Gympass

Understanding and overcoming burnout in a new era

Index

1. Introduction

It's been a while since the world had a complete shift on how people live their lives. Furthermore, we know that mental health continues to be a significant issue for individuals working and living through the pandemic. As COVID-19 continues to challenge us, employees claim to feel less prepared, less informed and less supported.

At the beginning of lockdowns, companies and executives took the lead in protecting employees, retaining customers and securing their organization's future. But according to Gallup's latest data, as these efforts ease along with protective measures, employees feel the consequences are directly affecting their wellbeing and performance. That is when they tend to experience burnout symptoms.

Although burnout has been at the top of the list for most HR leaders in recent years, the recent lockdowns have certainly taken things to the next level. Full-time remote work has presented a unique set of challenges including lack of social connection, anxiety, family responsibilities and employees feeling the need to be 'connected' 24/7. These challenges have undoubtedly led to an increase in the number of employees dealing with mental health issues.

Overwork is just one of the reasons why people feel exhausted and detached at work. 40% of US workers who are now working remote claim to work an additional 48.5 minutes per day. Besides the number of hours one dedicates to the company, how work is managed and experienced during those hours play an essential part in triggering burnout.

In this ebook, we aim to provide context on how stress might be affecting your employees, your company, and potentially be the leading cause of burnout. Most importantly, what you can do to help as an HR executive or leader.

2. Burnout is about personal and corporate health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the psychological meaning of burnout is associated with an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress. In other words, burnout happens when someone reaches their mental, emotional, and physical limits. People might not understand the real meaning behind the term, but many of us are starting to feel it following the number of recent changes and uncertainty in our work and personal lives. Common burnout indicators include:

a) **Feeling under-appreciated as a professional:** having unclear expectations and accountability at work intensifies feelings of disengagement and increases anxiety about job security.

b) **Detachment from the team and the company:** knowing "why they exist" "what the company believes in" and "how the team does things" dictates how employees treat each other and experience the workplace. If their roles are not clear, the feeling of belonging might trigger more anxiety, leading to less active participation in meetings, casual conversations and even team catch-ups.

c) **Trouble in establishing boundaries:** technology allows us to work online 24/7 with no limits. The lack of healthy boundaries should be a warning sign for employees, especially when it becomes clear they are unable to refuse new projects or demanding requests.

d) **Not separating work and personal life:** overwhelming household tasks and family responsibilities may add a lot on one's daily to-do list. While working from home, it becomes even harder to draw a clear line between concentrating at work and enjoying time with the family.

e) **Cynical or critical work behavior:** signs of constant irritability or impatience with co-workers, customers or clients can be directly linked to exhaustion and need to be looked at before it leads to burnout.

When we think of burnout, we often think about working 12-hour days, meetings, phone calls and emails, usually well beyond regular working hours. The pandemic has demanded a lot more of us recently; chores to be completed, time with the family, trying to stay in shape from home, homeschooling, books and movies waiting to be finished, hundreds of extracurricular courses available out there. People are trying to figure out how to exist in an unsettlingly new reality, and this is not an easy task.

[Research shows](#) that leaders are primarily responsible for the burnout symptoms in their employees. They should be in direct contact with each person of the team, and at the front line to combat possible indicators of burnout. COVID-19 is having an impact on people's lives, and it will be a matter of months to find the right balance. One that doesn't affect the business strategy and takes into consideration the employees' mental health.

What's clear is that leaders addressing the "new normal" need to put the wellbeing of their employees first. By doing so, they will build a more resilient, patient, honest and engaged workforce. That is the belief of Arianna Huffington, Co-Founder of The Huffington Post and Founder & CEO of Thrive Global. Arianna is the author of 15 books and one of the world's most influential voices when it comes to helping individuals, companies and communities improve their well-being performance. During a webinar organized by Gympass, she described how employees are "corporate athletes" who need a significant amount of recovering hours to perform at their best. *"Everybody who follows sports knows that athletes need to recover despite training, right? You can't just train without recovering. It'd be completely irresponsible, and it'd affect their performance. But why do corporate athletes, people in the corporate world, don't see the connection?"*, she asks.

Arianna experienced burnout herself, and the physical and emotional collapse motivated her to encourage other people around the globe to change their mindset and find balance in life. *""It's important for us to realize that wellbeing and performance are not on opposite sides. In fact, when we take time to recharge, we improve on performance"*, says the author of The Sleep Revolution.

