



Recognize and address the early signs of employee burnout

Creating a culture of
psychological wellness starts
with empathetic leadership



This guide has been created to help you understand employee burnout, the effects it has on an individual's health, and how individual burnout can compound and disrupt your entire workforce if not addressed early enough. You can use this practical guide to help your managers build a healthier, more resilient workforce, and create a culture better equipped to manage stressors – one step at a time.

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America's \$300 billion burnout problem

More employees have experienced burnout than not.

83% of employees feel emotionally drained by their job, an early sign of burnout¹

67% of employees have experienced burnout²

25% of employees have experienced severe burnout³

And the physical impact of burnout syndrome is expensive. In fact, stress is the single most important health risk factor in predicting workers' compensation claim occurrence and cost.⁴



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Burned out employees are:⁵



23%

more likely to visit
the emergency room



2.6x

more likely to be
looking for another job



63%

more likely to be absent
from absenteeism

It's little wonder then that the combined costs of health care, absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, and legal and insurance costs from work-related stress and burnout in the US amounts to an estimated \$300 billion annually.⁶

Unfortunately, it's not as easy to quantify the costs of chronic burnout to an employee's confidence, their relationships, or their holistic well-being.



Defining burnout: It's more than just stress

Burnout is not the same as “feeling stressed.” Some stress is normal at work and in life, and depending on the situation, it can be a great motivator.

Symptoms of burnout can be hard to spot because everyone shows it differently, but the key is that it is caused by chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

If such tensions endure for weeks, months, or years, physical consequences arise inevitably. In the short-term, being overworked can result in a lack of physical exercise, poor nutrition, and a lack of quality sleep.⁸ But ultimately chronic stress contributes to hypertension, heart problems, and a weakened immune system, so that employees are at risk of infections more often.

It's not difficult to surmise then, that the longer this chronic stress is experienced, the harder it is for an employee to recover from it.



The most cited reasons for burnout are:



Unfair treatment at work



Unmanageable workloads



Lack of role clarity



Lack of communication and support from managers



Unreasonable time pressure⁷



The rise of “quiet quitting” as a coping mechanism

Employees may be quiet quitting to cope with chronic stress. Quiet quitting has been defined in a couple of different ways – some describe it as not actively going above and beyond at work, others see it as doing only the bare minimum to remain employed. Some defend quiet quitting as “just doing your job,” whereas others see it as a form of passive resistance to redraw the boundaries between their professional and personal lives.

Smartphones have enabled colleagues to contact one another anywhere and anytime – and while that’s been great for improving communication, it’s also created an “always on” expectation. Working from home during the pandemic further blurred the lines between work and life for many employees. People found themselves working more hours than they did before for the same compensation.⁹

When employees feel they are putting more effort into their roles than they are rewarded for, it can spark cynicism (an early indicator of burnout). Many employees cannot afford to leave their current job before getting a new one, learning a new skill, or securing a new income stream. These are just a few of the reasons a wave of employees is drawing a line at doing just the work they are paid for, and no more.



Early signs of burnout

There is a saying that goes, “when you are tired, learn to rest, not quit.”

Being overwhelmed has a way of giving employees tunnel vision. While they are focused on just trying to get through the day or week, they may stop taking care of themselves the way they normally would. Amid physical and emotional exhaustion, it can be hard for an employee to see an opportunity for rest, and even harder to give themselves permission to take it.

Managers can save their reports from more severe consequences of burnout by knowing what to look for, spotting it in their employees early, and then intervening appropriately. They can set an example of talking openly and honestly about mental health, so their reports feel comfortable coming to them if they need support.

Some of the early signs that an employee is beginning to suffer from burnout include:

-  Complaints of exhaustion/persistent tiredness
-  Reports of excessive use of alcohol or other coping substances
-  Notable loss of enthusiasm or motivation towards work
-  Withdrawal from social events and interactions
-  Reduced work performance
-  Persistent worry, depression, and anxiety
-  Complaints of tension headaches, migraines, back aches, skin issues (all physical symptoms of stress)
-  Irritability and mood swings when interacting with teammates.¹⁰

By the time you see these symptoms, employee stress may have already reached damaging levels. Managers should be cognizant of their employees' workloads and working hours, and should have regular check-ins to understand all the factors that contribute to an employees' day-to-day work experience.



