Top Tips for Tackling Employee Burnout

A little stress can be a great motivator. But too much of it, combined with excessive work demands and personal life stressors can lead us to burn out.

The World Health Organization describes burnout as a syndrome "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed". [1] This long-term fatigue can lead to physical and mental health problems. What's more, if you burn out, you may feel psychologically trapped and exhausted by the pressure. Here's how to identify, prevent and tackle burnout in your team.

1. Know the warning signs

It's important to recognize that employee burnout can and does happen. So, be on the lookout for the warning signs in your team. Burnout is often characterized by increased absenteeism and ill-health.

But you may notice changes in people's behavior, too. They include cynicism and feeling unduly irritated by colleagues. Employees experiencing burnout may display signs of chronic fatigue, anger, self-criticism, negativity and a sense of being besieged.

Of course, it's better to spot the subtler signs before they escalate into the above. Siobhán Murray, author of 'The Burnout Solution', identifies these **pre-burnout symptoms** to watch out for:

- Ongoing anxiety or restlessness even when a challenging time or project comes to an end.

- Feeling work has little value. People may withdraw from projects they were previously passionate about.

- Poor performance and reduction in the quality of work. [2]

If you notice any of these signs, ask to speak to the individual concerned and find out what you can do to help.

2. Keep track of people's workloads

Warning signs aren't always easy to spot. People may keep issues bottled up, and it's also harder to see behavior changes if your team is working remotely.

That's why it's important that you **regularly check in** with your team members – and ensure their workloads are manageable. It's also a good idea to revisit and clearly define everyone's roles and responsibilities from time to time. Indeed, a 2018 Gallup study of 7,500 US workers found unmanageable workloads and a lack of clarity about roles are the main causes of burnout. [3]

If your people have high pressure roles, try rotating them out of exhausting positions for less stressful tasks, if practical to do so. It's also counterproductive for people to work long hours for extended periods of time. That's because their productivity and efficiency levels will start to drop.

A change of pace can shift energy levels too, by taking the pressure off and allowing people to **replenish and revitalize**.
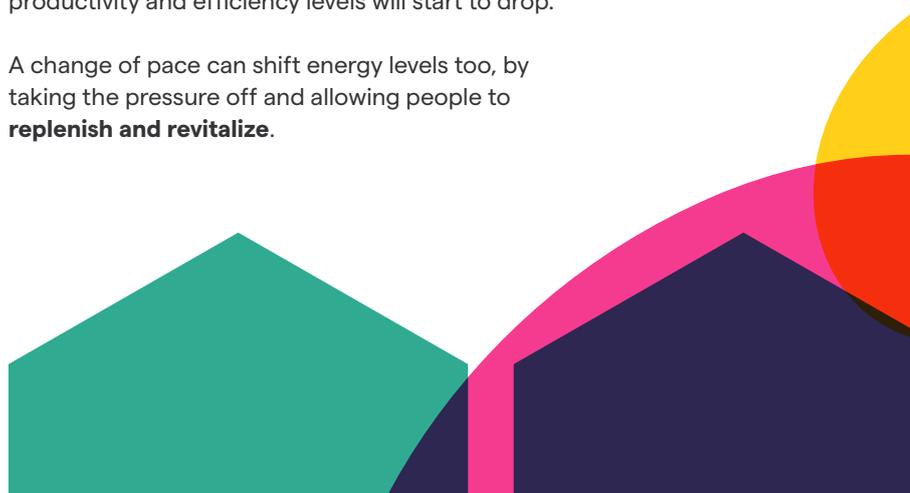
3. Encourage a support network

If you're a manager, it may not be easy for employees to open up to you about work and personal pressures. It's important to let them know you're there to listen. But equally, you should encourage team members to talk to one another in person or virtually and seek each other's support, particularly during times of pressure. This can help **prevent feelings of isolation** that can contribute to employee burnout.

If you're concerned about a team member, you might refer them to internal sources of support such as your HR department, a staff counsellor, occupational health service, or employee assistance helpline.

You can also point people to mindfulness apps such as **Headspace** to help ease stress. And mental health support charities such as **Mind** in the UK and **Mental Health America**.

Where appropriate, encourage employees to make use of external support networks too, such as family, friends or professional contacts.

Connecting with people outside the organization provides an outlet for people to let off steam or talk candidly about work pressures.

4. Consider professional coaching

Regular sessions with a coach, if practical, can also be a good way to help an employee in danger of burnout. Coaching can enable the team member to identify and address the underlying factors and behaviors that lead to them feeling unable to cope.

