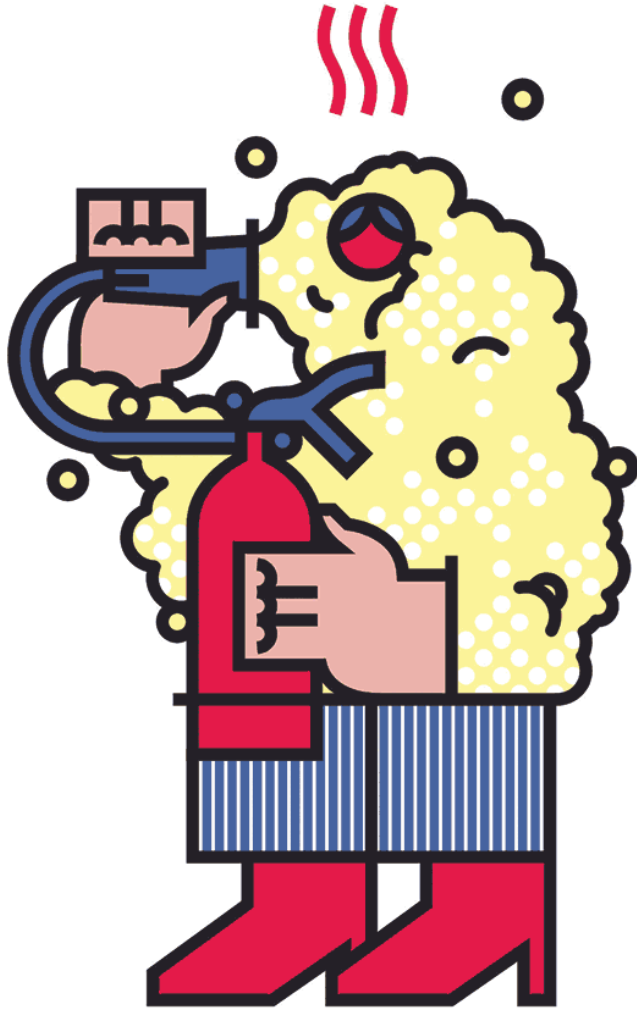


STRESS

Beating Burnout

by Monique Valcour

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THOMAS HEDGER

Heavy workloads and deadline pressures are a fact of managerial life. Who doesn't feel overwhelmed or stretched thin sometimes? But when relentless work stress pushes you into the debilitating state we call burnout, it is a serious problem, affecting not just your own performance and well-being, both on the job and off, but also that of your team and your organization.

Hard data on the prevalence of burnout is elusive since it's not yet a clinical term separate from stress. Some researchers say that as few as 7% of professionals have been seriously impacted by burnout. But others have documented rates as high as 50% among medical residents and 85% among financial professionals. A 2013 ComPsych survey of more

than 5,100 North American workers found that 62% felt high levels of stress, loss of control, and extreme fatigue. Research has also linked burnout to many negative physical and mental health outcomes, including coronary artery disease, hypertension, sleep disturbances, depression, and anxiety, as well as to increased alcohol and drug use. Moreover, burnout has been shown to produce feelings of futility and alienation, undermine the quality of relationships, and diminish long-term career prospects.

Consider the case of Barbara (last name withheld), the CEO of a PR firm that serves technology industry clients. During the 2001 collapse of the dot-com bubble, the challenge of keeping her business afloat added extra stress to an already intense workload. Focused on this “unrelenting hustle,” she neglected her health, lost perspective, and began to doubt her own abilities. Cheryl (not her real name), a partner in the Philadelphia office of a global law firm, hit the same sort of wall after she agreed to take on multiple leadership roles there in addition to managing her full-time legal practice. “I felt like my body was running on adrenaline—trying to do a marathon at a sprint pace—all the time,” she recalls. And yet she couldn’t step back mentally from work. Another executive I know—let’s call him Ari—felt trapped in his role as a consultant at a boutique firm. Toxic internal dynamics and client relationship practices that clashed with his values had eroded his sense of self to the point where he didn’t know how to go on—or get out.

Over the past 15 years as a coach, researcher, and educator, I’ve helped thousands of clients, students, and executive-development program participants in similar predicaments learn to manage the stress that can cause burnout and to ultimately achieve more-sustainable career success. The process involves noticing and acknowledging the symptoms, examining the underlying causes, and developing preventive strategies to counteract your particular pattern of burnout.

Three Components

Thanks to the pioneering research of psychologist Christina Maslach and several collaborators, we know that burnout is a three-component syndrome that arises in response to chronic stressors on the job. Let’s examine each symptom—exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy—in turn.

Exhaustion is the central symptom of burnout. It comprises profound physical, cognitive, and emotional fatigue that undermines people’s ability to work effectively and feel positive about what they’re doing. This can stem from the demands of an always-on, 24/7 organizational culture, intense time pressure, or simply having too much to do, especially when you lack control over your work, dislike it, or don’t have the necessary skills to accomplish it. In a state of exhaustion, you find that you’re unable to concentrate or see the big picture; even routine and previously enjoyable tasks seem arduous, and it becomes difficult to drag yourself both into and out of the office. This is how burnout started for Cheryl. Her fuel tank was low, and it wasn’t being adequately replenished.