Download our interactive [Rest and Revive sleep management toolkit](#) to help your employees get on a path to better sleep.

See **Step 1: Know the impact** on page 13 in this guide for more suggestions on where to gather data, and how to better understand what your employees are going through.



Burnout can be contagious

Working long hours has almost become a badge of honor – the idea is that the more you work, the more you accomplish, and the more important and valuable you are. But in reality, individual productivity decreases dramatically at 50 hours per week and becomes practically nonexistent after 55.¹¹

We recognize that too many hours of labor can hurt the body physically, but we can also become mentally exhausted. Our bodies and minds need time to recharge. But many employees stay digitally connected to work 24/7. The mere expectation of constant availability increases the likelihood that employees will drive themselves – and perhaps also one another – to burnout.

Employees struggling with burnout report feeling exhaustion, apathy, and cynicism. Not only are these emotions draining for employees and on their performance, they also have an immediate ripple effect on team members and adjacent departments. Even one person quiet quitting, as an example, may increase workloads for other members of the team, leading to burnout.

It's crucial for managers to consciously identify the root causes of burnout in their teams, and proactively support employees struggling with early signs and symptoms.

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What is psychological safety and why does it matter?

Psychological safety is “the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation”. This means a psychologically safe workplace is one where employees do not feel intimidated by co-workers or supervisors and feel able to freely voice their opinions and concerns.¹²

According to a recent report, workers who felt supported with their mental health overall were 26% less likely to report at least one symptom of a mental health condition in the past year.¹³ Respondents who felt supported by their employer also tended to be less likely to experience mental health symptoms, less likely to underperform and miss work, and more likely to feel comfortable talking about their mental health at work.

They had higher job satisfaction, greater intentions to stay at their company, and more positive views of their company and its leaders. In short, employees were more trusting of their company and were more likely to feel proud to work there.

Characteristics of a psychologically healthy workforce

Create a culture where employees can:

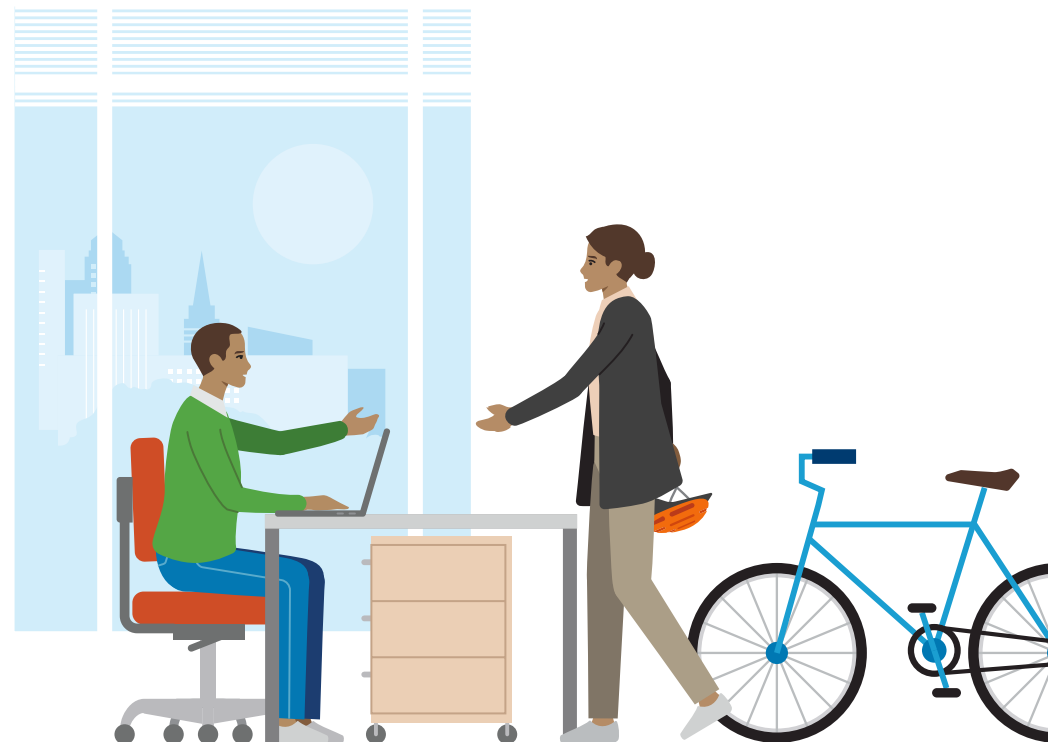
- ☐ Have a healthy work/life balance. They should feel able to prioritize their and their families' health, wellness, and important events
- ☐ Feel seen, heard, and included in discussions and decisions relating to work
- ☐ Clearly understand their roles and responsibilities
- ☐ Feel appreciated, recognized, and valued for doing their work well (and not just when they are working more than 40 hours a week)
- ☐ Know how to get help for their emotional health when they need it

