

# How to Douse Chronic Workplace Stress Before It Explodes into Full Burnout

By Antoaneta Tileva

June 1, 2021

If it's true, according to a recent Gallup study, that nearly 8 in 10 workers experience burnout on the job at least sometimes (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/282659/employee-burnout-perspective-paper.aspx>)—and more than 1 in 4 experience it "very often" or "always"—then it's clear that "chronic workplace stress has not been successfully managed," as the World Health Organization has said.

"Burnout is when people have been highly engaged for a long time, without the personal skills and organizational support to maintain their well-being," said Lindsay Lagreid, senior advisor at the Limeade Institute, a Bellevue, Wash.-based institute that conducts research on employee well-being.

Unsurprisingly, employee burnout levels in 2020—the year of the pandemic—were high, with one major shift (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/323228/remote-workers-facing-high-burnout-turn-around.aspx>) from previous years: Fully remote workers are now experiencing more burnout than onsite workers. Before the pandemic, the perks of working remotely—either part- or full-time—led to lower levels of burnout compared with employees who were onsite all the time.

Burnout has effects on the micro and macro levels. If employees' well-being suffers, they may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. They may also become less productive and unfocused.

Managers play a significant role in employees' mental health and can take several approaches to ease the effects of burnout:

**Conduct regular and varied check-ins.** Brandon Greiner is vice president of operations for MedExpress, a Morgantown, W.Va.-based urgent care provider. He emphasized the need for honesty and transparency from both managers and employees: "An important first step in keeping stress in check is for managers to regularly check in with employees and encourage them to provide honest feedback regarding their workload, work environment and responsibilities." These discussions can take a variety of forms, including hosting group or individual talks, creating employee surveys, and reviewing employment data.

Lagreid advises managers to "start asking better questions."

"Asking 'How ya doing?' and accepting answers like 'I'm fine' or 'hanging in there' aren't going to cut it anymore." Instead, try more specific questions like:

\*Have you been able to complete your projects on time? If not, why do you think that is?

\*Do you have the resources you need to get your work done? If not, what else would you need?

\*What can I do to make your job easier?

**Educate employees on what burnout is.** Educate your team on what burnout is and how it shows up, so they have the right language to describe their experience to you.

Workplace burnout is not a medical condition. Rather, it is a sense of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a feeling of reduced accomplishment, Greiner said. He defines workplace burnout as "often characterized by feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization and inefficacy. Workplace stress can cause mental and physical reactions that make employees less effective. Prolonged stress, which results in severe mental, emotional and physical fatigue, can lead to burnout."

Said Lagreid: "First is a deep feeling of exhaustion—almost a soul-level feeling of depletion, not just needing a good night of sleep. The second step is cynicism—being 'fed up' or negative. This cynicism is how the brain protects itself from the source of exhaustion. The final stage of burnout is inefficacy—feeling like there's no point and having a loss of hope, optimism and purpose, [and asking] 'Why do I even try.' "

Some potential signs of workplace burnout include:

- \*An increase in irritability or conflict.
- \*A pessimistic outlook or marked lack of interest.
- \*Decreased productivity or quality of work.
- \*Fatigue or exhaustion.
- \*Restlessness or insomnia.
- \*Increase in physical illness or discomfort.
- \*Mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression.
- \*Isolation or avoidance in the workplace.
- \*Decision fatigue.
- \*Concentration or memory issues.

Identifying the root causes of employee stress is the hard part, as is making successful organizational adjustments. "For instance, if employees find that long work hours contribute to stress, managers could consider accordingly adjusting work schedules," Greiner advised.

"Evaluate workload, turnaround time expectations and support. Find things you can take off employees' plates or find more efficient ways to get things done. All the burnout recovery in the world isn't going to last long if an employee comes back to the exact same reality that caused the burnout in the first place," Lagreid said.

**Reflect on your management style.** Managers should self-reflect. Are too many mandatory meetings getting in the way of completing work? Are assignments aligned with employees' strengths? Managers can also do simple things that can make a big difference, such as not scheduling meetings during the lunch hour or late on a Friday.

"If you haven't fostered that level of vulnerability and trust within your team, start by answering those check-in questions yourself," Lagreid said. "Be honest with your team about your own challenges and stressors, so they feel safe doing the same with you."

**Encourage downtime and unplugging.** People need time to recharge. Managers should encourage their employees to take time off. Lagreid advises managers to "model healthy boundaries for employees. Take walking meetings, don't respond to e-mails outside of working hours, and take time away from work. Share the things you do to take care of your well-being, and ask them to share what works for them."

Other tips include starting meetings by sharing fun trivia, holding a moment of mindful breathing or having workers share the things they're grateful for.

**Identify and encourage employee strengths.** "Share specific and thoughtfully-worded gratitude often: Tell your people the specific skills and strengths they have and the value that brings to the team and the organization. Recognize contributions and celebrate wins," Lagreid said.

**Get familiar with resources for your employees.** Make sure you, as a manager, are well-acquainted with your company's employee assistance program or other mental health resources, how to contact them, and what the benefits are so that you can steer your workers to those resources when needed.

"Burnout has become commonplace in the modern workplace, and it doesn't need to be this way," Lagreid said. "The best strategy is an ever-present, strategic approach to employee well-being that is supported by the organization ... from the top down and is integrated into daily work-life. ... Creating a culture where well-being is a priority can provide the safety net needed to prevent and address employee burnout."

Remember that everyone deals with stress differently, Greiner said. What's stressful to one person might not affect another. Additionally, factors outside of work, such as taking care of children or elderly parents, health issues, or personal issues like loneliness or depression, can impact people's ability to manage stress.

"It's important to recommend resources that are appropriate for the individual employee," Greiner said. "Promoting a meditation app may not be ideal, for instance, if the worker doesn't enjoy using technology."

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