"A lot of people believe that in order to perform to your best, you have to be always on, you can't take time to recharge or sleep. So HRs need to change people's mindsets by having them understand that when you're fully recharged, you're going to perform at your best."

"It's important for us to realize that wellbeing and performance are not on opposite sides. In fact, when we take time to recharge, we improve on performance."

Arianna Huffington, the CEO of Thrive Global

Another criteria to identify possible signs of burnout in your organization is to grasp what kind of practical consequences this condition may be bringing to the workplace. Over 60% of actual employees who claim to have experienced burnout are more likely to take a sick day and are twice as inclined to actively seek a different job, even though they tend to feel less confident in their performance.

The statistics above prove that employee burnout is not a personal issue, but an organizational one, which affects every part of any business. From the moment an employee starts feeling detached to the moment some measure is actively adopted by the business, there is an estimated cost of $125 billion to $190 billion a year in health care spending in the US, according to Harvard Business Review.

Burnout can also result in heart disease, gastrointestinal issues and aggravation of mental problems, such as anxiety and depression. On the other hand, a Staples Annual Workplace Survey shows that the stock prices of companies with a high-morale group of employees grew twice as much as those with low morale.

All companies with high instances of burnout have three aspects in common: excessive collaboration, weak time management, and a tendency to overload the most capable employees. While it isn't always possible to ask employees to slow down or ease up stress - especially during a crisis - keep in mind that organizational changes have the power to bring benefits not only to a single employee but to the whole team and the company.

Top 5 causes for Burnout

- Unfair treatment at work

- Unmanageable workload

- Unclear communication from managers

- Lack of manager support

- Unreasonable time pressure

Font: Gallup, 2020

Covid-19 aggravating challenges

- Unhealthy work hours

- Lack of social interaction

- Toxic and overcontrolling leadership

- New family and domestic tasks

If you're still struggling to get your employees to open up, try using the emotional rating system. Invite employees to share how they're feeling about work on a scale from 1–10, make it easy for them to tell you if they need your support and establish a simple system that flags those who are struggling. As a leader, show employees that they matter.

And what if we told you there are many other feasible actions to prevent and combat burnout in the workplace?

3. How to implement supportive changes in the workplace

Corporations are facing the urgent need to reimagine the workplace and create a productive yet healthy environment for their employees. The new work from home scenario is the ideal opportunity for leaders to experiment and adopt effective changes. **By following the simple steps of recognizing, reacting and reiterating, companies can begin to start seeing positive results.**
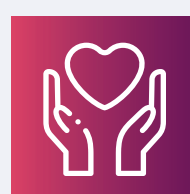
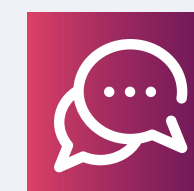### Step 1: Recognize the issue and keep an open-door policy

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According to a report from the IE Center for Corporate Learning Innovation, people with a pre-existing mental health condition are more vulnerable when dealing with the impact of COVID-19 as they have "less energy" to deal with added stress. Though everyone is susceptible to struggle with mental health issues during a pandemic, not all individuals are comfortable sharing concerns or talking about their feelings. As a leader, here is what you can do to help:
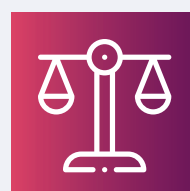
Endorse a work-life balance. Insist that employees respect working hours and avoid excessive overtime. Taking days off must be encouraged, as it's essential to reduce pressure and stress. Creating space for them to pursue a healthy lifestyle out of the office is critical to helping your employees to stay healthy in the long term.

Eliminate any kind of stigma. Being open about stress, frustrations, expectations, and self-care can reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues. In an environment where employees feel comfortable to talk about mental health without being considered emotionally unstable, they'll be more willing to seek treatment. Your role is to make it clear that you support their efforts in taking care of their mental health.

Be an example of self-caring. Your actions and personal choices have a significant impact on your team. Allow yourself to take some time off too. That will encourage everyone to follow in your footsteps and will work wonders for your own mental health.

Provide free tests and screening. Organizations all over the world offer free online tests and screening tools that can help employees to anonymously assess their own risk factors. Once the risk is tracked, it is easier to promote treatments.