And employees have access to:

- ☐ Self-care tools for resilience and mental wellness
- ☐ Employee assistance program support (your employee assistance program is only as good as its adoption rate)
- ☐ Specialty mental health and addiction care



Keep going...check the psychological health of your employees with this interactive [Psychologically Healthy Workforce Scoresheet](#).



4 Steps to creating a psychologically healthy workforce

Psychological health should be looked at as a process, not a destination.

During 2020, workplace mental health and wellness resources went from a nice-to-have to a necessity. As workplace mental health efforts evolve, it's important to continually revisit your approach and incorporate best practices.

Adaptability is, after all, considered a sign of psychological wellness.

STEP 1:

Know the impact

STEP 2:

Break the silence to help reduce stigma

STEP 3:

Support for employee total health

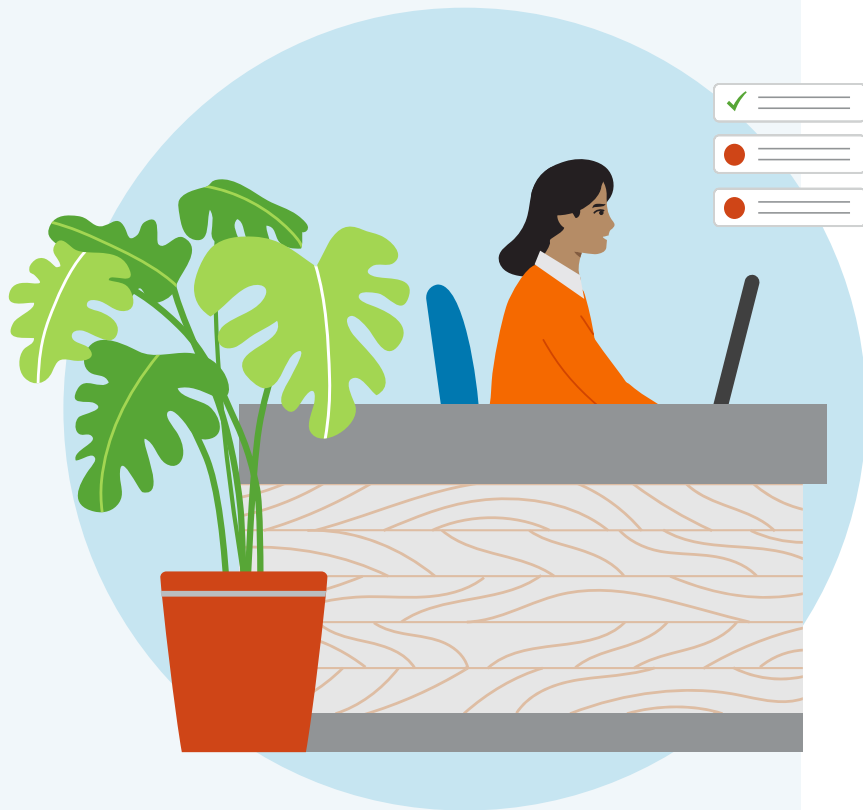
STEP 4:

Build a culture of well-being

1

STEP 1:

Know the impact



You can't manage what you can't measure. In this case, gathering both formal and informal data, and anecdotal insights can help you understand where your workforce is, and what they need from you.

