

HANDBOOK

The great big burnout handbook:

What it is (and isn't),
why it's happening,
and how to stop it
for good



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Meet the experts

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Burnout's not a buzzword – it's real, and potentially dangerous

In the world of workplace lingo, 'burnout' has had nearly as much play as 'WFH', 'hybrid' and 'The Great Resignation' over the past two years.

And, while the term itself is ripe for misuse (and by that we mean 'burnout' is not a synonym for 'sleepy'), the problem is as legit as it is stark.

A 2021 [McKinsey survey](#) showed half of all employees felt 'at least somewhat' burned out. [Depending on the study](#), burnout rates among health workers can be as high as 70% – with a sharp uptick during the pandemic.

While it's key to be cautious around burnout stats (especially when these are self-reported) – **not even science** 100% agrees on what it is, or how to measure it – even the most careful research will reveal a minimum of 1 in 10 of us are burned out.

This means – no matter the exact number – millions of employees around the world are hurtling towards something dark and dangerous.

Stopping this corporate crisis is far from easy (in part, as the syndrome is often invisible), but it is possible. To end burnout, we need targeted action from employees, leaders and businesses alike. This needs to be at once structural and, perhaps most importantly, cultural.

But first, it's best we settle an argument...

What even is burnout?

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“[Burnout is] an erosion of the soul caused by a deterioration of one's values, dignity, spirit and will.”

Christina Maslach – American social psychologist

The World Health Organisation defines burnout as a syndrome – not a disease, or illness, but syndrome – “conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”

What’s vital is burnout’s description as an “occupational phenomenon”. This means it only applies to jobs, not any other area of life. So, while there has been research into parental, marital and caregiver burnout (all of which are exhausting in their own way), these don’t meet the WHO’s rigid criteria.

That means it's up to organisations – and leaders within – to tackle the root causes of burnout.

Burnout signs, stages, and symptoms

As a syndrome, burnout is split into three signs, four stages, and several scary symptoms.

The signs

The warnings to watch out for:

- **Exhaustion:** Low energy (physical, emotional and mental), that slowly skids into a constant, soul-draining fatigue.
- **Cynicism:** Increased mental distance from work, often paired with negative feelings towards the job itself – including parts we once enjoyed.
- **Inefficacy:** Performance drops, and there’s also a high chance we’ll doubt the meaning, or quality, of our own work.

But, don’t forget: burnout isn’t binary. It doesn’t happen overnight – burnout is... well, to be frank it’s a slow-burn – which means it can be stopped. Yet early action is vital.



The stages

Honeymoon

It's easy to picture: we start a new role, and fizz with energy and ambition. We want to prove our worth, and so work all hours – but that's fine as we're mega engaged, with job satisfaction in the stratosphere.

Let's pause. As this stage is crucial. If we put effective coping strategies in place – to combat the stress that does, and will, come – it's possible to stay in the honeymoon phase indefinitely. The problem is, few people develop a healthy relationship to stress (which can, actually, be good for you), and so they slide into the next stage.

Onset of stress

At this point, we're facing increased demands that outweigh the resources we have to cope. We may have increased adrenaline swirling around our body, we'll struggle more with concentration, or irritability, and we might have bad sleep or fatigue. Increased anxiety or tension headaches are both common.

Chronic stress

This is when acute stress is present for a while, and has been left untreated. At this stage, we might experience a drop in our self-care, we might see physical health problems, or issues with digestion. We might also experience fluctuations in our mood, like anger or overwhelm, and notice a major slump in energy.

Burnout

Everything mentioned above, all at once. But also things like feeling isolated, experiencing self-doubt, emotional blunting and helplessness. At this stage, it's too late for preventative care, our only choice may be professional – even medical – support. If severe, recovery can take 12+ months.

It's why early detection, and intervention, is everything. Awareness of our own stress responses, as well as developing coping strategies, when deployed early, can snub out burnout – reducing stress, and increasing our ability to cope.

