

How to Prevent Burnout Among Employees



Table of Contents

- Introduction 3
- Start With Corporate Culture 4
- Look Beyond Wellness Programs 5
- Recognize the Signs 6
- Connect the Work to the Mission 7
- Check In Often 7
- Revisit Your Policies Toward Vacation and Flexible Work 8
- Conclusion 8

Preventing Burnout Among Employees Means Changing Your Company

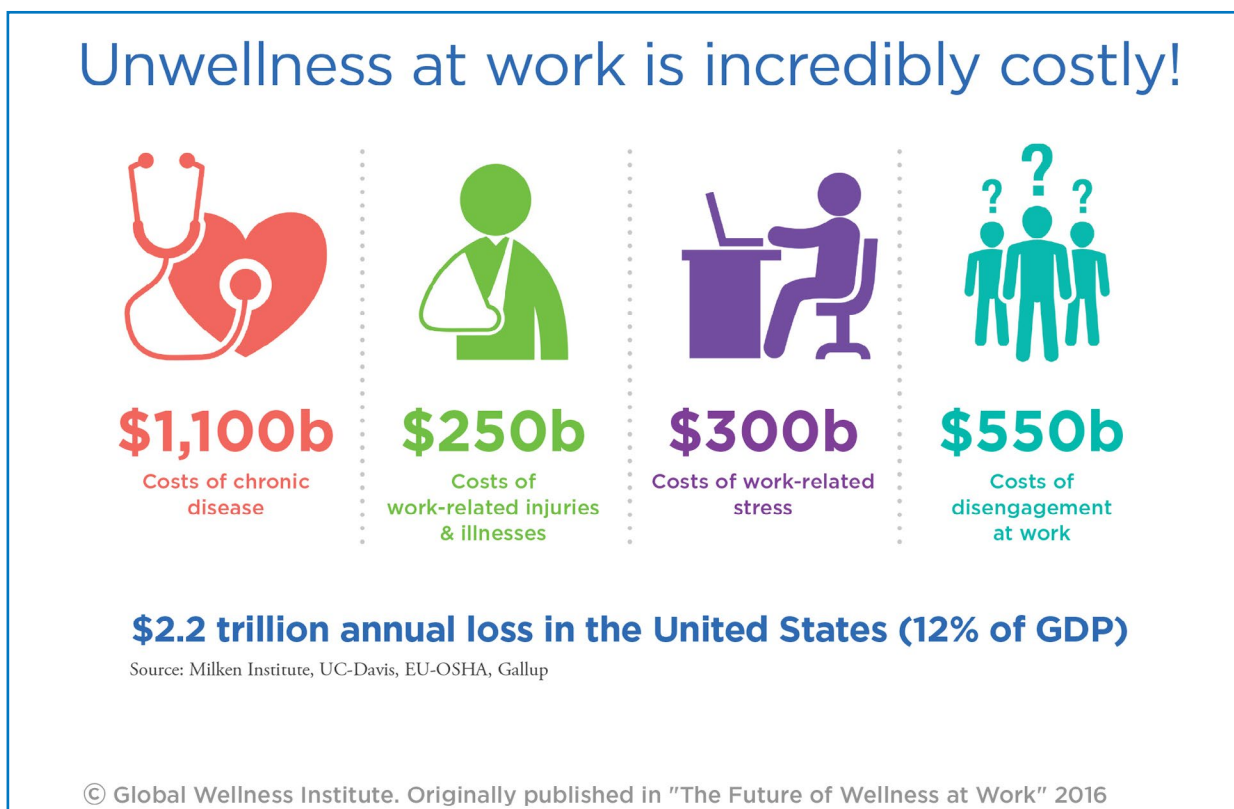
Some level of stress is unavoidable in the workplace. A [report](#) by the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) says a quarter of employees called their job the No. 1 stressor in their lives, and an [American Psychological Association report](#) from last year found that 61 percent of Americans said their job is significant source of stress.

Some forms of stress can be helpful at work, motivating people to focus and get the job done. However, prolonged and unmitigated stress can lead to burnout, which is a devastating psychological condition that can cause severe short- and long-term health problems.

For businesses, unchecked burnout typically leads to a decrease in productivity and losing your best employees. A [report](#) from Harvard Business School says burnout is responsible for \$125 billion to \$190 billion a year in health care spending. The report goes on to indict corporate culture — not the employees themselves — as the main culprit for employee stress, and calls for corporate leaders to acknowledge their culpability in creating stressful environments.

