

# Employee burnout: How to keep your team strong



If you've noticed your team members lacking energy, being more negative than usual or not being quite as productive, you may be witnessing signs of burnout. It's included in the ICD-11, the International Classification of Diseases book authored by the World Health Organization (WHO). And it results from "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."<sup>1</sup>

**Burnout isn't new, but the pandemic has definitely made it more common.** A global study of employees done in fall 2020 showed just how stressed most people are feeling.<sup>2</sup>

**85%**  
said their  
well-being had  
declined.

- **56%** said their job demands had increased.
- **62%** of people struggling to manage workload had experienced burnout "often" or "extremely often" in the previous three months.
- **55%** said they couldn't balance their home and work life, especially with kids in online learning.

Burnout isn't just something to think about because you care for your employees' well-being. It's also important to your business. It can lead to decreased productivity, high turnover, low employee engagement and negative health impacts.<sup>3</sup>

## **Understanding and support: Reducing workplace burnout**

Experts point to six main causes of burnout: unsustainable workload, perceived lack of control, insufficient rewards for effort, lack of a supportive community, lack of fairness, and mismatched values and skills.<sup>4</sup> While you may not be able to address them all during the pandemic, there are ways you can help employees feel supported and reduce the symptoms they're feeling.

**Take on some of the burden.** Writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, Jennifer Moss notes, “While [the primary causes] are all organizational issues, we still prescribe self-care as the cure for burnout. We’ve put the burden of solving the problem squarely on the shoulders of individual employees.”<sup>2</sup> So while it’s good to encourage healthy eating, exercise and other ways to combat symptoms of burnout, don’t leave it up to employees to fix it themselves.

**Ask how they’re doing.** Nearly 40% of employees say their company hasn’t asked them how they’re doing since the pandemic started, and 40% want their manager to bring up the topic.<sup>5</sup> Take the time to ask, and be an active listener. But don’t make it a one-time thing. Make mental health an ongoing topic, so employees know it’s OK to speak up when they’re facing challenging times. Tell them about available resources, such as their employee assistance program, too.

**Rethink meetings.** While many meetings may be virtual instead of in person these days, meeting fatigue is nothing new. Before you send that next invitation, ask yourself if the meeting is necessary. If yes, ask if it can be shorter than originally planned.<sup>2</sup> Also, get a pulse for what your team wants in terms of informal or social time. A third of employees said their team doesn’t maintain any informal contact while working from home. And that lack of connection resulted in a 19% higher likelihood of mental health decline.<sup>5</sup> But if your team is already feeling overwhelmed, be cautious about trying to increase social time. Virtual happy hours or coffee breaks may only add to their stress.

**Reevaluate workload.** Being overworked was the top reason given for burnout and decreased well-being. And that was before the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> So if the same expectations for performance remain now, employees may be even more stressed. They might be trying to work while roommates are in the same space. They might be helping a parent who doesn’t feel safe going out for groceries and other errands. Or they might be stressed by a partner’s job loss. It’s a lot for anyone to deal with, and it’s no surprise work may suffer.

**Allow for flexibility.** If flexible work hours are a possibility for your team, offer them. Parents, for example, may want to use mornings to help their kids with online school and then work evenings instead. And keep in mind that people with families aren’t the only ones who are having a tough time right now. Millennials — who may or may not have kids — have the highest rates of burnout. One study found less autonomy at work, lower seniority, greater feelings of loneliness and bigger financial stressors to be the causes.<sup>2</sup>

It’s a tough time for everyone. And just because you’re the manager, that certainly doesn’t mean you’re without stress of your own. You may even be experiencing burnout yourself. Keep in mind there’s support out there, including your employee assistance program. And know that your team will appreciate the efforts you make right now — even if you can’t make their stress magically disappear.

1. World Health Organization. Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases. May 28, 2019. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>. Accessed February 24, 2021.

2. Moss J. Beyond burned out. *Harvard Business Review*. February 10, 2021. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/02/beyond-burned-out>. Accessed February 24, 2021.

3. business.com. Why you need to worry about employee burnout. June 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.business.com/articles/why-you-need-to-worry-about-burnout/>. Accessed February 24, 2021.

4. Maslach C, et al. Making a significant difference with burnout interventions: Researcher and practitioner collaboration. *J Organ Behav*. 33:296–300. February 2012. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/246546370\\_Making\\_a\\_significant\\_difference\\_with\\_burnout\\_interventions\\_Researcher\\_and\\_practitioner\\_collaboration](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/246546370_Making_a_significant_difference_with_burnout_interventions_Researcher_and_practitioner_collaboration). Accessed February 24, 2021.

5. Smith R. How CEOs can support employee mental health in a crisis. *Harvard Business Review*. May 1, 2020. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2020/05/how-ceos-can-support-employee-mental-health-in-a-crisis>. Accessed February 24, 2021.

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