The symptoms

Though it's strictly viewed as an at-work syndrome, burnout can gnaw its way into every part of our lives. The negative impact is visible when we're awake and asleep; at work, and home.

These are just a few symptoms that can arise:

Physical

- Tension
- Chronic headaches
- Exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Stomach issues
- Nausea
- Changes in appetite

Emotional

- Emotional blunting
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Cynicism
- Depletion
- Brain fog

Behavioural

- Social withdrawal
- Irritability
- Neglecting personal needs
- Loss of motivation
- Detachment

The line between burnout and everyday emotions

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“Burnout is much discussed, but little understood. We speak about it imprecisely, which only adds to burnout culture's persistence.”

Jon Malesic – essayist, scholar, and author of [The End of Burnout](#)

It's easy to assume everyone on the planet is burned out.

As part of a recent [Unmind x Culture Amp webinar](#), 59% of viewers said they'd experienced at least one sign of burnout, and 39% all three. Compared to other self-report surveys, our web watchers were actually quite restrained.

A 2015 [Deloitte report](#) showed more than three-quarters (77%) of employees claimed to have experienced burnout in their current job, and over half more than once. In another, [96% of millennials](#) said burnout affected their everyday life.

In an Unmind x Culture Amp poll, 6 in 10 said they'd experienced at least one sign of burnout (exhaustion, cynicism or inefficacy). 4 in 10 said they'd experienced all three.

This is all to say that people can be quick to self-diagnose burnout. And, while some may very well be experiencing the syndrome, most are more likely tired, stressed, or overwhelmed. These are all standard human emotions.

So, while experiencing intense levels of negative emotions for prolonged periods of time can lead to a diagnosis of mental illness, negative feelings on their own are not the same as burnout. (A bit like how sadness is a symptom of depression, but doesn't meet the threshold for a diagnosis on its own, especially when feelings are short-lived.)

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“Burnout is one of those terms that gets bandied around a lot. People will say: ‘I skipped my lunch break today – I’m so burned out’. That’s not what we’re talking about.

“Burnout is something that’s chronic, and has serious implications for people, but also serious implications for organisations.”



Joel Davies

Senior people scientist at Culture Amp

Too much, or not enough?

A handy way to draw a line between human emotions and burnout is this:

Think of stress as *too much*. Too much work. Too many demands. Too much adrenaline, overwhelm, anxiety, or imposter syndrome.

Whereas **burnout is, actually, *not enough*.** You feel empty. Spent. No hope, or motivation. Beyond the point of even caring. Work sucks. So do your workmates. And you? You’re the worst of all.

So far, we've talked mainly about burnout – both cause and effect – from the point of individuals. But looking at burnout purely as a people problem is a misstep.

Why?

Because organisations are key to burnout. For preventing it, yes, though that's skipping too far ahead. Before that, it's important to understand how – in countless workplaces around the world – companies are contributing to a culture that makes burnout so widespread.

Burnout culture: Is your organisation to blame?

We live in a society where (whisper it) burnout is *celebrated*.

This has unspooled over several decades, and we can trace seeds back to Wall Street and Silicon Valley, smartphones and Slack, the Great Recession and the gig economy. Most recently, Covid-19 turbocharged this trend by snipping the link between the office and home (and where many staff swapped the commute for, you guessed it, yet more work).

Put together, this makes various burnout risks less of an anomaly, more an inevitability. Even as more and more employees work themselves into oblivion, overwork remains a badge of honour. To some, burnout is a perverse symbol of success.



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“The pandemic has certainly contributed to burnout for many people. So it would be understandable to assume that the end of Covid-19 will represent an end to the high levels of burnout that’s characterised the past two years.

“However, there is good reason to think that 2022 may lead to even more burnout than we observed during the pandemic. As ‘The Great Resignation’ gets underway, many organisations will be forced to maintain the same level of productivity, but with fewer of their current employees.