Changes at the job, team, or organizational level are often required.

Cynicism, also called depersonalization, represents an erosion of engagement. It is essentially a way of distancing yourself psychologically from your work. Instead of feeling invested in your assignments, projects, colleagues, customers, and other collaborators, you feel detached, negative, even callous. Cynicism can be the result of work overload, but it is also likely to occur in the presence of high conflict, unfairness, and lack of participation in decision making. For example, after ignoring repeated directives to push solutions that didn't solve clients' problems, Ari realized that the constant battle with his bosses was affecting his own behavior. "I was talking trash and shading the truth more often than I was being respectful and honest," he explains. Persistent cynicism is a signal that you have lost your connection to, enjoyment of, and pride in your work.

Inefficacy refers to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity. People with this symptom of burnout feel their skills slipping and worry that they won't be able to succeed in certain situations or accomplish certain tasks. It often develops in tandem with exhaustion and cynicism because people can't perform at their peak when they're out of fuel and have lost their connection to work. For example, although Barbara was a seasoned PR professional, the stress of the dot-com crisis and her resulting fatigue caused her to question her ability to serve clients and keep the business thriving. But burnout can also start with inefficacy if you lack the resources and support to do your job well, including adequate time, information, clear expectations, autonomy, and good relationships with those whose involvement you need to succeed. The absence of feedback and meaningful recognition, which leaves you wondering about the quality of your work and feeling that it's unappreciated, can also activate this component. This was the situation for Ari, who felt that he was forced to function at a subpar level because his organization didn't care enough to support good performance.

While each component is correlated with the other two and one often leads to another, individuals also have distinct burnout profiles. Michael Leiter, a longtime collaborator with Maslach, is examining this in his current research. He has found, for example, that some people are mainly exhausted but haven't yet developed cynicism or begun to doubt their performance. Others are primarily cynical or suffer most from feelings of reduced efficacy. People can also be

high on two components and low on one. Although most of the prevention and recovery strategies we'll discuss are designed to address all three symptoms, it's a good idea to diagnose your specific burnout profile so that you know where you need the most help.

Recovery and Prevention

Situational factors are the biggest contributors to burnout, so changes at the job, team, or organizational level are often required to address all the underlying issues. However, there are steps you can take on your own once you're aware of the symptoms and of what might be causing them. Here are some strategies I have found to be successful with my clients.

Prioritize self-care.

It's essential to replenish your physical and emotional energy, along with your capacity to focus, by prioritizing good sleep habits, nutrition, exercise, social connection, and practices that promote equanimity and well-being, like meditating, journaling, and enjoying nature. If you're having troubling squeezing such activities into your packed schedule, give yourself a week to assess exactly how you're spending your time. (You can do this on paper, in a spreadsheet, or on one of the many relevant apps now available.) For each block of time, record what you're doing, whom you're with, how you feel (for example, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 0 equals angry or drained and 10 is joyful or energized), and how valuable the activity is. This will help you find opportunities to limit your exposure to tasks, people, and situations that aren't essential and put you in a negative mood; increase your investment in those that boost your energy; and make space for restful, positive time away from work.

Barbara says she bounced back from her bout of burnout by "learning to do things that fill me up." Nowadays, when she notices that she's feeling overly tired or starting to doubt herself, she changes her behavior immediately, making use of flexible work options, hosting walking meetings to get out of the office, and setting limits on the amount of time she spends reading e-mails and taking calls from colleagues and clients.

Help Prevent Burnout on Your Team

Burnout is rarely an individual phenomenon; fixing and preventing it requires leadership. You can help your team thrive by implementing the following advice.

After her crisis, Cheryl also became much more intentional about her time off. "I find that going away, getting a change of scenery, and 'taking it down a notch' allows my body and mind to

Watch for Warning Signs

- The signs of burnout are obvious in some people but subtle in others. Keep an eye out for tiredness, lack of focus, depressed mood, hostility, and expressions of hopelessness.
- Regularly check in with team members to gauge their physical, cognitive, and emotional energy levels.

Set Limits on Workloads

- Talk to your team about its collective capacity, and ensure that assignments and deadlines don't exceed it.
- Shield your team from external pressures, including unreasonable or unclear client and management demands.

Insist on Renewal

- Communicate that optimal performance depends on rest and renewal. Encourage people to set sensible limits on work hours.
- Set an example by keeping reasonable hours yourself.
- Make sure your team members take their full vacation time.

Boost Control

- Clarify expectations; grant flexibility on where, when, and how people get work done.
- Advocate for the resources your team needs to perform.
- Create uninterrupted time for people to make progress on important tasks.

Make Recognition Meaningful

rejuvenate,” she says. “And my creativity benefits: I have more ‘aha’ moments, and I’m better able to connect the dots.”

Shift your perspective.

