



Help employees overcome burnout.

Nearly all employees have experienced a bad day at work. However, experiencing a prolonged period of poor motivation and a lack of career satisfaction could indicate a more chronic, serious problem: burnout.

In 2019, the [World Health Organization](#)¹ recognized burnout as an occupational health issue. In a [2021 survey](#)² of more than 5,000 full-time employees from around the world, nearly one-half reported feeling at least somewhat burned out.

What is burnout?

Professional burnout is [defined](#)³ as experiencing emotional, mental and physical exhaustion resulting from work-related stress. It can lead a worker to feel emotionally drained, poorly motivated and less productive.



“Burnout is a work-related syndrome that can be particularly prevalent in occupations where others’ needs come first,”

says Dr. Diane McIntosh, psychiatrist and formerly Chief Neuroscience Officer at TELUS. She has more than 20 years of experience caring for patients diagnosed with mental illness, as well as professionals dealing with burnout.

According to Dr. McIntosh, burnout is also prevalent in environments where there are high demands and limited resources and where there is a disconnect between workers’ expectations and their experiences.

Signs to watch for.

When reflecting on her own experience of professional burnout, Dr. McIntosh says it came as a complete shock. “Patient care was my passion,” she explains. “I realized I’d become exhausted by what had become a daily battle to get the right care for my patients. Most people don’t realize it’s possible to love what you do and still experience burnout.”



It's normal to experience stress from time to time, at work and at home, and some level of stress can be healthy. It can motivate us to accomplish goals, leading to greater productivity and a sense of mastery and accomplishment. But burnout is different.

While burnout may be associated with stress-related symptoms, such as changes in sleep or appetite, and physical symptoms, such as headaches or backache, it's the connection with chronic work stress that is the main clue. This is not healthy stress, but a stress that can ultimately lead to worsening symptoms and even illness.

"Burnout isn't a mental illness, but it can be on the path to developing one," Dr. McIntosh explains. "This is why it's so important for it to be recognized and addressed."

If you're more easily frustrated or less patient at work, if you've lost your usual patience or compassion for your co-workers or customers, if your confidence at work has hit a low, or if you're feeling increasingly cynical, it's important to consider whether you may be burned out.

How to overcome burnout.

If you think your employees may be experiencing burnout, know that they are not alone. Here are some tips and tools you can consider sharing with them that might help them turn their burnout around.

- 1. Start at work, by talking to your supervisor.** They might not be aware of the challenges you're facing, or the challenge might be more widespread than you realize. Your leader can help to address the problem, including potentially adjusting your workload, or share what the organization is doing to manage a more widespread, systemic problem.
- 2. Burnout can lead you to feel isolated and withdrawn,** which unfortunately can worsen your engagement at work. It's not uncommon for others in the same workplace to experience similar challenges. By sharing your experience and ensuring you stay solution-focused rather than focusing on the negative outcomes, you and your teammates can work together to find creative solutions.
- 3. Taking the time to socialize with your co-workers** may be helpful and boost your sense of belonging and confidence. This may be particularly challenging during the pandemic, when so many are working from home, so it requires a thoughtful approach and setting aside time specifically to personally connect.
- 4. Work with your leader** to ensure there are clear team guidelines regarding communication, whether via email, text or any other method. Those "rules of engagement" should be shared and agreed to by all team members, because failure to adhere can impact everyone's health and wellbeing. Working from home means we're never truly away from the office, so everyone must be empowered to make that break at the end of the shift or workday, shutting off communication, as well as taking vacation time that allows you to completely disconnect from work responsibilities.
- 5. It's important to get the support** you need and speaking with a healthcare professional or specialist may help navigate burnout.



Other things your employees can do include:



Exercise

(just a 30-minute brisk walk every day can help)



Meditation



Get enough sleep

(most adults require 7-9 hours every night)



Eat healthily

However, it's important to remember that burnout is as much an organizational issue as it is a personal issue. Employees taking care of themselves supplements the efforts of organizations to provide a safe and healthy workplace.

There's always a path forward.

For Dr. McIntosh, overcoming burnout meant a shift in her professional focus.

“My path back from burnout, which is still a work in progress, meant a break from clinical care. This was incredibly difficult for me because I felt deeply responsible for the wellbeing of my patients, and I had almost nowhere to send them. Many didn't even have a family doctor, let alone access to another psychiatrist.”

But shifting gears allowed Dr. McIntosh the space to focus full-time on other areas of her professional life. “My shift from individual patient care to medical education and writing has become my way of reaching as many people as I can, hopefully helping more than I could through my clinical practice,” she says.

Everyone's journey is different, but regardless of how hopeless you may feel in a particular situation, there is always a path forward.

“ Sometimes we experience a massive, sudden change that completely alters our course, and those are often the most challenging to navigate, ”

Dr. McIntosh says, “but the journey to overcome those challenges and the change that comes from the journey can turn out to be the most rewarding.”



1. World Health Organization. (2019, May 28). Burn-out an “Occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases. World Health Organization. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>. 2. Employee burnout is ubiquitous, alarming--and still underreported. McKinsey & Company. (2021, April 16). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis/charting-the-path-to-the-next-normal/employee-burnout-is-ubiquitous-alarming-and-still-underreported>. 3. Career Burnout. CAMH. (n.d.). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/career-burnout>. Article based on “Overcoming Burnout,” originally published on Telus Latest Thinking blog Personal · Nov 23, 2021 Authored by: Mental Health Team, TELUS Health Care Centres