Take a look at formal data, including:

- Mental health benefits utilization
- Employee assistance program utilization
- Questions coming into HR
- Emotional wellness resource utilization

And use these opportunities to gain more personal, informal insights:

- Manager check-ins
- Town hall Q&As
- Leadership office hours (in person or virtual)

Together, this information will help give you a picture of which employees are overloaded, which are unsure about their responsibilities – or their future, and whether the resources or strategies your organization has invested in are actually what your employees need to take care of their mental well-being.

STEP 2:

Break the silence to help reduce stigma



Did you know that 4 out of 5 workers say shame and stigma prevented them from seeking needed mental health care?¹⁴ As many as 45% of Americans who need help for a mental health condition never get it.¹⁵

In your role, you can help to reduce the stigma by breaking the silence:

- Understand and acknowledge that stigma exists
- Create policies that promote safety and respect for all employees
- Provide training on stigma reduction and mental health awareness
- Offer guidance and resources to support managers and staff



Read more about [how mental health stigma manifests in the workplace.](#)

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STEP 3: Support for employee total health



Employers have the chance to positively influence the physical, emotional, and social health of their employees.

Social and economic factors greatly impact an employee's overall health.¹⁶ Nearly half of workers report needing help with at least one social factor.¹⁷ This includes proximity to health services, food security, financial security, housing security, digital equity, the ability to travel to in-patient services, and the freedom to prioritize their overall wellness without impacting their income.

Money is one the biggest drivers of anxiety and depression, and a reason why some people are quiet quitting – and not just quitting outright. With valid concerns about the economy and their access to benefits, quiet quitting may be seen as the only way to survive an untenable work environment. Proactively addressing a person's unmet social needs can have a positive effect on their physical and mental health and quality of life.

Consider:

- Do your employees have access to self-care tools for resilience and emotional wellness? Could you provide your employees with any of the following:
 - Free access to mindfulness or meditation apps
 - Free access to virtual workouts
 - Free access to wellness coaching
- Do employees have access to employee assistance program support? Are employees aware of support programs available, and is it clear how they can access these?
- Are employees able to access specialty mental health and addiction care?



Employees with one or more unmet basic needs were about 2.4x more likely to have not received needed health care and to have missed 6 or more days of work in the past 12 months.¹⁸



