

6 Causes of Burnout at Work

by Jill Suttie

Job burnout is on the rise, according to several surveys. People are feeling emotionally exhausted, detached from their work and colleagues, and less productive and efficacious. This makes them more likely to suffer health consequences, need sick days, and quit their jobs.

Not too surprisingly, burnout has become even more prevalent during the pandemic, particularly among health care professionals, causing widespread concern. But, while many employers recognize the problem, they often don't recognize the solutions, says journalist Jennifer Moss, author of the new book *The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It*. She argues that employers need to stop blaming employees for not being resilient enough and, instead, change the policies and workplaces cultures that breed burnout in the first place.

"If you want to address the burnout problem, the first step is repeating and internalizing this mantra: Burnout is about your organization, not your people," she writes. "Yoga, vacation time, wellness tech, and meditation apps can help people feel optimized, healthier. But when it comes to preventing burnout, suggesting that these tools are the cure is dangerous."

Her book argues that we can better address burnout if we recognize the signs of burnout, understand its causes, and take steps to combat it at its roots. Only by doing so will we really make work healthy, productive, and enjoyable—as it was meant to be.

What organizations shouldn't do

Understanding what causes burnout can help organizations better match their policies to the needs of their workforces. But too often employers try to offer simple solutions without changing anything substantial.

For example, giving employees on-site perks (like free meals and workout rooms) can backfire, says Moss, as people stay too long at work, missing out on the benefits of being with friends and family. Offering unlimited vacation time means nothing if people feel they can't take it—or, worse, return to a huge backlog of work after they do. Enforced team-building or holiday parties meant to build social bonds at work can become an added pressure, too, if they take away from employee personal time.

Some employer attempts at preventing burnout fail because they are band-aids to a larger problem or because employees believe that their bosses don't care about worker welfare as much as productivity. To counter that, organizational leaders should listen to

their employees and understand their situation before implementing programs designed to help, says Moss.

Causes of burnout—and how to fix them

In her book, Moss combs through the research on burnout, showing what's at the heart of burnout.

“Burnout is a complex constellation of poor workplace practices and policies, antiquated institutional legacies, roles and personalities at higher risk, and system, societal issues that have been unchanged, plaguing us for too long,” writes Moss.

Basic things must be in place for people to thrive at work—what she calls “good hygiene.” This includes paying people what they're worth (and on time), making sure they are physically and mentally safe, and providing the tools and resources they need to do their jobs. It also means being sure that discriminatory practices are not part of your workplace culture.

Beyond that, there are six main reasons people tend to burn out at work, she writes—each of them with a potential workplace solution:

[The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021, 256 pages)]

Workload. Overwork is a main cause of burnout. Working too many hours is responsible for the deaths of millions of people every year, likely because overwork makes people suffer weight loss, body pain, exhaustion, high levels of cortisol, sleep loss, and more.

Yet telling people to “just say no” to working more is bound to backfire, says Moss. People recognize that working less is interpreted as not showing initiative or not stepping up and it may be punished, formally or informally.

Instead, says Moss, employers need to help identify low-priority goals for their employees (so people don't push themselves too hard to meet goals that aren't urgent), match people's strengths to their job duties, provide more support when needs change suddenly, and have open and safe lines of communication, where feedback is encouraged and people can admit to mistakes. She also suggests things like implementing a four-day workweek, encouraging frequent walking breaks, and eliminating “work lunches” to help lessen workloads.

Perceived lack of control. Studies show that autonomy at work is important for well-being, and being micromanaged is particularly de-motivating to employees. Yet many employers fall back on watching their employees' every move, controlling their work schedule, or punishing them for missteps.

Instead, says Moss, it's important to help employees feel a sense of autonomy by backing off and acting more as a coach. Sure, it helps if you hire people with the right skills in the first place. But you can also increase autonomy by inviting employees to ask questions and express their needs, letting people set their own schedules and goals, and encouraging employees to find meaning in their jobs, writes Moss.

Lack of reward or recognition. Paying someone what they are worth is an important way

to reward them for their work. But so is communicating to people that their efforts matter.

