The reality of burnout among software professionals

Santosh Hari

Santosh Hari

Azure Consultant @ New Signature

Azure MVP

President, Orlando .NET UG

Organizer, Orlando Codecamp

santoshhari.wordpress.com

santosh.hari@newsignature.com

@_s_hari

/in/santoshhari
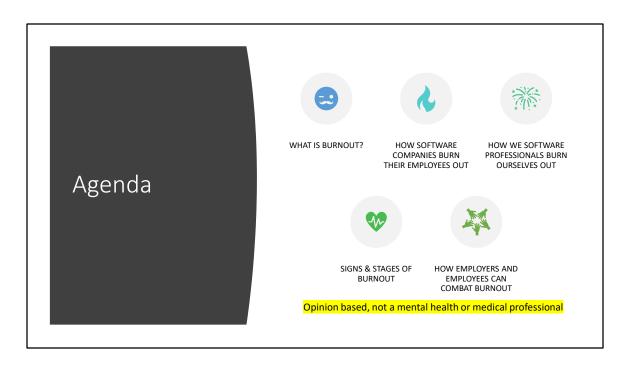
I'm in danger of burning out

As you can see I do a lot of things.
If I'm not real careful I will burn out
I'm not here to give medical advice,
but I don't think we take mental health seriously enough
In our field and in this country and it begins with self-care
If I can get one person in this room to become aware
I will consider my work done

How I burned out in 2013

WORKLOAD

TREADMILL OF SPRINTS

CREATED MY OWN PERSONAL PAGING MONSTER

NO DESTRESSING ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF WORK
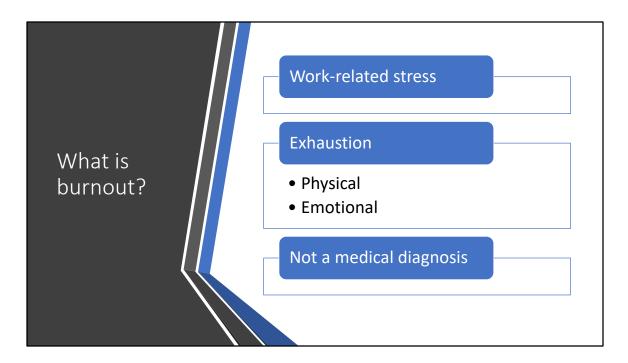
COMBINATION OF FACTORS:
- REDUCTION OF WORKFORCE, HAD TO CARRY THE LOAD OF OTHERS
- TREADMILL SPRINTS/DEVELOPMENT CYCLES
- CREATED MY OWN PERSONAL PAGING MONSTER
- NO ACTIVITIES TO LOOK FORWARD TO OUTSIDE OF WORK

What is burnout
How software companies burn their employees out
How we software professionals burn ourselves out
Signs and stages of burnout
How employers and employees can combat burnout

Opinion based, not a mental health or medical professional

What is burnout?

Work-related stress

Exhaustion
- Physical
- Emotional

Not a medical diagnosis

Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress —
a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.
"Burnout" isn't a medical diagnosis.
Some experts think that other conditions, such as depression, are behind burnout.
Some research suggests that many people who experience symptoms of job burnout don't believe their jobs are the main cause.
Whatever the cause, job burnout can affect your physical and mental health.
1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job;
3) reduced professional efficacy.
Consider how to know if you've got job burnout and what you can do about it.

Gallup Poll on burnout

7500 employees

23% burned out always or often

67% felt burned out at some stage

https://www.gallup.com/workplace/237059/employee-burnout-part-main-causes.aspx

How software companies burn employees out

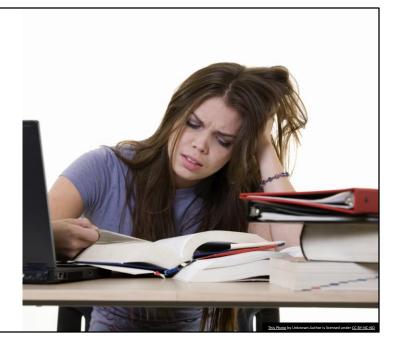This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

Origins of burnout

Term came from space scientists
Scientist used to work long hours
Took a toll on their health and family lives
The **velocity** of a rocket at the time when depletion of the fuel or oxidant occurs
things burned out like ball bearing