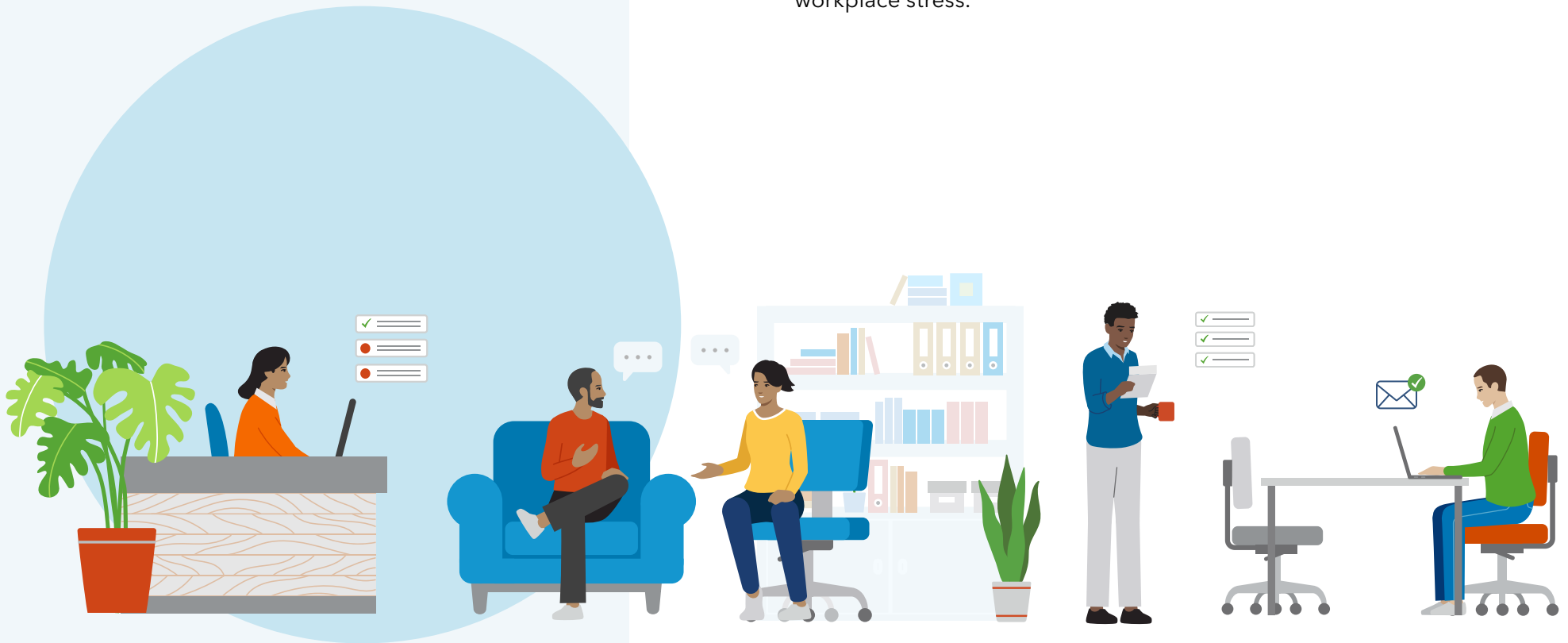
Learn more about the growing emphasis on social health in the workplace in our guide, ["The impact of social health on your workforce"](#).

STEP 4:

Build a culture of well-being

Burnout and quiet quitting are not just an individual's problem: They should be seen as the collective priority of the organization.

The causes of burnout, and the resultant symptoms, cannot be resolved by individual behaviors alone. Daily habits that support emotional health, and reduce the stigma of prioritizing one's mental health, can help employees better cope with day-to-day workplace stress.



Here are some specific steps managers can take:



Lead with empathy

- Practice active listening
- Check in with your team
- Be compassionate to employees' challenges
- Be flexible and open to different ways of working
- Help employees find purpose in their work



Lead by example

- Model a healthy work/life balance
- Encourage employees to focus on self-care
- Establish firm boundaries
- Ask for and integrate feedback
- Share your own experiences



Lead inclusively

- Be mindful of bias
- Treat all employees fairly and equitably
- Seek out diverse perspectives
- Have conversations about stigma and mental health



Ready to start?

Your first step is to assess the psychological health of your workforce. Next, speak with your health care provider to get the latest information about their mental health and wellness support offerings. It's possible that there are some lesser-known features that some of your employees would really benefit from.

Once you have a clear picture of all the mental health and wellness resources available to managers and employees – make sure they do too! Frequent communication, an open-door policy, and occasional workshops can help employees take a multifaceted approach to wellness.



Don't stop there. Explore our [Stress Management Toolkit for your workplace.](#)



Final thoughts: Overall wellness must include mental wellness

Mental health and wellness have become significant concerns for employers in recent years – and rightly so. As the statistics in this guide prove, we all need some level of mental health support to perform at our highest level. Building a supportive, empathetic culture centered on wellbeing is the best way forward.

Interested in learning more? **Let's talk!**

[Contact us](#)

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