Step 2: React and put solutions into effect

Even though <u>people who experience mental health problems do not often see mental fitness as their priority</u>, it is also up to the company and its leaders responsibility to provide new and compelling approaches to a different lifestyle. Stephan Hunter, CEO and co-founder of Mindshine, a digital coach dedicated to providing effective mental fitness through techniques based on Positive Psychology, Leadership Coaching & Mindfulness, points out: "While physical fitness is super important for your health and wellbeing, the mental side is equally (if not more) important to live your best life". According to him, in the near future, exercising and strengthening our minds will be as important as exercising and having a healthy eating routine.

90%
Think it is somewhat important that an employer offers fitness and wellness benefits

71%
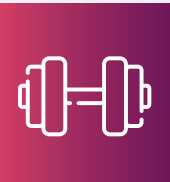Feel more productive on days they have been active

57.5%
Of employers don't provide benefits

70%
Of employees wish companies offered wellness benefits

Source: A survey conducted by Propeller Insights on behalf of Gympass, 2020

Emphasize fitness benefits. Exercise and other physical activities produce endorphins — often called "feel-good" chemicals because they act as a pain reliever and happiness booster — which also improves the ability to sleep, reduces stress and burnout symptoms. Think about offering a physical wellness program as part of your compensation package, encouraging employees to be active; whether it is going safely to the gym, the park, the beach or by using a workout app at home.

Turn ideas into actual habits. Before providing access to resources like mental health and fitness apps, it's essential to create a culture where employees can engage in activities during working hours. Nikki Salenetri, Gympass' Vice-President of Human Resources, regularly encourages her team to block their calendar for workouts and take walking meetings, for example.

Organize group activities. Exercising, eating healthy, and sharing some personal routine in a small group may be a great way to improve your employees' mental health. Make it a priority to look for activities your team seems interested in participating together. It can be a cooking class, online games, or even a virtual happy hour. Creating a space for your employees to connect, even if it's via video, helps them to feel part of the group and the company.

"We have to recognize that this is a difficult time and lead from a place of trust - support employees to do what they need to take care of themselves and their families and create opportunities for them to come together outside of normal work, keeping up a sense of community."

Nikki Salenetri, Gympass vice-president of Human Resources

Step 3: Reiterate the importance of your team's efforts

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Poor management can easily contribute to burnout in the office. Prevent that by showing appreciation for the work your employees do, even if it's just the regular work that is expected from them, it makes a big difference on how the team will act and react through difficult times.
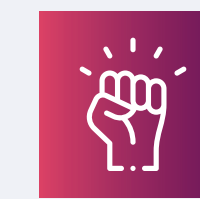
Empower your team. When employees perceive they don't have any say in what they do, they may start to question their sense of belonging. Sharing how their roles impact the overall goals of the business, encouraging honest feedback, and giving them the confidence to thrive at what they do best will help your team as a whole to excel at their jobs.
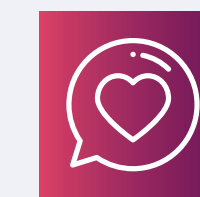
Recognize all efforts audibly and honestly. Rewards don't always need to come in the form of benefits, promotions or raises, although those are welcome. Genuine feedback, e-mail or public recognition of achievements are often enough to make employees feel appreciated. Do not take "Great job!" and "Thank you!" for granted. Simple and constant praise shows employees you value them for what they do.

4. Wellness culture and mental health always go together

As a leader, you are not in charge of solving every personal problem that comes up, but you do play a fundamental role when issues like burnout affect the health of your organization. As CEO of Healing Clouds (a platform for online mental health and wellness), Asim Amin knows precisely how each one of us can face these changes more wisely: with a little tenderness. *"Being kind to yourself is the first step towards wellbeing. It is important for us to treat ourselves with kindness and compassion, draw boundaries, find time for yourself and seek help whenever needed. With each one of us doing it, we could transform into a kinder, accepting and inclusive society."*

Remember that it is vital to create a positive culture of taking good care of both body and mind, together. Reducing burnout is not a quick fix, but it is definitely a priority that helps both individuals and organizations.

"Being kind to yourself is the first step towards wellbeing. It is important for us to treat ourselves with kindness and compassion, draw boundaries, find time for yourself and seek help whenever needed. With each one of us doing it, we could transform into a kinder, accepting and inclusive society."

Asim Amin, CEO of Healing Clouds app

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