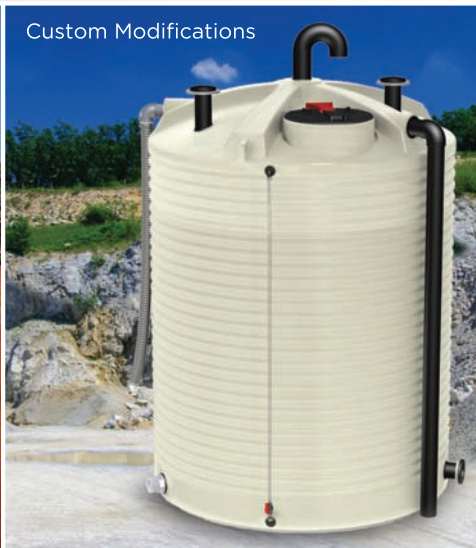
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fatigued miners getting behind the wheel, according to Central Queensland coroner Anne Hennessy.

Imagine the overall benefits to the industry if the work force could switch on and off at will, mechanisms within their own brain and body that could help them to combat stress and fatigue and to adapt to the daily challenges that face them at work?

There is a technique that has been scientifically proven to do just that: a technique called Autogenic Training.

Autogenic Training enables people to self-regulate their psychophysiological responses creating profound changes in the mind and body that lead to optimal physical and psychological health and enhanced performance overall.

It includes a series of mental exercises taught over eight hours and then practised for only a few minutes daily.

Backed by over 3,000 clinical studies worldwide, positive changes brought about by Autogenic Training on the mind and the body are immediate and the processes under-



Fatigue and work stress present a serious hazard on and off site.

lying the changes are detectable and scientifically measurable.

Helen Gibbons, the chief psychologist and head trainer at the Autogenic Training Institute runs Australia's only Autogenic Training Programme for organisations and their employees.

"Autogenic Training is a technique unlike any other," Gibbons said.

"It achieves cognitive and

psychological results similar to that achieved through a combination of meditation, yoga, hypnotherapy and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and on a physical level it produces the same physiological and chemical benefits that are associated with rigorous athletic training."

She added that for workers it is an internal process, rather than external, so does not

require users to discuss their feelings or thoughts with others.

Gibbons explained that the training has already seen positive results within the NSW Police Service; the NSW Fire Brigade; Price Waterhouse Coopers; Ernest and Young; and NASA, which routinely train astronauts and pilots in the Autogenic Training Programme to adapt to the psychological and phys-

ical stressors of space travel.

"Every organisation has its own unique combination of environmental factors that can affect the resilience and performance of their employees," she stated.

"In the mining industry for example, workers aren't only dealing with complex problems under difficult and often hazardous environmental circumstances, many are also often dealing with psychosocial disadvantages because of the remote location of their work.

"On top of this, normal personal routines are disrupted to fit in with the work cycles of the mining operations. The fact of the matter is that stress is rarely compartmentalised – for fly in fly out miners stress at work affects home life and stress at home affects work life.

"Little by little, workers find that they are struggling to cope without really being able to identify the core reason. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a very real and a very

Continued on page 22



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common problem for workers in mining and an integrated approach at the organisational level can do a lot in mitigating the risk of the negative impact of this 'stress creep'."

Gibbons said the Autogenic Training Programme equips workers with tools that build up their mental and physical resilience so that they can deal more effectively with both personal and work-place stressors.

"When the workforce learns to self-regulate their psychophysiological responses there is improved staff morale, lower staff turnover, lower incidence of work place accidents, reduced number of stress and other injury claims, less sick leave and higher productivity."

She described how the Autogenic mental exercises guide you into an 'Autogenic State' where you are relaxed both mentally and physically allowing for the regenerative mechanisms in the mind and body to kick in.

"For this reason I call it the Triple R technique", she said.



By using autogenic training, workers can relax their system while remaining alert, Gibbons claims.

"It allows your mind and body to rest, repair and regenerate. It targets the detrimental effects of the build-up of negative day to day stress that can over time make us unwell and erode our ability to think and perform. I have seen workers, despite their best efforts, reach a point at work where they feel they can't go

on. They either leave their job, go on Workers Compensation or carry on at work at a much reduced capacity, often making mistakes and affecting the morale of those who work with them."

One area of prime importance in the mining industry is the mitigation of the risks associated with fatigue.

"It is really important that we understand the psychophysiological dynamics of fatigue if the mining industry is to make true inroads into this problem," Gibbons stated.

"As we are aware, fatigue is a ticking time bomb. People have what we call, a Basic Rest Activity Cycle. During the day we have a period of

approximately 90 minutes of alert activity followed by a 20 minute period when we feel fatigued and should strictly speaking be resting. People can override the fatigue period up to a point but it is unlikely that levels of hypervigilance will be as high in this phase of the cycle. With Autogenic Training, however, we can automatically switch on our 'Para-Sympathetic Nervous System' (the rest, repair and regeneration mode) and indulge in the ultimate power nap. In a very short period of time you can feel completely recharged and extend your period of hypervigilance at work."

"Based on improvements in imaging technology we now can see the scientific processes behind the Autogenic responses in motion, right down to the molecular level," she said.

"This is a truly exciting time for individuals and organisations alike as we now have at our fingertips a simple but highly effective evidence-based tool which is proven to enhance Occupational Health and Safety outcomes."



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