“Even the organisations that are able to fill vacant roles quickly will find that new employees need much more mentoring and support, which will put further strain on managers. If organisations do not make accommodations for the large number of people leaving, they are likely to burn out those who stay, and cause turnover contagion.”



Joel Davies

Senior people scientist at Culture Amp

As part of a society that salutes overwork (in spite of known risks and pitfalls), organisations *themselves* might be edging their staff towards the syndrome. Most, it should be said, don’t do this on purpose. But that’s where culture comes in.

Company culture, much like burnout, is invisible yet powerful. It’s a million silent signals – telling staff how to think about the organisation, and behave at work. In simple terms, culture might be that *no-one* is expected to work till 10pm, or that *everyone* is expected to work till 10.

Worse, this stuff doesn’t have to be conscious to take root. For instance, the exec who sends a company-wide update at midnight may simply be a night owl. Yet smartphones mean everyone will receive it. Most will read. And though not everyone will reply, many will pressure to snap back into work mode.

That’s culture. And when it comes to fuelling burnout, workplace culture can be gasoline.

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“While the experience of burnout is generally focused at an individual level, the workplace environment contributes greatly to an employee’s chance of experiencing what is a very negative phenomenon.

“Often it’s systemic issues that really contribute to burnout. So, though there might be great policies in place for annual leave, or workload, for example, if we’re not paying attention to the patterns of systemic workload pressures, at the very local level, that’s when people tend to experience more burnout.”



Jessica Brannigan

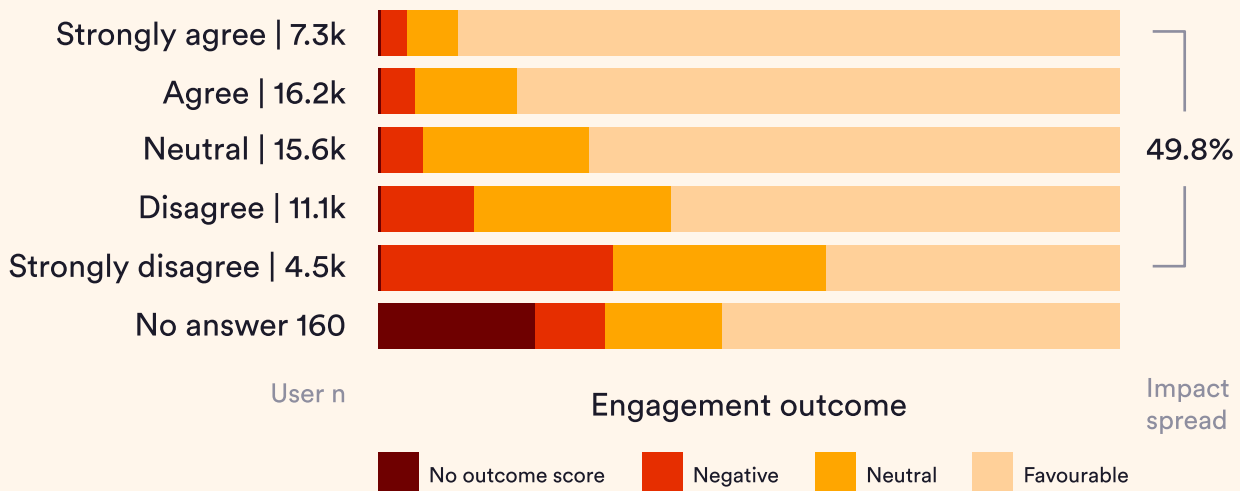
Lead people scientist at Culture Amp

Though science is unsure about the specifics of burnout as a disorder, it’s clear on the impact to organisations. Burnout is closely linked to decreased productivity, employee engagement and job satisfaction, as well as higher absenteeism.

Speaking of engagement (see graph)...