Software Companies become Burnout Shops

Huge problem in software companies particularly startups
This kind of business model is what used to be called a "burnout shop" —
one whose management policies and practices lead to burnout for many employees, as an intentional stress test — to extract the maximum benefit possible from an employee.
The underlying assumption is that employees who burn out are not the best ones, so they are expendable and disposable.
But is it really the employee who is not measuring up?
Or is the problem the system that creates the chronic conditions for burnout,
 with so many negative consequences for employees?
Companies collect big data on what works for them but not the human costs
Attitude that burnout is a personal failing

Agile becomes a Death March

Major problem in medium to large size software companies
The scope of the work is so large compared with the available time that the team dispenses with conventional planning and estimation.
They dive right in, focusing on the functionality directed by the key stakeholder.
The team delivers as much of the most important functionality as they can within the allotted time.
If any key functionality remains unfinished, they cover for it manually while continuing to tie up loose ends after the delivery date.
To be sure they can get as much work done as possible, the team uses methods and techniques they know are effective,
and they dispense with activities that don't directly help them deliver.
When the project ends, the survivors crash for several days to recover from the exertion.

Burned out
employee
==
canary in coal
mine

Canary in a coal mine
Warning sign of a toxic work environment
Response should focus on making environment less toxic
People try to make the canary tougher instead of fixing the environment

How software professionals burn themselves out

Cultural gaslighting

Busy-ness as a status symbol

It seems as if being busy is the new status symbol.
Imagine someone asks how you're doing and you say "fine" -- you'd look crazy because the normal response is, "tired" or "busy"
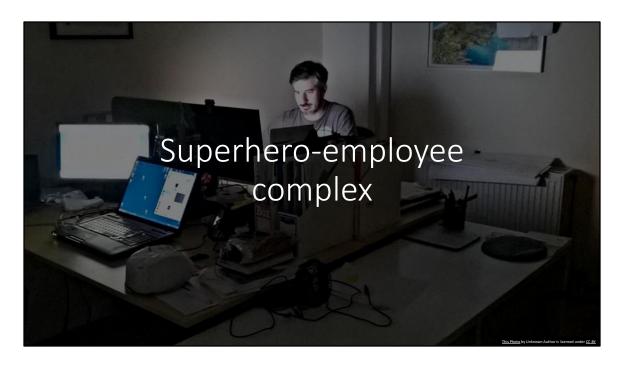
Social media

This is how we communicate now.
We curate our lives and create a culture of competition
Additionally you have all these influencers/celebrities tweeting, facebooking, instagramming
About conferences, cool trips, how great their jobs are
Our worth is measured in likes

Lack of work life-personal life boundaries

There are constant alerts! No wonder we all suffer from anxiety!
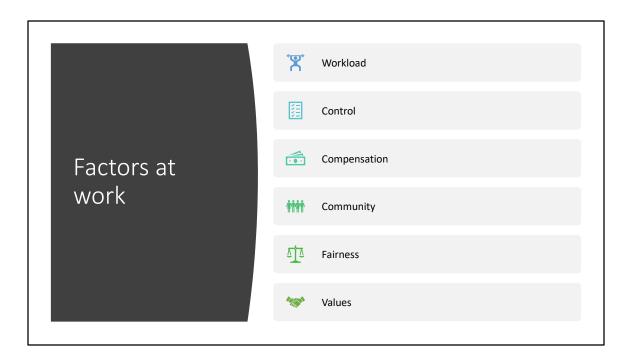
Superhero-employee complex

The addiction to being a hero is no different than any other addiction:
heroes to spend the bulk of their time on saving the day,
and nowhere near enough time on transferring knowledge and skills to others

No matter how brilliant, hard-working, and heroic an you might be,
no human can keep up the pace forever
and as soon as you can't, they'll penalize you.

Startups look for heros.
The truth is that you won't get rich by joining a start-up,
but you'll work yourself to death making the founders rich.

