Burnout
The Latest Major Health Crisis to Affect the Workplace

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Why is burnout important?

Burnout has been identified as a major health crisis in the U.S. workforce, leading to reduced job engagement, lower productivity, more frequent or extended sick leave, occupational change and even permanent withdrawal from work. Recent studies have found more than 1 in 5 workers experience feelings of burnout[1], figures that lead to an estimated cost of more than $125 billion in health care spending every year[2]. Moreover, burnout has been associated with increased health risks, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes[3].

What is burnout?

Burnout is an occupational phenomenon caused by chronic job stress that leads to feelings of emotional exhaustion, indifference towards one's work and an absence of value or achievement in the workplace. The three main characteristics of burnout:

- **Emotional exhaustion:** feelings of fatigue due to work

- **Depersonalization:** unsympathetic or impersonal response and distant attitude toward one's job and recipients of one's service, care, treatment or instruction

- **Professional efficacy:** feelings of incompetence and lack of successful achievement and value in one's work

What causes burnout?

Research has identified six main risk factors[4-5] that contribute to burnout including workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Interestingly, effective managers can positively impact these factors[6] and increase employee value, level of engagement and productivity.

Work overload stems from feelings that an individual does not have the capacity or resources to meet job demands.

One way to help combat work overload is to implement brief break periods (10-15 min) at regular intervals (every 90-120 min) throughout the day to renew mental resources for an overall higher and more sustained level of productivity.

Another factor that contributes to burnout is perceived control over job-related decisions. Managers who promote independent thinking and decision-making facilitate employee engagement by conveying feelings of trust and value. Individuals are naturally more engaged and productive when they feel their opinions matter.

Similarly, reward and recognition of hard work and achievement reduces vulnerability to burnout by building trust, emotional security and a sense of impact. Recognition attaches value to a person's actions and communicates appreciation. It helps to confirm or validate an employee's competency, and conversely, the lack of recognition could imply inadequacy.
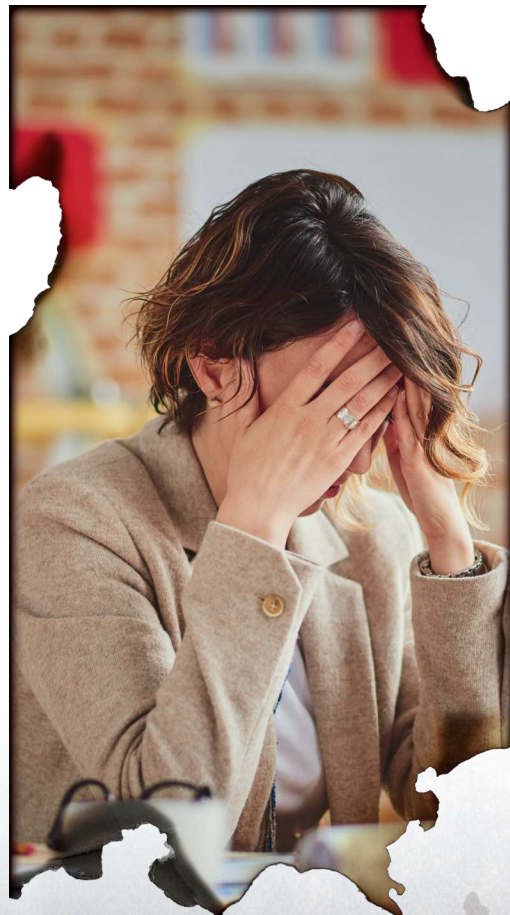
Another important factor that helps protect against burnout out is a supportive and inclusive environment, where an individual feels secure, comfortable and 'fits in' with his/her co-workers. When employees feel surrounded by unresolved conflict, vulnerable in their job security or experience discomfort interacting with co-workers they gradually develop feelings of anxiety, isolation and loneliness. This feeling can even permeate into their personal lives. As a result, these individuals are not as engaged or productive in their work. As a manager, it can be really powerful to reach out to that individual and 'check-in' by asking if there is anything you can do to help. This action conveys compassion and support for an individual as a person and not just an employee.

Fairness is also a key part of effective work environments. Employees should feel that company and managerial decisions are based on logic and fairness. It also helps if managers explain their rationale behind big decisions. This transparency helps promote security, trust and inclusiveness.

Lastly, value alignment plays an important role in protecting against burnout. It is important that company values align with personal values to reinforce personal motivation and fulfillment for their role and the company. When personal values align with work culture, employees feel more committed to the job and more engaged and productive in their work.

How can you help prevent employee burnout?

Managers can have a major impact in helping to reduce employee burnout[7-8]. Here are some key questions when evaluating your company, your management style and your employees to help identify potential pain points and areas that can be improved.

The first step to combat burnout is to start an open dialogue with employees by asking:

- Are their job expectations in line with management?

- Do they feel their workload is fair and balanced?

- Do they feel valued as an individual?

- Do they receive regular feedback, including rewards and recognition for hard work and achievements and ways they can improve and grow as a person and professional?

- Do performance work measures inspire them to improve?

- Is the workplace culture healthy?

- Are there policies in place to address unresolved conflicts?

- Does leadership promote inclusiveness, fairness and teamwork?

- Do employees feel listened to or are there opportunities to voice their opinions?

- Do they feel involved in decision processes?

- Do they feel their work is in line with their values and motivations?

- Do they feel their work has significance?

All these questions will help gauge an employee's risk for burnout. If they answer no, find out what support they need from the company and what help you can provide.

For other information or resources on burnout in the workplace:

Recent Gallup articles[7-8] provide excellent information and recommendations for executives, managers, and human resource professionals on how to reduce burnout in employee populations.

There are also several excellent and validated surveys to assess burnout, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS), Bergen Burnout Inventory and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale.

Remember, while burnout is becoming more prevalent, it can be largely prevented through small changes in management style and cultivating a strong workplace support system. Try to implement some of these tips and create a happier, healthier and more productive workplace.

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