“Burnout leads to turnover, as well as loss of morale and the bottom line. Nipping it in the bud is essential,” says Kristen Nielsen Donnelly, director of [Abbey Research](#), a business research firm.

Employers can play an important role in reducing workplace burnout. Here’s how to prevent it at your organization.



1 Start With Corporate Culture

The research is clear: Burnout is not an individual problem; it's a corporate problem.

In their book "Time, Talent, Energy," authors Michael Mankins and Eric Garton of Bain & Co. argue that when employees aren't maximizing their productivity, the root cause is usually the organization rather than the employees. The same is true for employee burnout, they contend.

"Employee burnout is a common phenomenon, but it is one that companies tend to treat as a talent management or personal issue rather than a broader organizational challenge. That's a mistake," Garton wrote in [Harvard Business Review](#).

The authors point to three common workplace practices that are drivers of burnout: excessive collaboration, weak time management and overloading high-performers with too much work.

The bottom line is that organizations are failing to take into account what's important to individuals, and that disconnect is resulting in unnecessary stress and burnout. This affects your company's ability to attract and retain top talent, protect your brand and effectively compete in an ever-changing and increasingly complex marketplace. And the problem is massive.

The [American Institute of Stress](#) says workplace stress costs U.S. companies more than \$300 billion a year due to accidents, absenteeism, employee turnover, lower productivity and direct medical costs. And that's only part of the financial equation. Gallup [estimated in 2013](#) that disengaged employees cost the U.S. \$450 billion to \$550 billion a year in lost productivity.

In addition, a [2015 study](#) by three Stanford professors on the impact of workplace stressors on mortality and health costs in the U.S. found that more than 120,000 deaths per year and up to 8 percent of annual health care costs could be attributable to how U.S. companies manage their workforces. "Our results suggest that more attention should be paid to management practices as important contributors to health outcomes and costs in the United States," the study's abstract says.

The stakes are clearly high. Companies have created this burnout epidemic through the unsustainable way they have been organized and operated. Now they must drive the solutions. But traditional approaches aren't moving the needle.



2 Look Beyond Wellness Programs

Wellness programs, particularly in the U.S. where companies are largely responsible for health care costs, are on the rise. But a [report](#) by the [Global Wellness Institute](#) says that while 54 percent of full-time workers have access to workplace wellness programs in the U.S., only 40 percent of those employees say the programs actually improve their health and wellness.

Research reveals that it is not wellness programs alone that boost worker health and productivity – it’s whether employees identify that company as genuinely **caring**. A critical finding in a [survey](#) conducted by the Global Wellness Institute is if an employee identified their company as “caring about their health/wellness” that employee’s overall health, stress and job engagement/satisfaction improved significantly. The survey found that 17 percent of employees at these caring companies reported very high stress, compared with 41 percent at non-caring organizations.

Workers at companies rated as caring were more likely to report the availability of break time and space, fresh air and private space. They also said their employers offered healthy workspace elements such as medication spaces, standing treadmill desks or places for mothers to breastfeed.

Employees at these caring companies also much more frequently reported positive intangible qualities, including a culture of openness and honesty, opportunities for growth and independence in how and when they complete their work.



3 Recognize the Signs

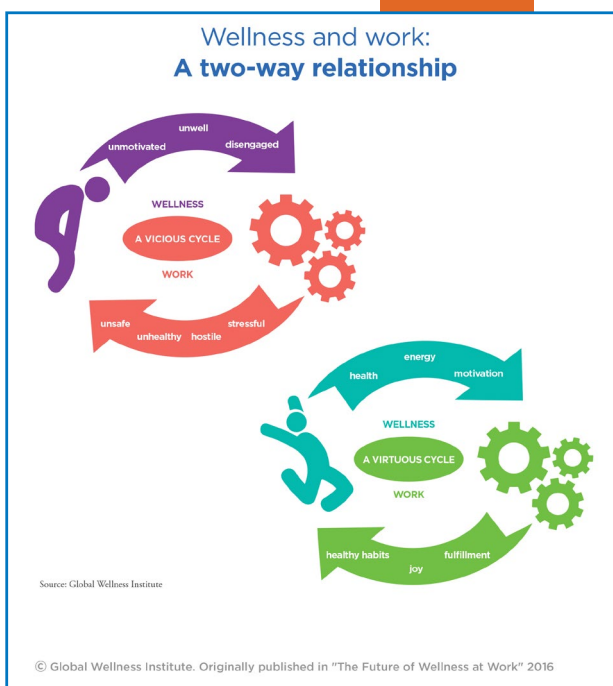
The term **burnout** is sometimes misused to describe workplace stress or fatigue. Actual burnout is a specific kind of job stress that's difficult to shake once it occurs. A mixture of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, along with insecurity about whether you are able to complete your work, characterizes burnout.