Signs & stages of burnout among software professionals

Factors at work

🏋	Workload
📋	Control
💵	Compensation
👪	Community
⚖	Fairness
🤝	Values

Not in order of importance.
Workload = amount of work a person can reasonably accomplish in allocated time based on their current skillset
Control = autonomy, wiggle room for doing a good job
Reward = not always salary or perks but also social rewards, recognition
Community = work place community, people who you come in contact with regularly. Do you have an environment in which you can mutually count on each other or is it socially toxic
Fairness = whatever our policies are, are they fairly administered
Values = gives meaning to the work we do.
If one or more areas have problem = greater burnout risk
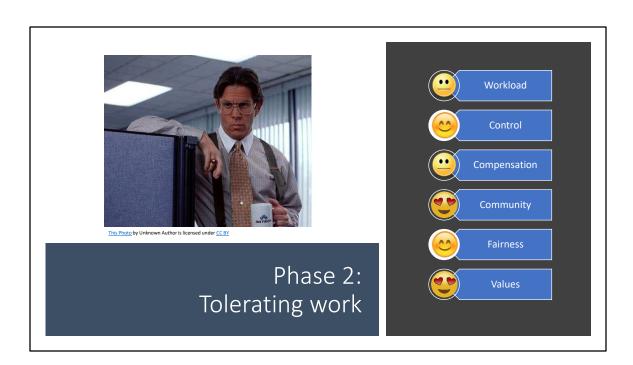On the flip side
Lack of control
Overload
Breakdown of community = socially toxic environment
Absence of fairness = discrimination, glass ceilings
Value conflicts = wrong unethical, preaching one and doing something else
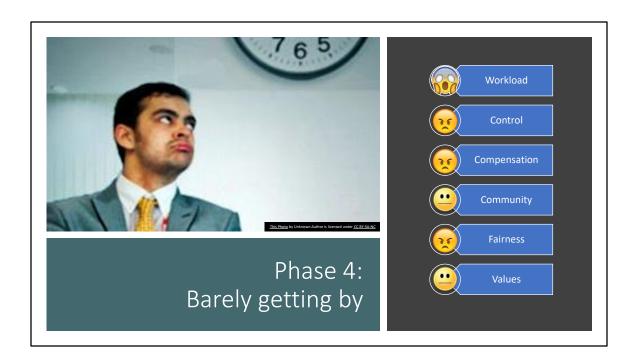Insufficient reward.. "a good day is when ... nothing bad happens"

Phase 1:
Dialed-in

Focused
100% engaged
honeymoon phase
Control
Compensation
Community
Fairness
Values
All areas seem well taken care of
Even if one area is worse off, others compensate for it
This is probably an unicorn company-person fit
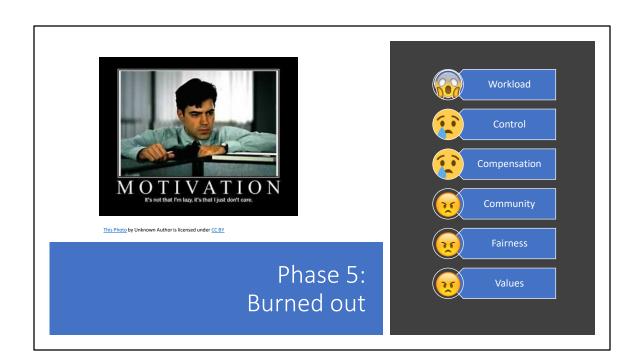
Phase 2:
Tolerating work

Workload

Control

Compensation

Community

Fairness

Values

Manageable workload
Job feel fair
Values are still intact
Low pay or loss of control
And believe it or not, this is where most of our industry is

Phase 3:
Stretched to the limit

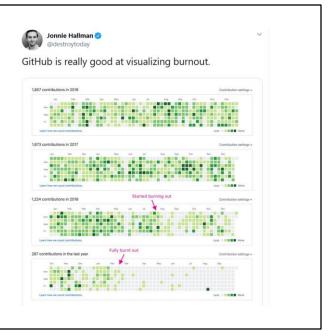| Workload |
| Control |
| Compensation |
| Community |
| Fairness |
| Values |

Work load gets out of control (burning from both ends)
Obviously feeling of control is low to negative
You don't feel like compensation meets workload
Still like the work community and values of the company
Fairness feels off because of workload and compensation
Most common stage

Phase 4:
Barely getting by

😱	Workload
😡	Control
😡	Compensation
😐	Community
😡	Fairness
😐	Values

Everything feels out of control
Work load excessive
Not happy with compensation
Community turns toxic
Feeling of Fairness may start to disappear (related to community)
Values may start to slip (related to community)

MOTIVATION
It's not that I'm lazy, it's that I just don't care.

This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

Phase 5:
Burned out

Workload
Control
Compensation
Community
Fairness
Values

Everything feels out of control
Work load excessive
Not happy with compensation
Community turns toxic
No feeling of fairness or trust
Unethical stuff going on (no values)

GitHub activity as an indicator for burnout

Jonnie Hallman @destroytoday
GitHub is really good at visualizing burnout.