“When we don’t acknowledge each other, both as peers and leaders, we lose our sense of value to the greater organizational mission and we stop feeling good about ourselves,” writes Moss.

Of course, rewards and recognition must be genuine and not fake or manipulative. And, while it’s important to express appreciation for a job well done, it’s also important to avoid pitting employees against one another or recognizing only certain people. Moss cautions employers not to implement recognition programs that elevate one part of a team over another. These instill jealousy or anger if people feel overlooked or believe the awards are undeserved.

She suggests gratitude from top leadership and peer-to-peer gratitude—and not just for meeting work goals, but for showing empathy and care for colleagues, too.

Poor relationships. Having a sense of belonging is necessary for mental health and well-being. This is true at work as much as it is in life. When people feel part of a community, they are more likely to thrive. As a Gallup poll found, having social connections at work is important. “Employees who have best friends at work identify significantly higher levels of healthy stress management, even though they experience the same levels of stress,” the authors write.

Of course, the opposite is also true—that poor relationships at work can lead to burnout. That’s why Moss suggests that employers pay attention to social needs and give people spaces where they can connect with colleagues around non-work-related topics. Encouraging volunteerism and building more inclusive cultures that are less competitive and more cooperative is also helpful.

Lack of fairness. Unfair treatment includes “bias, favoritism, mistreatment by a coworker or supervisor, and unfair compensation and/or corporate policies,” writes Moss. When people are being treated unjustly, they are likely to burn out and need more sick time.

Moss suggests that organizations need to have complaint mechanisms in place, respond to every grievance, and act promptly to resolve issues. Otherwise, resentment is bound to fester and grow. Additionally, unfair treatment due to racial or gender bias must be rooted out, as discrimination boosts the chance of burnout substantially.

Values mismatch. “Hiring someone whose values and goals do not align with the values and goals of the organization’s culture may result in lower job satisfaction and negatively impact mental health,” writes Moss. It’s likely that someone who doesn’t share in the organization’s mission will be unhappy and unproductive, too.

Values mismatches may be avoided through the hiring process. But workers can also become disillusioned if an organization doesn’t stand up for its own values, leading to withdrawal. Organizations that communicate values clearly and strive to fulfill their mission will more likely have satisfied employees.

The role of individuals in burnout

While organizations can do much to prevent burnout by setting kind, considerate workplace policies and improving workplace culture, individuals have a role to play, too. Understanding what burns you out and trying to alleviate it is important to keeping you

happy on the job.

Some people with particular personality traits or career paths may suffer burnout more easily, writes Moss. For example, those who have higher levels of neuroticism (over-worry), conscientiousness (especially if it leads to perfectionism—a potential problem), and introversion (in a highly social office) may be particularly susceptible.

Also, health care workers and teachers have higher levels of burnout than other professions, says Moss, because of the nature of their work and the personality types drawn to those jobs. And their potential stressors have only increased since the pandemic, as teachers scrambled to switch to remote teaching and health professionals witnessed increased suffering and COVID-19 deaths.

To help individuals do what they can to reduce burnout in themselves, Moss recommends saying no to things that are not necessary to do your job, without fear of “missing out” or disappointing others. She also suggests doing more of what you’re good at and less of the stuff that drains you—perhaps skipping the Zoom meeting with multiple people and phoning a person you need to talk to instead. Lastly, she notes how important it is to have friends—at work and outside of it—whom you can lean on when times are hard.

“We need to notice the roles we play and the moments they get too big for us,” she writes. And, she adds, “We need others to look out for us and protect us from the worst.”

Overall, changing organizational cultures to be more purpose-driven, kinder, and rewarding for workers is bound to help prevent burnout. By stopping overwork, communicating organizational values, fostering social bonds, and being fairer, more appreciative, and less controlling, organizational leaders can make sure they are supporting, and not hindering, worker well-being.

“Though employees are ultimately responsible for their own happiness, it is our responsibility to provide the conditions that support, and not detract, from their happiness,” writes Moss.