

# A Leader's Guide To Tackling Employee Burnout



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01.

## What is burnout?

Burnout is a term that's thrown around a lot, but what does it actually mean?

The Mayo Clinic defines it as, "a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity."

And, it's evident that employee burnout is on the rise. In a recent study from Indeed, 52% responded that they are experiencing workplace burnout.

The image shows a white smartphone with a black border, centered against a blue background with a white grid. The phone's screen displays the word "burnout" in a large, bold, red font. Below it, in a smaller black font, is the word "(noun)". To the right of the phone, there is a small portrait of a smiling man with short brown hair, wearing a dark blue polo shirt. Above the phone, in the top right corner of its screen, is a small red speech bubble icon containing a white heart symbol. The phone has three small colored dots (red, green, blue) at the top edge.

**burnout**  
(noun)

Burnout is a state of mental and physical exhaustion when you feel like nothing and everything matters, nothing is achievable, and there's no light at the end of the tunnel.

- Tim Reitsma

# What does burnout look like?

Burnout is typically accompanied by:

-  Lack of focus
-  Lack of energy
-  Lack of motivation
-  Emotional numbness
-  Extreme overwhelm

As humans, we all have different capacities, working preferences, and ways of reacting to challenging circumstances. So, burnout won't always look the same in everyone.

For leaders, it's important to know some of the key signs of burnout in order to better identify it, plan for it, and manage it.



## How to know if your team is experiencing burnout

Here are some questions to consider when connecting with your team, whether in a team meeting or in a one-on-one:

	Yes (✓)	No (✗)
Have you noticed a change in their level of engagement?		
Is there an increase in irritability with co-workers?		
Have you noticed a drop in energy?		
Has the level of work accuracy and output changed?		
Has the individual become more critical of the organization and/or their peers?		
Has there been an increase in sick days taken?		
Is the individual easily angered?		

## How to know if you are experiencing burnout

As an individual, how do you know if you are experiencing burnout? Ask yourself the following questions:

	Yes (✓)	No (✗)
Are you critical about work and about co-workers?		
Has your sleep been interrupted or you've had trouble turning off your mind when resting?		
Do you lack motivation or job satisfaction?		
Is it hard to concentrate?		
Do you feel overwhelmed?		
Has your sense of hope changed?		
Have you noticed physical changes such as headaches, muscle pains, or stomach issues?		

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may be experiencing burnout. It is really important that you connect with your leader, a trusted colleague, or HR. Also, consider talking with your doctor to get an accurate diagnosis.



## Stress vs. Burnout

 Stress	 Burnout
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>👉 Fatigue</li><li>👉 Loss of energy</li><li>👉 Overengagement</li><li>👉 Causes anxiety</li><li>👉 Reactive emotions</li><li>👉 Sense of urgency</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>👉 Chronic exhaustion</li><li>👉 Loss of motivation</li><li>👉 Disengagement</li><li>👉 Leads to depression</li><li>👉 Numb emotions</li><li>👉 Sense of hopelessness</li></ul>

# What causes burnout?

There can be many causes of burnout and we have categorized them into direct (work-related) and indirect (life-related). Remember to consider that what may cause one person to burn out may not cause another to.

Knowing this, it is important to exhibit compassion when we look at the causes of burnout. This list isn't exhaustive; however, we believe these are the key causes:

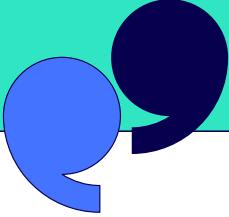
## Direct (work-related) causes

- ✓ Lack of job clarity
- ✓ Lack of connection in the workplace (isolation)
- ✓ Toxic workplace culture
- ✓ Workload (too much or too little)
- ✓ Feeling a lack of control
- ✓ Not being heard

## Indirect (life-related) causes

- ✓ Financial pressures
- ✓ Unstable living conditions
- ✓ Sudden life event
- ✓ Feeling a lack of control
- ✓ Lack of personal relationships
- ✓ Lack of sleep
- ✓ Health challenges

# Why is it important to talk about burnout?



We'd like burnout and mental wellness in organizations to be as well accepted as brushing your teeth. It's something that has known wellness benefits, but it is also something that is habitual and it's something that individuals and organizations know needs to be addressed for everybody to be well and healthy and proactive in their care.

Bev Attfield, Partner at Within People

Burnout can be devastating and, when unchecked, be a catalyst for longer-term side effects such as depression, anxiety, and prolonged stress.

Talking about burnout may seem odd or awkward, especially if all you talk about is work, tasks, and timelines. As leaders, we need to lead by example and start the conversation. This doesn't mean telling your team that you yourself are burnt out (we don't recommend starting there). But, introducing the conversation yourself is an important first step to begin to proactively manage employee burnout.