Engagement

Favourability on engagement by response to, “I rarely feel overstressed by my work”



According to global Culture Amp data, staff who strongly agreed with the statement, “I rarely feel overstressed by my work” were 89.5% engaged in their job. Meanwhile, workers who strongly disagreed had an engagement score of just 39.7%.

Not only that, those who strongly disagreed were more than 1.5-times as likely to quit their job in the next year.

It’s not 100% straightforward – highly stressed employees can be highly engaged – but what’s obvious is the wrecking effect this can have, on individuals and organisations both.

Overloading and under-resourcing

Employees are generally pretty resilient. They can deal with episodically increased workloads – that could be Black Friday for retailers, or a punchy project deadline for knowledge workers. But when demands are chronic – continuous and long-lasting – stress becomes chronic, and burnout can set in.

Does your organisation have a do-more-with-less mindset? Making sure you’ve got enough people with the right skills to do the work you’re asking for is an obvious and critical step towards preventing burnout.

Solutions: for staff, managers, and companies

Preventing burnout, and changing the culture that sparks it, requires collective action. That means buy-in from every corner of a company, and committed work at an individual, management, and organisational level.

Here's a selection of startpoints.

Staff

Self-care: Basically, the basics. Like getting enough sleep, eating brain-boosting food (not just a conveyor belt of fast food), drinking enough water, exercise, limiting alcohol. We know this, though we still manage to overlook it, and so it's always worth repeating.

Self-care is more than tub soaks and country walks. It's also about setting workplace boundaries, switching off, saying no, and knowing what's important to prioritise. As often as possible, our top priority should be ourselves.

Challenging beliefs: We might think we don't deserve downtime. That it's selfish, or impossible – as we have far too much to do. We may hold unhelpful beliefs, perfectionist tendencies, or think we have to give 100%, 100% of the time. Thoughts can act as internal stressors, so gently challenging each one as it arises can help to reframe it.

Sphere of control: In other words, control the controllables and accept the rest. This means striving for a better work-life balance, using up our holiday allowance, not working late if we can avoid it, and knowing when to delegate, or who to ask for help.

The other side is accepting the things we can't change. It doesn't mean welcoming or condoning bad news, but actively choosing to focus energy on the things we do have power over.

Managers



“Your first and foremost job as a leader is to take charge of your own energy and then help orchestrate the energy of those around you.”

Peter Drucker – Austrian-American management consultant

For decades, parents rolled their eyebrows at the plane-based plea: ‘In the event of an emergency, please put on your own oxygen mask before helping others’. Yet, look beyond the perceived selfishness, and it’s obvious why. If we don’t first give ourselves the tools needed to support others, we’re far less able to help.

Culture Amp’s data puts this into context. Almost 9 in 10 employees said their manager showed genuine care about their wellbeing during the pandemic. Fewer – 8 in 10 – felt these same managers set a good example for wellbeing. It’s not a major drop, but does imply an instinct to support others – help with their oxygen mask – than nurture their own wellbeing.

Which questions matter the most?

The questions that are most associated with overall manager effectiveness generally have to do with innovation and caring. It’s likely no surprise that getting to know your direct report and checking in is an important driver of perceptions of management. But creating a place where innovation is encouraged and acted on is equally important. Along with championing the importance of diversity, which can affect the innovativeness of the team.

1	My manager helps me follow through on innovative ideas	81% favourable Fostering innovation
2	My manager shows that they value diversity on the team	83% favourable Inclusion
3	My manager regularly checks in with how I am doing (not just work-related)	81% favourable Caring
4	My manager encourages innovative ideas and approaches	83% favourable Fostering innovation
5	My manager takes time to get to know me	85% favourable Caring

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“Looking at our manager effectiveness data – taken from our 2021 benchmark, that uses data from over 250 organisations, with 1.3million questions answered – we are able to zone in on the things that matter most to employees.