While rest, relaxation, and replenishment can ease exhaustion, curb cynicism, and enhance efficacy, they don't fully address the root causes of burnout. Back at the office, you may still face the same impossible workload, untenable conflicts, or paltry resources. So now you must take a close look at your mindset and assumptions. What aspects of your situation are truly fixed, and which can you change? Altering your perspective can buffer the negative impact of even the inflexible aspects. If exhaustion is a key problem, ask yourself which tasks—including critical ones—you could delegate to free up meaningful time and energy for other important work. Are there ways to reshape your job in order to gain more control or to focus on the most fulfilling tasks? If cynicism is a major issue, can you shield yourself from the parts of the organization that frustrate you, while reengaging in your specific role and the whole enterprise? Or could you build some positive, supportive relationships to counteract the ones that drain you? And if you're feeling ineffective, what assistance or development might you seek out? If recognition is lacking, could you engage in some personal branding to showcase your work?

Cheryl worked with an executive coach to evaluate and reset her priorities. “I work in a competitive field and I’m a competitive person,

- Regularly highlight wins and successes, even small ones.
- Recognize and reward people for helping others.
- Note the positive impact of your team's work on others.

Emphasize Learning

- Routinely ask team members about their development goals and what resources are required to achieve them.
- Share what you're learning and how you're doing it.

Facilitate Mutual Support

- Talk regularly about progress toward team goals.
- At team meetings, ask what assistance people need and can offer one another.
- Be open about asking for and giving support.

Build Community

- Don't tolerate incivility on your team. Set an example for respectful, compassionate behavior toward others.
- Encourage people to share what's happening in their lives outside of work.

which can skew the way you see reality," she explains. "In the past I didn't dare say no to leadership opportunities because I was afraid that if I did, everything might disappear." She says she's now replaced that "scarcity" mentality with one that instead presumes abundance. "Now if I feel overextended, I'll ask myself, Is there a way to inject joy back into this role, or is it time to give it up? And I understand that when I want to take something on, I need to decide what to give up to make space."

Ari did the same sort of deep thinking. Although he had previously felt tethered to his job—the firm was prestigious, the pay was good—he realized that values and ethics meant more to him than any perk, so he eventually quit and started his own business. "After I pushed back a couple of times and said that what we were recommending wasn't right for the clients, my boss cranked up the pressure on me and assigned me to only the most difficult clients. At one point I said to my wife, 'It might be good if I got hit by a bus. I don't want to die, but I'd like to be injured enough that I'd have to stop working for a while.' She said, 'That's it; you're getting out of there.'" He took a few months to line up some independent consulting assignments and then made the move.

Reduce exposure to job stressors.

You'll also need to target high-value activities and relationships that still trigger unhealthy stress. This involves resetting the expectations of colleagues, clients, and even family members for what and how much you're willing to take on, as well as ground rules for working together. You may get pushback. But doubters must know that you're making these changes to improve your long-term productivity and protect your health.

Barbara, for example, is keenly aware of the aspects of PR work that put people in her field at risk of burnout, so now she actively manages them. “There’s constant pressure, from both clients and the media,” she explains. “But a lot of times, what clients label a crisis is not actually one. Part of the job is helping them put things in perspective. And being a good service professional doesn’t mean you have to be a servant. You shouldn’t be e-mailing at 11 at night on a regular basis.”

Cheryl, too, says she’s learned “not to get carried along in the current” of overwhelming demands. She adds, “You have to know when saying no is the right answer. And it takes courage and conviction to stick to your guns and not feel guilty.” If you find that there are few or no opportunities to shift things in a more positive direction, you might want to contemplate a bigger change, as Ari did.

Seek out connections.

The best antidote to burnout, particularly when it’s driven by cynicism and inefficacy, is seeking out rich interpersonal interactions and continual personal and professional development. Find coaches and mentors who can help you identify and activate positive relationships and learning opportunities. Volunteering to advise others is another particularly effective way of breaking out of a negative cycle.

Given the influence of situational factors on burnout, it’s likely that others in your organization are suffering too. If you band together to offer mutual support, identify problems, and brainstorm and advocate for solutions, you will all increase your sense of control and connection. Barbara participates in a CEO mentoring and advisory program called Vistage. “We’re a small group of CEOs in noncompetitive businesses, so we can share ideas,” she explains. “We spend one day per month together, have great speakers, and serve as advisory boards for each other.” Ari, now a successful solo entrepreneur, has built a network of technical partners who share the same vision, collaborate, and funnel work to one another. He says that running a “client centered” business he believes in and working with people he respects have boosted his engagement tremendously.

CONCLUSION

Burnout can often feel insurmountable. But the sense of being overwhelmed is a signal, not a long-term sentence. By understanding the symptoms and causes and implementing these four strategies, you can recover and build a road map for prevention. Your brutal experience can serve as a turning point that launches you into a more sustainable career and a happier, healthier life.

Monique Valcour is a management academic, coach, and consultant.

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Christophe Herault 4 days ago

My experience as a coach is very much in line with the principles laid out in this article. I would add that the person who is on her way to the burnout is locked in a system of beliefs where she sees no other option than what she is currently doing. Applying the 4 prevention steps recommended in this article is a change that the person may not be able to do alone. It often requires a trusted partner, external to the situation, who really cares with empathy, to challenge the system of beliefs and enable the change. It's all about enabling the person to take back control of her own life.

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