

Strategies for Managing Burnout in the Workplace

By: Anthony Adams

Over the last several decades, profound changes have occurred in much of the workplace. Budgets have been cut, companies have been downsized, and often fewer employees are left to maintain the workload.

As a result, the pace of work seems far more relentless now than it did only a few brief decades ago. Workers are more harried than ever, and attempts to control or limit the volume of work assigned are often futile. At best, an individual who says no to more work will be regarded as someone who is not a team player. At worst, saying no is viewed by the organization as unacceptable and a step toward dismissal.

Given the demanding pace, time away from work should be the period during which an employee can relax and recover from the stresses of the day. Instead, setting clear boundaries between work and personal time has become, for many, impossible. Employees are frequently expected to check their emails at work and at home, and to be reachable at any time of day or night, including vacations. Constant connectivity makes finding a work-life balance more difficult and results in greater stress on the individual employee (Study, 2012).

Eventually, the volume and pace of work, along with a myriad of other factors in the workplace, break down many individuals so that they can no longer function. Burnout is often the result.

Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, ineffectiveness in the workplace, and chronic negative responses to stressful workplace conditions.

While not considered a mental illness, burnout can be considered a mental health issue. According to the Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research (cited below), burnout is having a growing impact on workplaces, particularly in advanced economies and during times of economic downturn.



Burnout is more likely when employees:

- Expect too much of themselves
- Never feel that the work they are doing is good enough
- Feel inadequate or incompetent
- Feel unappreciated for their work efforts

Because it can be chronic in nature, affecting both the health and performance of employees at all levels of organizations, prevention strategies are considered the most effective approach for addressing workplace burnout.

Recognize Signs and Symptoms

The majority of employees experiencing burnout will remain at work. Being aware of changes in attitudes and energy can help with early identification. Employees may not realize that they are dealing with burnout, and may instead believe that they are just struggling to keep up during stressful times. Stress, however, is usually experienced as feeling anxious and having a sense of urgency while burnout is more commonly experienced as helplessness, hopelessness, or apathy.

Some of the signs and symptoms that an employee experiencing burnout may exhibit include:

- Reduced efficiency and energy
- Lowered levels of motivation
- Increased errors
- Irritability
- Increased frustration
- More time spent working with less being accomplished
- Self-medication with alcohol and other substances
- Sarcasm and negativity
- Clinical depression
- Decreased productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Increased risk of accidents
- Poor workplace morale
- Communication breakdown
- Increased turnover

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Recovering from Burnout

Burnout doesn't go away on its own; rather, it will get worse unless you address the underlying causes. If you ignore burnout, it will only cause you further harm down the line, so it's important that you begin recovery as soon as possible.

Recovery from burnout is a slow journey, not a quick dash to some imaginary finish line. You need time and space to recuperate, so don't rush through this process.

The recovery strategies that we've outlined below are all useful in different situations. Some of these strategies will work for you, while others won't, so find a balance of strategies and best practices that feels right to you. If you believe that something isn't working, don't be afraid to try something new.

Change how you think about and do work:

- Stop multi-tasking – focus on one thing at a time.
- Work at a reasonable, steady pace.
- Break down seemingly overwhelming tasks and projects into smaller achievable parts.
- Recognize and celebrate your small steps along the way.
- Take regular assigned breaks.
- Resist working unnecessary overtime.
- Even if you must provide contact information in case of emergency, try as much as possible to stay disconnected from work during vacation time.

Improve relationships:

- Set boundaries for yourself in terms of what you will and will not do – be okay with saying no.
- Avoid toxic people and situations.
- Learn to be comfortable with saying, "I don't know" if you don't know.
- Shut out media that includes disturbing images and messages.
- Become more involved and connected with friends, family, or the community.

Improve self-care strategies:

- Minimize or eliminate alcohol and caffeine.
- Develop and follow a healthy eating plan.
- Take time away from work if the burnout is resulting in impairment in the ability to function or requires treatment, but then include a healthy approach to work as part of the recovery process.
- Exercise
- Walk in green space.
- Garden
- Find a creative outlet, such as painting.



Change the way you think and live:

- Focus daily on your accomplishments.
- Avoid criticizing yourself unnecessarily.
- Give yourself a gift on your birthday or other holiday event.
- Create a space in your home that feels serene and peaceful to you.
- Keep your environment organized and tidy.
- Write daily in a gratitude journal to help refocus your mind on those things that are positive in your life.
- Post a list of what is valued, enjoyable, or precious in your life on your refrigerator or in a place where you will see it daily.
- Nurture your spirit using quiet reflection, meditation, or prayer.

References

Brown, LW, Quick, JC, Environmental Influences on Individual Burnout and a Preventive Approach for Organizations, Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research, 2013, 18, 2, pp. 104–121.
MindTools Recovering from Burnout. Finding Passion for Your Role Again Managing Burnout in the Workplace; Nancy McCormick, Catherine Cotter