CONQUERING BURNOUT

Job satisfaction is a surprisingly fragile state. Here's how to protect yourself against the top contributors to burnout

By Michael P. Leiter and Christina Maslach

YOU LIE IN BED IN THE MORNING, RELUCTANT TO SWING YOUR LEGS OUT FROM under the warm embrace of your blanket. After several bleary minutes, you finally rouse yourself, throw on some clothes and head to the office. Having arrived at your desk, you stare blankly as e-mail loads on your screen. When you first started this job, you derived deep satisfaction from addressing the day's challenges efficiently and artfully. Yet the optimism that used to buoy you is long gone. Now your morning coffee gives you the only jolt of energy you'll feel all day. The details differ by profession, but this state of being is the essence of burnout. It undoes a person's ability to pursue a happy, healthy and productive professional life.

Given that many of us spend the bulk of our waking hours at work, burnout can pose a real threat to overall well-being. Often it begins with pure exhaustion. When you are worn out, you invest less in your job. As a result, you accomplish fewer things and feel less effective than you did before. Because work has ceased to offer the same psychological rewards, you start to feel cynical about your role. This set of emotions—exhaustion, feelings of inefficacy and cynicism—feed off one another, producing a vicious cycle of deepening burnout.

So do you just quit? Quitting is probably not the answer, although you might want to look for a different job. To recover a professional joie de vivre, it helps to understand the basics of burnout from a psychological perspective. Decades of research have revealed several core truths about the syndrome. First, banish the idea that it arises from a personal failing. People who face burnout do not lack some essential quality such as work ethic, resilience or self-confidence. When all goes well, we naturally tend to bring dedication and pride to our work. Burnout represents the erosion of these noble qualities. Research has consistently pointed to management practices and poor job designs as the leading causes. The ways supervisors lead, and the structure of employees' workdays, fail to bring out the best in people.

If you suffer from burnout, your relationship with your job has gone sour. Just as a fight with a partner or close friend can exhaust you and cause you to pull away from that person, so can a soured relationship with your job sap your enthusiasm and alienate you. Relationships are complicated things, however, so there is no single solution, no magic bullet, no "one size fits all" approach. Yet with patience and optimism, anyone can find a path back to engagement.

THE RISE OF BURNOUT

THE USE OF THE TERM "burnout" began gaining popularity in the 1970s, especially among people working in human services. Herbert Freudenberger, a psychologist at an alternative mental health agency, and one of us (Maslach) wrote early articles describing idealistic young professionals in health care and social work who were overextending themselves. They felt discouraged because they did not have sufficient resources to do their jobs well. Instead of building a better world, they felt they were marking time in a dysfunctional system.

The global pandemic that began in 2020 disrupted work life, increasing the intensity for some while decreasing the intensity for others. Everyone was affected. Imposed changes to work, such as shifts from meeting in person to online meetings, classes or interviews, can weaken a person's sense of efficacy. In addition to workload, responding to disruptions in itself drains energy. Concerns about personal safety can increase cynicism. An understandable rise in the dimensions of burnout need not endure, but it is essential that employers support employees as they manage these disruptions to their work life. With experience, people adapt to change, learning ways to create a fulfilling life at work.

Based on research evidence accumulated over several decades, in 2019 the World Health Organization (WHO) defined burnout as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy." The WHO also stated that it recognized burnout as an "occupational phenom-

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enon" and declared emphatically that "it is not classified as a medical condition."

Ultimately the true culprit is a mismatch between a person and the circumstances of a job. You might not have the resources you need, or your bosses might expect you to complete a task in a way that clashes with your principles. For example, health-care providers in our surveys often cite tensions between their professional ideals—to be emotionally supportive to their patients—and the constraints that undermine that goal, namely, insufficient staffing and outsized workloads. The quantity of work is important, but the real trouble arises from an employee's perception of his or her performance.

Another type of mismatch stems from lack of control. Letting people make decistions about how they spend their days is vital to a healthy work arrangement, but a sense of control can be easily eroded. Managers who set unrealistic expectations for an employee contribute to attrition. So do colleagues who do not communicate well. We all rely on others while doing our jobs, and poor communication can make our workdays more difficult and unpredictable than they need to be. When people feel they lack control over their own work, they are particularly prone to feeling cynical and ineffectual.