Maybe start by talking about a few stats found in this Playbook, actioning one of the "plays", or implementing **CheckingIn** to anonymously get feedback. Perhaps it's taking team members for coffee or lunch (in person or virtually) and setting aside work for a bit of time.

Your employees may feel uncomfortable talking honestly with you about burnout. In this case, it's important to find internal allies, such as your HR team, a colleague, or someone from a different team/department. It is important to put a voice behind burnout so we can start normalizing the conversation.

CheckingIn is a quick, easy, accessible tool to support mental health and emotional intelligence.



Users can complete a daily check-in in less than a minute, or go deeper to reflect on mental health and wellness topics, view personal trends, access mindfulness resources, and gain real-world skills.

Learn more here: [checkingin.co](https://www.checkingin.co)

02.

# How to proactively approach employee burnout

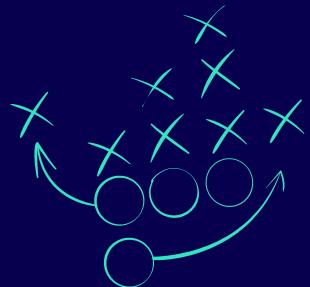
It seems like a strange thing to say “prepare for burnout”. But, can burnout be prevented? We don’t believe so. Burnout can happen at work and in our personal lives.

If something happens in our personal lives, can we shut off the emotional burden of it and simply focus on work? Some can but many of us can’t.

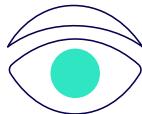
This is why we don’t believe we can completely prevent burnout. However, there are some things you can do as a leader to prepare for employee burnout to make things easier when it does happen.



# FIVE TACTICS TO HELP YOU LEAD THROUGH BURNOUT



**Build  
team trust**



**Strive for Clarity,  
Responsibility, and  
Accountability**



**Check-in regularly, both as a team and in meaningful one-on-one's, and start each meeting with an energy check**



**Lead by example  
(creating a healthy workplace culture)**



**Celebrate  
wisely**



## Build Team Trust

To approach burnout proactively, there needs to be a level of trust between the leader, the team, and the individual. Without trust, the ability to approach burnout is diminished. Why? Would you share with someone you don't trust how you are truly feeling? It's doubtful.

So how do you build trust? One way to build trust with your team is to create a trust agreement.

### How to create and use a trust agreement:

- Have each team member share what trust means to them.
- Pull out the words your team has come up with to define trust, write them down, and post them up in the office or a shared drive.
- Use this agreement to hold each other accountable. Review it at the beginning of team meetings and ensure there is nothing that will be compromised.

### Example Trust Agreement Template

- ↗ **Download** our Team Trust Agreement Template
- ↗ Check out **this article** on employee onboarding best practices for another trust agreement example



## Strive For Clarity, Responsibility, and Accountability (CRA)

As leaders, it is our responsibility to define what success looks like to our team members.

If the targets are always changing, if the responsibilities are constantly shifting and there is no measure of success, then how do we know if our teams are on the right track?

We often hear the phrase “are we on the same page?” but what happens if you are not even in the same book?! Remember this simple acronym:

### CRA - Clarity, Responsibility, Accountability

Clarity provides the vision of where we are headed, responsibility outlines the goals, and accountability is the measure of success.

As leaders, when we show our teams what the big vision is, what everyone is responsible for in order to get us closer to the vision, and how we measure success, there is a lower chance for burnout (provided what you’re aiming for is realistic).



## Check-in regularly

Regular check-ins are a great way to grow relationships and build trust with your employees. They will also help you to maintain CRA by providing opportunities for clarification, reviewing goals and responsibilities, and holding team members accountable for their success metrics.

By meeting regularly, you'll also be able to keep an eye on employee well-being, stress levels, workload management, and the other factors that contribute to burnout.

Starting each meeting with an energy check is a proactive way to gain insight into your employees' current mindsets. Ask them how they are doing on a scale of 1 to 10 and respond to their numbers meaningfully.

Check-ins don't have to be long and can be kept between 15-30 minutes. You can also encourage your employees to take ownership of their check-ins with you and pass the responsibility of scheduling to them.

### Example 1:1 Meeting Template

- ↗ Use this **1:1 template** to guide your meetings.

## ⚡ Lead By Example

You can tell your employees the company values. You can tell them not to work overtime. You can ask them to take care of themselves so as not to burn out. But, as a leader, if you aren't practicing what you preach, then you can be certain your team won't either.

You, the leader, are the role model of the team. Your team will look to you for cues on what behaviours are encouraged and what behaviours should be avoided.





## Celebrate Wisely

As a leader, it's important to know what types of behaviors are worth celebrating. People want to be celebrated, so they're more likely to engage in behavior they see being rewarded.

