

# Fighting Burnout: How to Identify, Reduce Stress for You and Your Employees

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by Harold Dahlstrand

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*When bad days start to add up, you may be suffering from burnout. How can you diagnose and treat burnout in yourself and your employees? A career counselor offers answers.*

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No matter how much HIM professionals love their work, it's not uncommon for them to experience burnout. One of a manager's duties is to recognize what may be causing employees to feel burned out and help them address the problem through guided self-exploration. If you find you're experiencing burnout, you'll need to take a similar approach to turn things around. In this article, you'll learn how to recognize the causes of burnout and get ideas for alleviating it in yourself and others.

## Help Others

There are many causes of professional burnout, including excessive job pressures, organizational restructuring, lack of personal fulfillment, or a lack of positive feedback about performance. Additionally, prejudice, disagreements with managers or fellow employees, little or no say about how a job is performed, lack of communication, and inadequate recognition for a job well done can damage an employee's morale. Even seemingly minor irritations, such as the absence of workplace privacy or poor working conditions, can distress an employee and take away the fun of a job.

## Recognize the Signs

Career burnout can occur when employees' values are compromised or when they no longer feel that they are important. It can be difficult to recognize burnout because employees may try to hide the truth from themselves and coworkers. The following signs may indicate that an employee is heading toward burnout:

- loss of productivity
- change of attitude
- anger or temper tantrums
- fatigue
- depression
- tardiness
- poor quality of work or missed deadlines
- increased break time
- associating with different people
- seeking employment elsewhere

Once you understand what burnout looks like, you may be in a better position to help an employee who is experiencing it. For example, try focusing most of the attention on missed opportunities rather than on problem situations. What should the employee be doing? How can the employee better use his or her skills and do things better?

## What Can You Do?

I help clients become better at helping themselves in their daily lives. You can do the same in your workplace. If you sense burnout in a coworker, take the following steps: be empathetic, listen to what your employee is telling you, do not judge what he or she may be going through, and be willing to help. Then, suggest that the employee contact your organization's employee

assistance program or seek the help and advice of an executive coach, human resources professional, or an organization/industrial psychologist.

As a manager, help your coworkers become aware of their blind spots and develop both new perspectives and more constructive behaviors. Employees depend on the strength and guidance of their leaders, especially when they're stressed. When they come to you with a problem, it's important to give them your undivided attention.

To uncover the causes of burnout and unleash possibilities, consider asking the following questions:

- What are your unused skills/resources?
- What ambitions remain unfulfilled?
- What could you be doing that you are not doing?
- What are you failing to accomplish?
- What could you become if you tried?
- Which role models could you emulate?
- What problems are you avoiding?
- What do you refuse to see?
- What don't you want to do?
- How are you being dishonest with yourself?
- If others were honest with you, what would they tell you?

If you are asking yourself these questions, you may also want to take them to a trusted friend and ask him or her to be candid with you. Many times someone close to us can see our situation more clearly than we are able to see it ourselves.

## **Stress Stops Here**

When faced with burnout in your workplace, consider the following ways to reduce job-related stress for you and your staff:

- Build rewarding relationships with coworkers
- Keep current on the recent developments in your field and keep learning
- Negotiate and set realistic deadlines
- Act on problems or concerns of importance
- Even though your office may have an open-door policy, close the door when necessary
- Find time for relaxation and take short breaks from your work area as a change of pace
- Don't let trivial items take on importance; handle them quickly or delegate them

When you identify and clarify problem situations and missed opportunities with your employees, you help them become happier, healthier, and more productive employees.

## **Help Yourself**

### **Where Is Your Passion?**

When I provide career coaching to an individual, I ask three questions:

- Do you love your job?
- Do you have a passion for it?
- Are you living the life that you were meant to live?

Next, we discuss the individual's passions, interests, abilities, and gifts by self-analysis, self-reflection, and conducting a personal inventory or "innerview." These tools enable an individual to look inward at his or her passions, abilities, likes, aspirations, and personal beliefs. The purpose is to help assess whether he or she is in the right line of work, doing the right things, and experiencing fulfillment.

In *What Color is Your Parachute?*, a popular book on job hunting and career changes, Richard Nelson Bolles asks his readers to think about their philosophy of life and answer the following questions: What do I believe about life in general and my life in particular? In order to do my best work, what are the factors from my philosophy of life that are especially important to me to have in my work?

Fulfilling one's unique role is the key to achieving personal satisfaction. When people are truly and fully living the life they were meant to live, they will have a more abiding sense of both purpose and happiness. People who are using and developing their talents rarely feel as if they are working. But keep in mind that development of a person's talents is a matter of choice. The individual alone can choose to turn their talents into genuine mastery.

### Take a Closer Look

Because your overall satisfaction may change from day to day, assess your happiness by looking at the following areas:

- career satisfaction
- career aspirations
- work relations with bosses, peers, and subordinates
- finances
- personal relationships
- friends/social life
- recreation/relaxation
- personal/spiritual life
- community/volunteer involvement
- overall health and happiness

As you review this list, you may see areas in which you are less than fulfilled. What can you do about them? Where can you work harder at improving certain areas of your life or building better relations? Do you have someone that you can go to that you trust to seek advice?

An effective exercise is to jot down the various people and situations that drain your energies, such as coworkers, neighbors, or relatives, your own emotions or moods, things that happen at work, or other issues. This can help you better understand situations to avoid or develop.

Negative forces definitely affect our attitudes and performances on the job and in our personal life. Fortunately, we have a choice: we can look at things positively and do something about them. Albert Einstein said it well: "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

Keep in mind that often it is the little things in life that can cause burnout and stress. Here's a popular list of tips often used by counselors. For example, don't rely on your memory; instead, write down appointments, when to pick up the laundry, and when library books are due. Consider getting up 15 minutes earlier in the morning so you don't start the day feeling frazzled. Make time for regular exercise or at least a few brisk walks each week. Even though it can be difficult, turn down extra projects for which you don't have the time or energy. Spend less time worrying: if something concerns you, do something about it. If you can't do anything about it, let it go.

We all have our own hot buttons and unique causes of stress. But if we pay attention to our values and our passions, abilities, and desires, we can achieve our own level of success and happiness and avoid burnout. As Confucius once said, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

### Avoid Burnout on the Job

The following suggestions can help you and your employees avoid burnout at work:

- Establish clear, specific, prudent, and realistic goals that make a difference
- Set goals that can be sustained
- Choose goals that have some flexibility

- Choose goals consistent with your values, passions, and talents
- Establish realistic time frames to accomplish these goals
- Determine what kind of time, energy, and commitment you are willing to put into accomplishing your goal

## Look Inward, Then Onward

Many times, burnout is not caused by the job itself or the environment in which you work, but rather by our own nature. If you are feeling burnout, you might want to look at yourself. Are you a workaholic and putting more pressure on yourself than the job demands? Are you insecure or a perfectionist? Are you afraid to take a day off or a vacation? Sometimes we fail to look at ourselves and tend to put the blame on the job or our boss instead. Be aware of these feelings. If this is the case, you may want to get professional help.

## Reference

Bolles, Richard Nelson. *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2002.

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