



Restoring Workplace Health, Well-being, and Productivity



Overview

As organizations navigate employees returning to the workplace and manage hybrid workforces, they will need to understand and address the employee experience. The mental health impact of these changes is real and affects employees at all levels. Persistent stress over time can lead to burnout, which impacts physical and mental health, the ability to focus, and relationships at work and at home.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, The Pew Research Center found that a third of Americans surveyed between March and April last year had experienced “high levels of psychological distress at some point during the extended period of social distancing undertaken to slow the spread of Covid-19.” The World Health Organization even included burnout as an occupational phenomenon in its International Classification of Diseases, but did not go as far as classifying it as a medical diagnosis.ⁱ

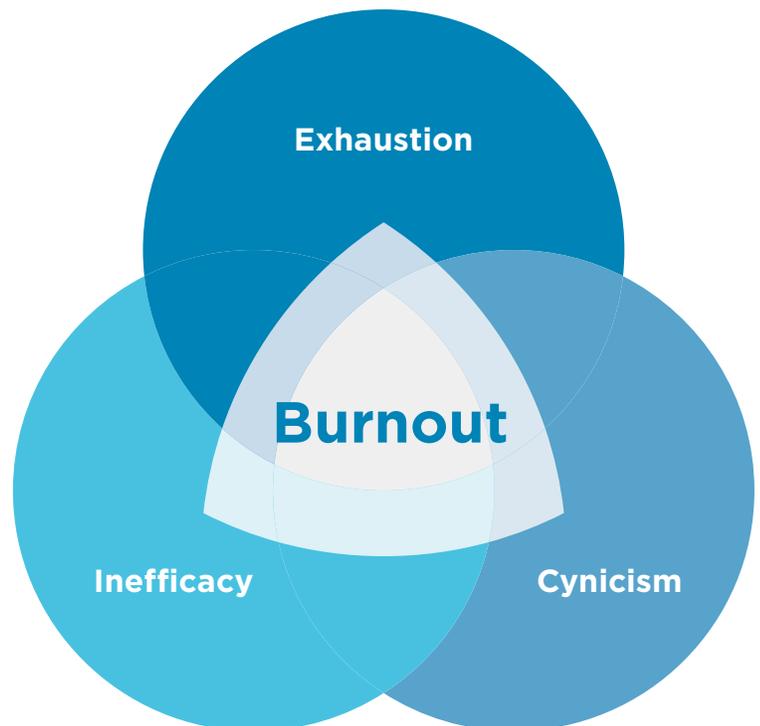
This paper will explain how to recognize burnout, identify its causes, and most importantly, how to resolve it. It will also address the current challenges facing companies as they transition from the disruptions of the pandemic to a more normalized workplace model, and will offer strategies to re-establish healthy, safe, inclusive practices that meet the needs of all employees. These strategies will help individuals and leaders increase engagement in today’s transitioning work environment and improve overall well-being in the workplace.

Burnout and Mental Health Support: Overcoming Exhaustion, Cynicism, and Inefficacy

Chronic stress can lead to burnout, and studies show that stress and burnout are at an all-time high. Remote work has led to increased rates of burnout, especially for those who must work from home 100% of the time. This can impact an individual’s motivation, productivity and have adverse outcomes on mental health. Recent studies overwhelmingly demonstrate this trend. A Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that 53% of Americans reported their mental health had been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over COVID-19.ⁱⁱ Additionally, the American Psychological Association reported 54% of essential workers relied on unhealthy habits to get through the pandemic, and 29% stated that their mental health had worsened.ⁱⁱⁱ Finally, 76% of employees polled by Gallup experienced burnout at least sometimes, and 28% said they are burned out “very often” or “always” at work.^{iv} The problem is indeed widespread.

Defining Burnout

In 2019, burnout was categorized as a “syndrome” that resulted from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Further, the World Health Organization defined workplace burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” with three chronic symptoms – Exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.^v



Symptoms of Burnout

The WHO goes on to discuss these symptoms in detail. The exhaustion associated with burnout presents as mental and physical symptoms that involve the loss of energy, a chronic worn-out feeling, depletion, debilitation, and fatigue. It is well beyond simply “feeling tired.” The cynicism experienced by people suffering from burnout is marked by a shift in attitude about work, disengagement, and a mental and emotional distancing from one’s job. Negative attitudes, irritability, loss of motivation and withdrawal become the prevailing states of mind for individuals in this condition. Finally, the feeling of incompetence, lack of a sense of personal accomplishment, low morale, and/or an inability to cope are emblematic of those experiencing the symptom of inefficacy.