By giving the employee space and time to reflect in a non-judgmental setting, they can find new ways of thinking and doing, helping them to minimize stress, develop and grow.

5. Set a positive example

If you work long hours, consider the impact this has on your team. If they feel compelled to follow your lead, this can create a negative culture of presenteeism.*

So, set a positive example by clocking off at a reasonable time and ensuring your team members do the same. You should **encourage people to take regular breaks**, too, and eat lunch away from their workstations.

Annual leave is also important to help people recharge physically and mentally from the stresses of the workplace. Nudge people to take their full quota of holidays. Even if 'getting away' right now is loafing on the sofa.

* Presenteeism is the opposite of absenteeism. It describes a work culture where employees come to work in spite of illness or because they're following an example set by their peers or senior management. It also describes the expectation that employees are present regardless of work being available or getting done.

6. Up-skill your team

Employees are more likely to burn out if they feel dissatisfied with their career or current job position. Which is why it's important to ensure team members have access to professional development opportunities.

When people feel they lack the knowledge and skills needed to do a good job, they are prime candidates for burnout. You can work with them to identify their learning needs and offer regular training on new processes, systems or technology.

Paula Davis-Laack, founder of **The Stress & Resilience Institute** also recommends giving everyone a say when setting work goals. That's because we're more intrinsically motivated (and less affected by stress) when we have a say in how we work and what we learn. [4]

7. Praise team members

It's important to praise your team and individuals regularly for their efforts. Praise releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that controls the brain's reward and pleasure center.

As well as making us feel good, dopamine also contributes to innovative thinking and creative problem-solving. [5]

8. Work smarter

Effective time management techniques go a long way to preventing the onset of burnout. You can help to reduce work-related stresses by delegating projects and assignments appropriately. And helping each team member prioritize their work. Make sure any deadlines you set for your team are realistic and achievable. If people need to start early and/or and finish late, encourage them to start later the next day, if possible, to start the day refreshed.

Apps such as **Asana** and **Trello** can help you prioritize, collaborate and make deadlines transparent for everyone in your team. They can also be particularly useful If some or all of your team work remotely.

Psychotherapist Francis Walker argues that prioritizing can help with out-of-work stresses, too. "When others seem like the perfect boss, parent, fitness idol and friend all at the same time," she says, "they're probably misleading us – or at the very least getting a lot of help." She advises we forget one day at a time and **focus on one thing at a tim**e. [6]

9. Encourage fun

Work can be a serious business. By encouraging some fun in the workplace, you can help to alleviate some of the symptoms of stress.

Try to give your team some tasks that will spark their creativity, innovation and imagination. Teambuilding exercises and social events can also be a good way to encourage people to relax and bond in a less formal setting.

If you're catching up virtually, video conferencing apps such as Zoom let you set up fun backgrounds and run breakout sessions. And companies like **Goose's** run online quizzes you can all play together.

As a manager, you have a key role to play in ensuring your team doesn't suffer undue stress. By following these tips, you can take a proactive approach and stop burnout before its sets in.

Worried you might be in danger of burning out yourself? Try the **Maslach Burnout Inventory**. This test is used by the MBI-General Survey to measure factors like exhaustion, cynicism, and how well you think you're doing at work. You could also share this test with your team.

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[1] 'How to tell if you're close to burning out'. Available at: **https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190610-how-to-tell-if-youve-got-pre-burnout** (accessed 16 April 2020).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ben Wigert and Sangeeta Agrawal, 'Employee Burnout, Part 1: The 5 Main Causes' (2018). Available at: **https://www.gallup.com/workplace/237059/employee-burnout-part-main-causes.aspx** (accessed 16 April 2020).

[4] '5 things that resilient teams do differently' (2019). Available at: **https://www.fastcompany.com/90364553/5-things-that-resilient-teams-do-differently** (accessed 16 April 2020).

[5] 'Turbocharging Employee Engagement: The Power of Recognition from Managers. Part 2 – The Circle of Recognition' (2011). Available at: **https://www.bl.uk/business-and-management/collection-items/suppressed-by-publisher/willis-towers-watson/turbocharging-employee-engagement-the-power-of-recognition-from-managers-part-2-the-circle-of-recognition** (accessed 16 April 2020).

[6] 'How to tell if you're close to burning out'. Available at: **https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190610-how-to-tell-if-youve-got-pre-burnout** (accessed 16 April 2020).