The [Mayo Clinic](#) says ignored or unaddressed job burnout can have significant health consequences, including fatigue, insomnia, heart disease, high cholesterol, stroke, obesity, vulnerability to illnesses and substance abuse issues. It can also spill over into personal relationships or home life in profoundly negative ways. Once it sets in it's hard to get past, so prevention is key.

Christina Maslach, professor emerita of psychology at the [University of California at Berkeley](#), cites three main aspects to burnout. Employees who display these characteristics are at high risk of burnout or are already facing it:

- **Depersonalization:** Loss of compassion for others is a sign of burnout. This may look like the employee is pulling away from others, or not being empathetic to customers or co-workers.
- **Exhaustion:** When employees no longer seem quite themselves because they're bogged down by work demands or are unable to quickly recover from setbacks, they may be facing exhaustion.
- **Reduced personal accomplishment:** A burned-out employee's performance may drop, including making more mistakes or missing key deadlines.

The ways to prevent burnout can be effective regardless of whether employees are experiencing actual burnout or just everyday stress. If you do observe signs of burnout, prioritizing the following steps can help mitigate it.



4 Connect the Work to the Mission

People like to know that the work they do matters. They want to do things that help build success for themselves and the organization or the customers they serve. But in many cases, they may feel like the work they do doesn't fit in with a bigger picture, or they might not understand the important role their work plays in the mission of the company.

"People are more willing to put in the hard work if they can directly connect it to their sense of purpose," says [Crystal Lee](#), a psychologist in private practice who is on the board of the Los Angeles County Psychological Association.

Making that connection may include helping people find their purpose, the unique thing that drives them. Managers must understand how to link each employee's purpose to the work they're doing and how that helps the organization as a whole.

Communicate your organizational mission regularly, and establish clear values that company leaders and managers embody in the work culture. Also, connecting with others is part of overall happiness, so making it easier for employees to connect and enjoy each other's company can help as well, Lee says. This may include company outings, retreats and other team-building exercises.



5 Check In Often

Part of that connection should also include frequent short visits with employees to get a read on how they're feeling about their work and their role. These don't have to be lengthy or formal meetings that ask pointed questions; just a casual but sincere *"How are you doing, really?"* can help.

"One of the most motivating things for employees to feel is like their manager cares about their concerns and is making changes to address them," says [Wyatt Fisher](#), a private practice psychologist.

Fisher says managers should get feedback from employees on what they are feeling, why they are feeling it and what could help them feel better.

But as Donnelly notes, what employees show you in their actions can be just as useful as what they say with their words, such as when you notice their work getting more frantic or their tempers getting shorter. Stopping by periodically before things get to that point can show employees that you care about their well-being — and that they have an ally in you.

"Ask questions and provide space for them to authentically answer, so you can come up with a plan to combat exhaustion together," she says.

6 Revisit Your Policies Toward Vacation and Flexible Work

Another major cause of burnout is overwork. Employees need time away from their jobs to rest and recharge; long stretches of work without a reasonable break will put them at risk for burnout. But in some cases your company’s culture or policies may keep them from getting the break they need to stay physically, emotionally and mentally resilient.

“A flexible work culture can make a huge impact for all aspects of burnout,” says Lisa Philyaw, a learning and development consultant at [2Connect](#). “Allowing employees to flex their schedule as needed can allow them to take the time they need to sleep, rest or restructure time in a way that will work better for them.”



Fisher says this may include allowing people to work from home a few days a week, or more flexible scheduling for when employees are required to be in the office. In addition, employers can offer services such as a gym, child care or stress-management options such as massages, he says.

Also, ensure your policies make it easy for employees to take time off when they need it. A flexible culture that can give people the time they need when they need it will help them manage their own stress before it becomes your problem as their employer. Philyaw recommends offering personal health or well-being days in addition to sick days to show employees you understand their needs and have created a space for them to address those needs.

Conclusion

Burnout is a serious business problem, and it can sneak up on people without a lot of warning. Because every person’s ability to handle stress is different, managers may not recognize what’s happening until it’s too late and an employee has hit full burnout. Because of the physical, emotional and financial toll burnout can take on people and businesses, it’s paramount that organizational leaders and managers understand what it is and how to prevent it. Doing so will help keep your business strong and healthy, no matter the stressors it faces.



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