Burnout can be a combination of all three of these symptoms and often is difficult to recognize. Frequently, burnout begins as a slow progression, and can become pervasive over time. In terms of outcomes, burnout negatively impacts the health and well-being of employees, and can lead to absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, disengagement, and lack of commitment. These consequences, in turn, may result in a decline in productivity, and, potentially, turnover. Burnout can be catastrophic for the individual employee, and it also disrupts the organizational health of the entire team. Cynicism, in particular, has been found to be the pivotal aspect of burnout in predicting turnover.

Causes of Burnout

The causes of work-related burnout are diverse, complex, and vary by the individual and type of organization. However, the following factors are commonly correlated with high levels of job burnout, particularly as they related to the pandemic and post-pandemic landscape:

- › Uncertainty, whether it be professional, financial, medical, emotional, relational, or mental
- › Fear of illness
- › Family responsibilities with school-age children, elderly relatives, etc.
- › Isolation, lack of socialization, loneliness
- › Managing unpredictable or inconsistent workload
- › Adjusting to various workplace models and collaborating with coworkers in new and unfamiliar ways

Once the symptoms and causes of burnout are identified, there is ample opportunity for companies to address it through a number of accessible strategies

From Burnout to Engagement

The solution to burnout? Engagement. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, “Burnout prevention requires reducing workplace stress while upping employee engagement.”^{vi} When employees are engaged, they are productive and fulfilled. They exhibit health, well-being, vigor, energy, dedication and motivation. They have a strong sense of efficacy and are stimulated by their work. Moreover, they are productive, collaborate effectively, and are generally much healthier than their counterparts suffering from burnout.

Effective organizations and leaders strive for an engaged and healthy workforce, but today they are facing new challenges in supporting their employees.

These new challenges include:

- › Embracing the new workplace model – onsite, remote, and hybrid workforces
- › Managing and supporting remote employees
- › Safety protocols and reintegrating into the workplace
- › Supporting healthy lifestyles

Embracing the New Workplace Model

The workplace has changed, and the companies that will successfully emerge are those that embrace the journey ahead. A recent McKinsey study of over 1200 global leaders and teams ranked adaptability as one of the top capabilities identified as crucial for supporting growth and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders who display inspiration, hope, and optimism tempered by reality will be most effective in building confidence, efficacy, and endurance in their teams.^{vii} The result is greater resiliency, which the American Psychological Association defines as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress.”^{viii}

One of the biggest challenges in this area has been to keep the team together, and that is likely to remain an issue as companies manage multiple work environments—virtual, hybrid, and in-person.

Regardless of the assortment of work models and locations, there are five key strategies to fostering a successful, resilient team.

- 1. Lead with awareness and recognition** that unlike the office, where conditions are uniform and stable for all, everyone’s home office arrangement is different. In addition to this recognition, good leaders foster acceptance and awareness so that all employees are affirmed and included regardless of their situation.
- 2. Set and respect boundaries.** The lines between work and home have become blurred, to say the least, so companies must lead by example. Establish clear working hours—but allow for the fact that some employees may need to work late at night or early in the morning to accommodate young children or other home and family responsibilities.
- 3. Respect workflow and workloads** and avoid last-minute assignments or rushed deadlines.
- 4. Communicate** effectively to ensure that all team members are up to date regardless of where they are working. Provide regular, honest, constructive feedback. For remote employees this is especially critical, as the day-to-day, casual encounters and catch-ups onsite will not occur.
- 5. Create opportunities for social encounters**—whatever that looks like for your team. These can be virtual coffee breaks, trivia or game competitions, brown bag lunch meetings or potlucks, brief outdoor walks, or enrichment classes (online or in-person, and unrelated to work, e.g., cooking, painting, fitness, etc.)

Managing and Supporting Remote Employees

Research shows that nearly 100% of managers rate themselves as supportive of employees with families, yet only half of their subordinates agree.^{ix} This does not imply that managers are dismissive or uncaring, it simply demonstrates that in this new and uncharted landscape, everyone is navigating a steep learning curve.

Supervisors and managers can promote engagement and well-being among their staffs through strong, fair, inclusive leadership. Setting clear expectations, embracing transparency, practicing flexibility, and providing ample resources all contribute to healthy, productive low-stress work environments. Managers should listen carefully to employees, perhaps scheduling short, one-on-one check-ins to understand how they are coping; these can mimic the past in-person casual encounters at the water cooler or coffee station, and they foster connection and empathy. Importantly, they offer insight into how employees are doing, and enable managers to adjust, accommodate, and adapt when necessary. Managers should strive to provide an optimal work environment, which will help employees manage stress.

Even as companies transition to hybrid and in-person workplace models, virtual communication will continue to comprise a significant portion of meetings and interactions. As a result, it is essential to arm employees with the best techniques and tools to optimize this format. With far less nonverbal communication at play, employees need to be more attentive to what is said. The ability to “read the room” and decipher social cues is less important in virtual communication as full body language is almost nonexistent. Further, the need to be well prepared for this type of meeting is paramount, because the use of notes and scripts makes for inauthentic communication and conveys the appearance of inattention.