What employees can do to reduce burnout

- Understand your role
- Reduce multitasking
- Learn to say NO
- Reduce Social Media usage and Notifications
- Get a life outside of work
- Get exercise and sleep

Understand your role (Clear expectations)
People can become exhausted simply by trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing.
Reduce multitasking
Multi-tasking reduces your productivity because your brain can only focus on one thing at a time – this continued stress leads to burnout.
Learn to say no
If another task is given to you,
ask your manager what they suggest you drop in order to complete that task.
For larger projects break them down into smaller, more manageable tasks.
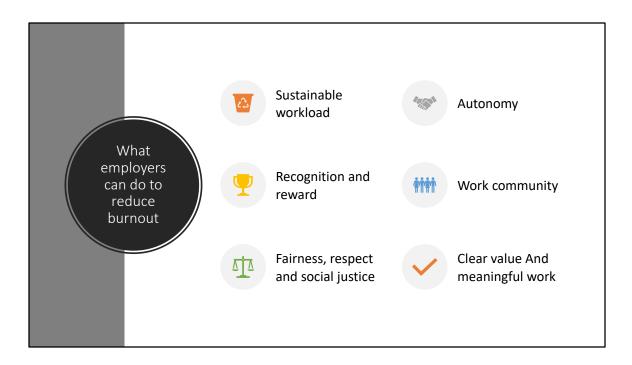Your employer will ask and ask because they expect you to know your limits.
Reduce social media and notifications
Turn off your damn notifications. Stop being influenced by social media
Get a life outside of work
Get exercise and sleep

What employers can do to reduce burnout

- Sustainable workload
- Autonomy
- Recognition and reward
- Work community
- Fairness, respect and social justice
- Clear value And meaningful work

Sustainable workload
Provide autonomy
Recognition and reward
Supportive work community (No Asshole Rule)
Fairness, Respect and Social Justice
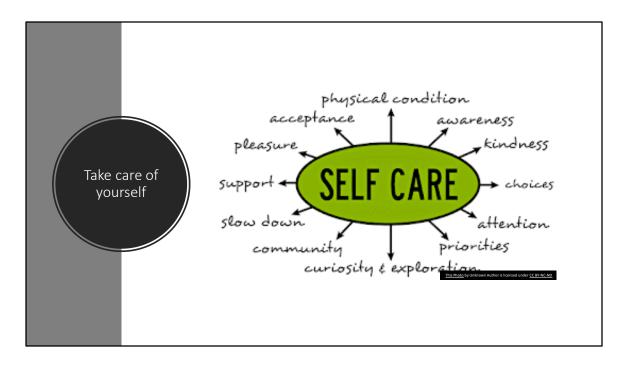Clear values and meaningful work
Have an honest self assessment and see where they grade on each of these factors
Fix fixable factors
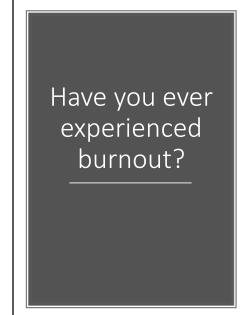Be honest about factors which cannot be fixed
Open internal communication
Be deliberate about building a culture

Take care of yourself

physical condition
acceptance
awareness
pleasure
kindness
support
SELF CARE
choices
slow down
attention
community
priorities
curiosity & exploration

Listen to your body and mind
Have empathy towards others
Get involved in community and talk to others

Now I'm a recovering burnout enthusiast

Have you ever experienced burnout?

Share your experience.

References

- DevOps Enterprise Summit 2019 talk by Dr. Maslach
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVIL9TnvphA
- The Thing About Burnout – Ashley McNamara
  https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1oGNNZn4eX-
  a0jj9W04NjeP-
  2RzLkCmlxyKC8UXmfauo/edit#slide=id.g654c726fad_2_142
- Dan Pink – The puzzling science of motivation
  https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_the_puzzle_of_motivation
- The No Asshole Rule – Robert Sutton
  https://www.amazon.com/Asshole-Rule-Civilized-Workplace-
  Surviving/dp/1600245854

Santosh Hari

Azure Consultant @ New Signature

Azure MVP

President, Orlando .NET UG

Organizer, Orlando Codecamp

santoshhari.wordpress.com

santosh.hari@newsignature.com

@_s_hari

/in/santoshhari