“It’s likely no surprise that getting to know your direct report and checking in is an important driver of perceptions of management. And it’s this item on managers checking in that we know is a key mechanism of control for mitigating, where possible, burnout in their teams.”



Jessica Brannigan

Lead people scientist at Culture Amp

The answer? Training. If the above shows anything, it’s that empathy, confidence and emotional intelligence are the tools (or proverbial oxygen mask) that help managers provide the support that employees both want and need.

And, as managers are the arteries that connect the shopfloor to the boardroom – interacting with more people within an organisation than any CEO – this can become a huge step towards a psychologically safe workplace, and burnout counterculture, that we all want.

Companies

Start with measurement. If you measure it, you can manage it.

Loads of burnout-centric tools exist – most notably, the [Maslach Burnout Inventory](#) – yet engagement surveys, employee feedback, and clinically-backed mental wellbeing trackers like the Unmind Index can all help pencil a picture of how the employees are feeling.

Developing a comprehensive image of mental health and wellbeing will help pinpoint the early signs of burnout, which means you can intervene proactively, rather than once someone has already flamed out (and could need a year, or more, to recover).

Use this to guide the actions you take, but start slow. Changing too much at once risks confusing and unsettling the workforce, and it could also prove tough to track the impact of each individual measure. Ending burnout culture is a long game, so prioritise the most pressing, and go step-by-step.

For example:

- Increasing awareness of mental health.
- Upskilling managers, execs, and all employees, with mental health training.
- Signposting to wellbeing support.
- Adding wellbeing items to 1:1s.
- Leaders role-modelling healthy work boundaries.
- Addressing workplace risk factors, such as role clarity, clear communication, adequate workloads and making sure there are enough people to do the work needed.

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“One of the best ways organisations can spot signs and symptoms is to look for them.

“That may sound rather obvious, but if you’re not collecting employee feedback data then you will be relying on anecdotal evidence only, and likely missing opportunities to take action earlier. If you have data across the company, this gives you a perspective on more systemic issues. Also, if you democratise access to data through your organisation, you can empower your leaders to take action where it matters.

“Having data at these macro and micro levels can ensure that those in the best positions to take action, at the exec level or at the local level, have the data they need to determine what this would be.”



Joel Davies

Senior people scientist at Culture Amp

A post-burnout future

A degree of chaos in life is unavoidable. We're vulnerable to too many things outside of our control. Stress itself is no bad thing (see also: sadness, sleepiness etc) it's part of being human. But relentless pressure and overwhelm without the right coping strategies, can lead to devastation.

Self-care and individual choices are vital, but also irrelevant if workplace structures, managers and wider culture don't play their part. Leaders need to learn, organisations need to evolve, and steps need to be taken to track, and address, how employees feel in – and approach – their jobs.

A post-burnout future is not fantasy – it's real and, for those who want it, in reach.



About Unmind

Unmind is a cultural change platform. We empower employees to live more fulfilling lives while giving leaders the insight and confidence they need to create psychologically safe, engaged and mentally healthy cultures.



Unmind Learning
Lead with empathy

Unmind Learning is a wellbeing-centred training platform that gets to the heart of modern leadership. Help your managers build empathy, confidence and emotional intelligence to create the psychologically safe, engaged cultures of tomorrow.



Unmind Insights
Measure it, manage it

Unmind Insights gives organisations the confidence – and conviction – to make informed decisions about their mental health and wellbeing strategies while demonstrating the impact of your investment.



Unmind Wellbeing
Empower people to flourish

Unmind Wellbeing helps your people to proactively measure, understand and improve their wellbeing. Access hundreds of bitesize, self-guided tools for leading a more balanced and fulfilling life.



Unmind Spaces
Unite behind change

Unmind Spaces is a wellbeing community for champions of change. Our rich programme of tailored live events, experiences and gatherings bring together like-minded professionals to listen, learn, and catalyse change.

We're driving cultural change with world-leading organisations:



Want to find out more? Book a demo today.
www.unmind.com

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