The Four Problems of “Zoom Fatigue” and How to Address Them^x

Intense overload or close eye contact	Minimize face sizes
Seeing yourself constantly is fatiguing	Use the hide self view button
Reduction in mobility	Move the camera farther away to allow wider frame for you to move/gesture and turn video off periodically and stretch
Brain is working harder because of limited nonverbal cues	Take audio breaks—turn off camera briefly and turn away from screen

Safety Protocols and Reintegration into the Workplace

As we emerge and “bounce forward,” it is clear that many past social norms have changed, at least for the foreseeable future. Shaking hands and other incidental physical contact will be reduced or eliminated. Communal dining, buffets, and birthday candles will likely disappear. Hand sanitizer and wipes will be commonplace, and mask-wearing in crowds and while traveling will remain. In addition, videoconferencing will reduce business travel, and we will continue to evolve into a “tele-world” as the effectiveness, efficiency, and economy of this model have been clearly established.

But humans need to feel connected, so innovative companies will develop ways for employees to gather, connect, and belong. The role of in-person work has shifted—it is no longer about “where you work”; rather, it is about where (and how) you collaborate, socialize, and convene. The role of the workplace has expanded—there is a strong push to create workplace community and collegiality as other social interactions, which may have taken place at gyms or restaurants have become limited.

Companies that embrace the following strategies as they reintegrate into the workplace will optimize the individual and organizational experience. These best practices will enhance employee health and well-being, and foster productivity.

- > Put people first: create human-centric experiences that prioritize employee safety and empowerment
- > Make short- and long-term plans: conduct comprehensive pandemic-awareness training, COVID testing and vaccines, flu shots, condition support and monitoring
- > Establish partnerships with trusted experts: access professional support to avoid overburdening human resources and safety teams—their well-being is a priority, too

Supporting Healthy Lifestyles

Encouraging and modeling healthy habits is critical in restoring professional, mental, physical, and emotional well-being in the workforce. Creating a culture and community that prioritizes employee health will enhance productivity and demonstrate that the company cares about its people. There are many effective ways to maximize employee health and well-being; these include:

- > **Nutrition Services**
- > **Tobacco Cessation**
- > **Injury Prevention Coaching**
- > **Wellness Coaching**

Food as Medicine

Many health plans include one-on-one personalized sessions with a Registered Dietitian as a covered preventive benefit. As companies transition back to the office or to a hybrid work model, there is an opportunity to support employees as they set and achieve their nutritional goals and optimize their health. The pandemic presented many challenges to health and well-being, and many people neglected their nutrition and self-care. Nutrition is a critical component of physical, mental, and emotional health, and engaging the nutrition services of Registered Dietitians is a recommended way to improve all three.

Tobacco Cessation Programs

With more employees working from home through the pandemic, factors like stress and loneliness (and no smoke-free environment rules) have contributed to increased tobacco use. Companies that strive to create a culture of well-being must offer a smoking cessation program that provides comprehensive, personalized support for employees whether they are working remotely or returning to the office.

Injury Prevention Coaching

Providing employees with a comprehensive injury prevention coaching program reduces work-related injuries and illnesses. Coaches educate the workforce in proper body mechanics and safe movement techniques, mindful awareness, and healthy habits to reduce risk. They also advocate for employee health and safety and offer individualized approaches to behavior change. Coaching includes blood pressure and body composition monitoring, group workshops, and stretch and flex classes.

Wellness Coaching

Trained, professional Wellness Coaches maximize employee engagement in all employer wellness and benefits offerings while also providing personalized, one-on-one support for improved health. Coaches help employees develop a foundation of well-being and safety and connect them to resources to address chronic disease management (Registered Dietitians), tobacco cessation, and mental health (EAP).

Coordinated Wellness Solutions

Employee health directly impacts organizational health. If members of the workforce are experiencing burnout, they risk illness and injury, underperformance, and potential turnover. Organizations that embrace a people-first philosophy, plan strategically, and access support for their teams through trusted wellness providers are likely to foster health and well-being among their workforces and resolve burnout. Accessing the support of dedicated healthcare professionals can help maximize employee engagement, facilitate regular communication, and encourage positive coping behaviors, all of which combat burnout, and improve employee health and well-being.

Conclusion

Restoring workplace health, well-being and productivity is a high priority for companies as they begin to “bounce forward” into the post-pandemic era. Supporting employees as they make this transition, whether it be to working in-person, remotely, or as a hybrid model, is essential to both the health of the individuals and the health of the organization. For companies preparing for this transition, the appropriate resources are critical. We encourage you to consider how you can support employees and optimize organizational well-being through intentional strategies and comprehensive, integrated healthcare resources.

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