Bosses who fail to express their appreciation also contribute to workers' feelings of inefficacy. Indeed, we have found in our research that negative interactions with a supervisor incline a person toward burnout. Yet not all praise is created equal. We worked with one organization in which employees resented an employee-of-the-year award. The rank and file perceived the accolade as an indicator of who was in the good graces of company leaders and little else. Seemingly inequitable promotions can similarly harm engagement. In a 2014 survey that one of us (Leiter) conducted of people's feelings of burnout, one respondent wrote, "It is difficult to watch the randomness of why some are promoted and others are ignored. It drains the spirit from you." That interviewee directly linked a feeling of being unappreciated with a loss of energy—a strong indication of burnout.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

THE EMOTIONAL DISTRESS of this syndrome can persist for years. Because it can become chronic, we grew interested in discovering whether we might predict—and thus potentially ward off—the emergence of burnout. In a study published in 2008, we surveyed 446 employees of an administrative department at a large university, first at the beginning of our investigation and again a year later. We probed numerous areas of their work life to assess burnout. We were curious to see how people who scored high on one dimension—say, high cynicism or high exhaustion—would rate a year later. If they became more burned out, we wanted to know what tipping point might have sent them in that direction.

As it turned out, we found one such indicator: workplace fairness. People who perceived favoritism, cheating or other inequities were more likely to be burned out by the end of our study. Conversely, employees who viewed the workplace as a just environment tilted back toward engagement. A fluke event during the year of our study brought the issue of fairness into stark relief. Investigators uncovered department members who were stealing from their workplace. Our final survey occurred soon after a few employees were apprehended and dismissed, so we could assess how disruptive this event had been. The thefts undermined trust among colleagues, weakened employees' sense of job security and, as a result, deepened burnout.

Recent developments have distinguished burnout from other distressed states. Our research has identified three profiles in addition to the distressed "burnout" profile (exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy) and its opposite, the positive "engaged" profile (energy, involvement, efficacy). The "overextended" profile seems similar to burnout in its high exhaustion level but differs importantly by having lower levels of cynicism and inefficacy. The "disengaged" profile, in contrast, has high levels of

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cynicism but relatively low levels of exhaustion and inefficacy. People in the "ineffective" profile feel energetic and involved but lack a sense of professional efficacy.

These distinctions matter. Research revealed that people in the overextended profile had one overriding concern: work overload. They gave every indication that with effective help managing their workload, they would move toward the engaged profile. In contrast, people in the burnout profile had many concerns beyond work overload, such as control, community, reward and fairness. They seriously doubted any alignment of their workplace values with their personal or professional values. Making a difference for them would be a much bigger job. A more precise definition of the problem can facilitate more effective solutions.

THE SOCIAL SOLUTION

BECAUSE BURNOUT DEPENDS HEAVILY on the specific relationship between person and job, broad guidelines for recovery are hard to come by. Nevertheless, we now believe that improving the quality of workplace relationships may be one general way to intervene. Social exchanges between colleagues play a role in many facets of burnout.

As you might expect, people share more readily with individuals they admire and trust. Conversely, hostile workplaces eat away at a person's ability to focus on his or her work. Consider, for example, this anecdote, also from Leiter's 2014 survey, in which one person articulates the energy tax of negative interactions: "I love my work. I am an avid learner and a very positive person. But I work in a toxic workplace. This is a highly political environment that encourages competition between colleagues, backstabbing, gossiping and hiding information. I find going to work very difficult and come home exhausted." Other participants in our studies have similarly cited the emotional toll of unpleasant interactions. They describe feeling upset for days following a few rude words from a colleague and losing sleep over the incident—both factors that make it difficult to engage in what otherwise might be pleasurable tasks.

An opportunity to alleviate burnout arose in a meeting with leaders of a hospital in 2016. These executives had taken reasonable action to strengthen the sense of community in struggling work groups, including by changing team leaders and reassigning or dismissing identified troublemakers. Managers had brought in inspirational speakers and conducted team-building exercises. All of this effort met with minimal success.

To tackle this problem, Leiter and his research team built on

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their previous work on work-group-based civility programs to develop a new method called SCORE (Strengthening a Culture of Respect and Engagement). This focused process, occurring over five sessions, delivers a structured curriculum. The Leiter team's previous research had demonstrated that guiding work groups to reflect on their social encounters can improve civility, with the downstream benefit of alleviating burnout.