Start by asking your employees how they like to be celebrated, as everyone will have a different preference. For one, it might mean recognizing them verbally in front of their team members. Whereas for another, it might be giving them a gift card to their favourite coffee shop for a job well done. Regardless of how you celebrate your employees, make a point of doing it in order to positively reinforce the behaviors you want to encourage.

This should go without saying, but it's also important to avoid celebrating behaviors that you want to discourage. For instance, if you're trying to promote healthy work habits, praising or rewarding those who respond to messages at all hours of the day, for always being "on" or available, will likely set the tone that others need to follow suit.

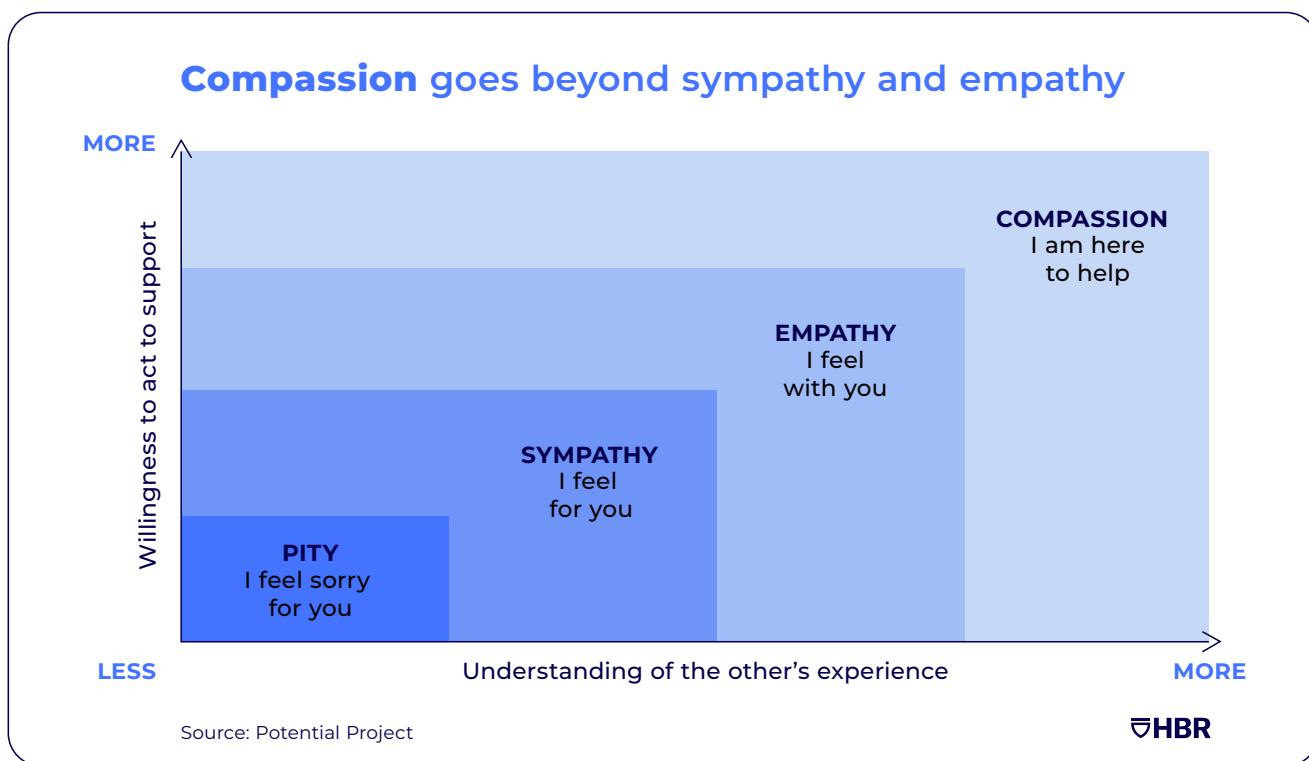
Here at **People Managing People**, we use a Slack integration called **Know Your Team** for giving each other shoutouts. It allows everyone to see the comment and join in on celebrating the person being recognized.

# How to Approach Burnout When it Happens

How we approach burnout, as leaders, is vital to our team. When burnout happens, we have a choice: ignore it or do something about it and we (strongly) recommend the latter. Here are a few ideas on how to approach burnout when it happens.

## 1. Lead with Empathy and Compassion

Empathy can be defined as “I feel with you” and compassion can be defined as “I am here to help”. There is an important distinction between these two approaches.



## 2. Lead with a Coach Approach

As leaders, we don't need to solve everything or have all the right answers. The coach approach (in simple form) involves:

- ↗ **actively listening**
- ↗ **asking open-ended questions**
- ↗ **guiding someone to their own answers and solutions**

### ↗ Active listening

is the ability to tune into the words of the individual and tune out every other noise and distraction. Closing off notifications, shutting your computer (if in person), or finding a quiet place to have a meaningful connection will aid in actively listening. Here is a simple framework for active listening:



## ↗ Open-Ended Questions

invoke sharing rather than a single-word answer. A key thing to remember when asking open-ended questions is starting with “what” or “how”. For example, “What are some options...” or “How could we approach this...” Starting a question with “why” often leads to a defensive response, so be cautious using “why” questions.