Knowing that burnout has a social angle, we deployed a work-group civility process in several units of the hospital. Some of these units had a long history of problems, others were uncommunicative, and some functioned well but aspired to collaborate more. Employees were divided into groups of 15 to 20 people from their same unit. With larger units, we offered the sessions multiple times. A professional facilitator from a local consulting firm facilitated the sessions, with assistance from a co-facilitator who was an employee of the participating organization.

Before we began, we surveyed all our participants on their perceptions of civility in their unit and on their own conduct so that we could compare their impressions at the beginning and the end of the program. We also assessed the dimensions of job burnout.

Over two or three months the teams met five times with three weeks between sessions. The facilitator started off the first session by asking, "How do we show respect (or disrespect) for one another here?" Then attendees practiced enacting civil exchanges, showing acceptance, acknowledgment, appreciation and accommodation of one another. Later sessions addressed responding to incivility, as well as promoting civility within their work groups.

The meetings gave employees a chance to work through strained relationships and engage in more productive ways of defusing emotions. Between sessions, workers practiced specific civility behaviors and tallied acts of kindness they witnessed.

The project has continued in other health-care settings, as well as in financial institutions, a radio station, and police and fire departments. The research on work-group-focused civility programs over the past decade confirms that they bring improvements in both workplace civility and burnout. Implementing the program across a variety of settings identifies the mechanisms that help work groups free themselves from dysfunctional social dynamics.

The SCORE approach reflects actions that arise from considering burnout as a relationship problem. Social encounters with colleagues, especially with supervisors, create points at which the work-group culture becomes personal. Infusing these encounters with respect inspires energy, involvement and efficacy—the opposite of burnout.

FINDING ENGAGEMENT

GIVEN THAT NOT EVERY COMPANY is about to start implementing SCORE, what is an individual worker to do? Many corporations may see squeezing every bit out of employees to be to their advantage. Organizations by and large do not expect to retain their employees forever, so they are unlikely to serve their workers' long-term interests. Employees thus must shoulder the responsibility of maintaining a sustainable work environment.

How employees define their relationship with work gives us insight into their larger aspirations for work. How much control do they desire, knowing control brings accountability? Is being fully involved in a vibrant workplace community essential? Most centrally, what are the core values that define a meaningful work life? In other words, establishing a fulfilling relationship with work becomes more likely for people who know what they are seeking. Such insight allows people to make their case.

Because burnout is a relationship issue, the individual has some, but not complete, control over circumstances. What follows are a few basic strategies for improving your contribution to the relationship. The good news is that many of these suggestions happen to be good for life in general, so you will benefit in many ways from developing these habits.

First up is fitness. A healthy way of life increases your resilience. A combination of sufficient exercise, nutrition and sleep will reduce your vulnerability to exhaustion. Although the job will not change, you will increase your endurance—and maybe even learn to thrive.

Closely related to fitness is a habit of integrating recovery cycles into your life. Demanding work depletes your physical, emotional and cognitive resources. As the saying goes, there is a reason it is called work. Your personal life should afford opportunities to enjoy relationships, catch up on sleep and take time for reflection. To reverse a trend toward burnout, a key step is to establish a firm structure for recovery activities. Lacking a structure, you will not make time for recovery in the course of a busy life.

You can incorporate small amounts of exercise and recovery into the workday, too. The strategy here is simple: get off your butt. Set an alarm every 30 minutes as a signal to get up and walk around. You can devise some activities that would convince an observer that this meandering is a necessary part of your work.

Now let us incorporate the social angle. As we demonstrated with SCORE, improving the quality of day-to-day exchanges among colleagues reduces burnout. You do not need your entire team to join you on this journey, but if you can recruit a friend or two to share a burnout-reduction project (a short midday walk, perhaps) the mutual support can be powerful.

Receiving good vibes from others is an uplifting experience, but so, too, is expressing them to others. Keep a tally of your own acts of kindness toward colleagues. To whom did you express appreciation today? Collaborating with a companion will, again, help you get the most out of this project.

Last, consider job crafting. You very likely have more latitude in your work than you think. Job crafting is an analytic approach that involves identifying the duties you find tedious and the aspects you find fulfilling. You should develop a plan to spend a bit more of your day on the good parts. Those increments can add up over time. Just ensure that the additional time you are spending on the fulfilling tasks makes a meaningful contribution, so as to keep your colleagues and supervisor onboard.

These ideas may sound like a big investment, but the truth is that burnout can be hard to shake. Once the syndrome has set in, you must commit to a deliberate practice to find your way back to a healthy, fulfilling relationship with work. Yet it can be done, so let's get started. SA

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