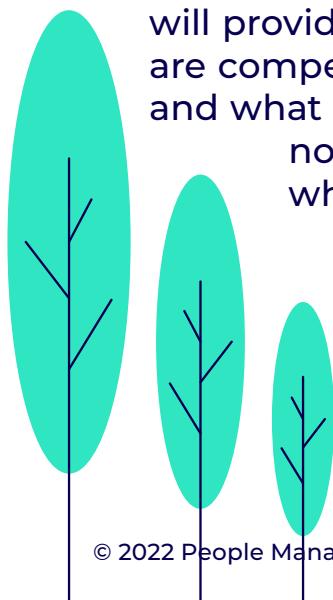
## ↗ Guiding someone to their own solutions

often leads to a sense of ownership and empowerment. Telling someone to exercise more in order to move past burnout will have no effect. The solution will emerge when you approach the situation with open-ended questions, empathy, and compassion. As a leader, we may need to suggest a few ideas in order to unlock someone who is stuck.



## 3. Clarify What is Most Important Right Now

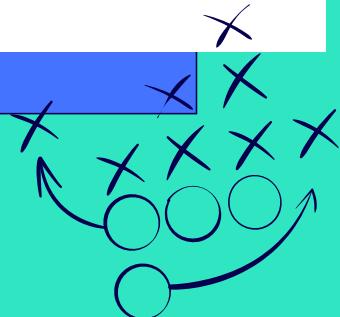
Providing insight into what matters most at work at the given time will provide clarity into where an employee needs to focus. If there are competing priorities, specify what work needs to take precedence and what work can wait. Often in a burnout state, everything and nothing matters. As a leader, this is an opportunity to clarify what truly matters.



# Action plan for **proactively** approaching employee burnout

## Host an interactive workshop with your team on burnout

- Define burnout together
- Discuss the signs of burnout and understand what may burn one person out may not burn out another
- Brainstorm how the team can support one another
  - ★ Learn each other's communication styles, working styles, working times, etc
- Clarify and understand what to do when a team member is hit with burnout



## Host a trust workshop and ask each team member the following

- Define what trust means to you personally
- What do you need to feel trust?
- Read through **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable**, by Patrick Lencioni, and share responses to the following:
  - ★ Where you were born
  - ★ How many siblings you have and where you are in the order
  - ★ What is one thing you've always wanted to try but haven't and why?

## Define how you will work as a team

- Working styles
- Working hours
- Normalizing response times to emails, direct messages, and calls.

## Consolidate resources available to employees

Make sure everyone knows what's available. Examples:

- ★ Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)
- ★ Lunch and coffee budgets
- ★ Coaching and mentoring
- ★ Training

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## Additional Resources

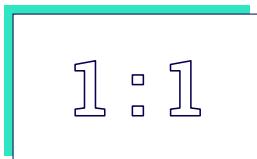
### Statistics on employee burnout



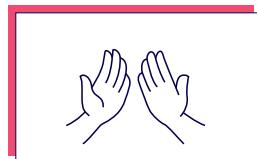
## Templates



Team Trust  
Agreement



1:1 Template



Weekly Team  
Huddle Template

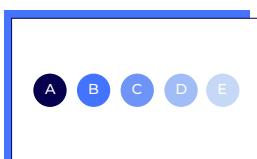


CRA Worksheet



Ordergroove's  
Wellness Support  
Guide for Managers

## Articles



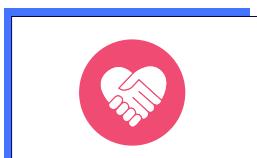
5 Management  
Styles



Leadership  
vs Management



Servant Leadership  
Examples & Characteristics



Connect with  
Empathy, But Lead  
with Compassion

## Tools



10 Best OKR Software Of 2021 Compared



10 Performance Management Tools Every HR Pro Should Know



**Know Your Team**  
Software to help hold more effective one-on-one meetings, get honest feedback, and build team rapport



**Donut**  
A free Slack integration to help foster camaraderie, collaboration, and community within your team



**HIGH5 test**  
A free strengths test

## Books

-  **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable** by Patrick Lencioni
-  **Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less** by Greg McKeown
-  **A Minute to Think** by Juliet Funt
-  **Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business** by Gino Wickman

**Book a discovery call** with Tim Reitsma for information on scheduling an interactive workshop or to get coaching or mentoring.

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checkingin

CheckingIn is a quick, easy, accessible tool to support mental health and emotional intelligence.

Empower your team with a simple, fast, and approachable tool to assess and respond productively to their feelings.