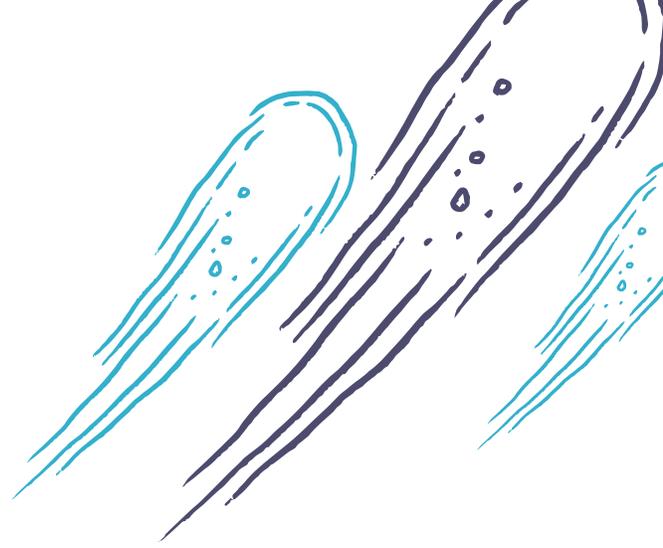


Anxious Achiever: Telltale Signs of Burnout

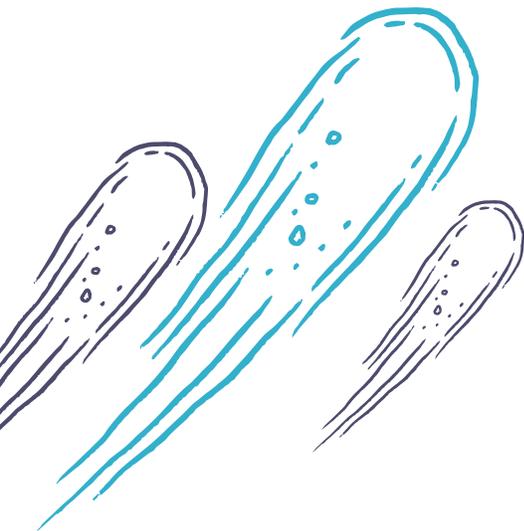
This article explores the impact of chronic stress on employee mental health and engagement.



Imagine a meteor travelling through space...

Since there is no air in space, this travel is effortless. But when that meteor enters the Earth's atmosphere, it encounters a lot of resistance from the air. The meteor must expend a lot of energy to push through, as it does so it begins to burn up and will eventually explode.

A similar situation exists in the workplace – **employee burnout**.



Herbert Freudenberger defines burnout as “*a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one’s professional life.*”

It is what happens when employees depersonalize their work and feel decreasing levels of achievement. It can feel like no matter how hard they try, the results are not worth the effort anymore. Studies show that in general men are more likely to manifest burnout as ‘**depersonalization**,’ whereas women manifest it as ‘**emotional exhaustion**’. One reason an individual may experience burnout is because they are unable to recognize the early warning signs.

Once an individual reaches a state of burnout, their level of involvement, commitment and affinity for their organization significantly decline. Simply put, they no longer feel compelled to go the ‘extra mile’ or invest the same level of enthusiasm, engagement or interest they once had. The result can come in the form of increased absenteeism, diminished work quality and a general state of ambivalence.

By contrast, positive engagement occurs when an employee is truly invested in their job and feels a sense of value, accomplishment and pride. Positive engagement generally results in increased levels of workplace satisfaction, a higher quality of work, increased productivity, and employee retention.

So how can we tell when either we ourselves or our teams are exhibiting signs of burnout?

This is where it can get complicated. When an individual is placed on a highly visible project or time-sensitive deliverable, their effort in the form of longer work hours and sustained periods of high performance may be viewed positively. It may appear as though this individual is exhibiting high levels of employee engagement. However, in parallel to the symptoms of high engagement they may also be experiencing increasing levels of stress and anxiety. In other words, they **exhibit high levels of engagement and symptoms of burnout simultaneously**. Left unaddressed, one of the larger consequences of this situation is an increase in employee turnover.

It’s easy to conclude that positive employee engagement is important for the success of an organization. **However, unsustainable high levels of engagement can be dangerous.** Smart Engagement is what leaders should aim for moving forward.

Smart Engagement involves an equilibrium, it promotes a balance of both work satisfaction and personal wellness.

Smart Engagement promotes the need to recognize, reward and encourage both conventional forms of professional success and less recognized forms of team wellness, satisfaction and value. The premise is rooted in the belief that balance is the key to sustained levels of organizational wellbeing.

What are some telltale signs that can indicate you or your team has lost its equilibrium?

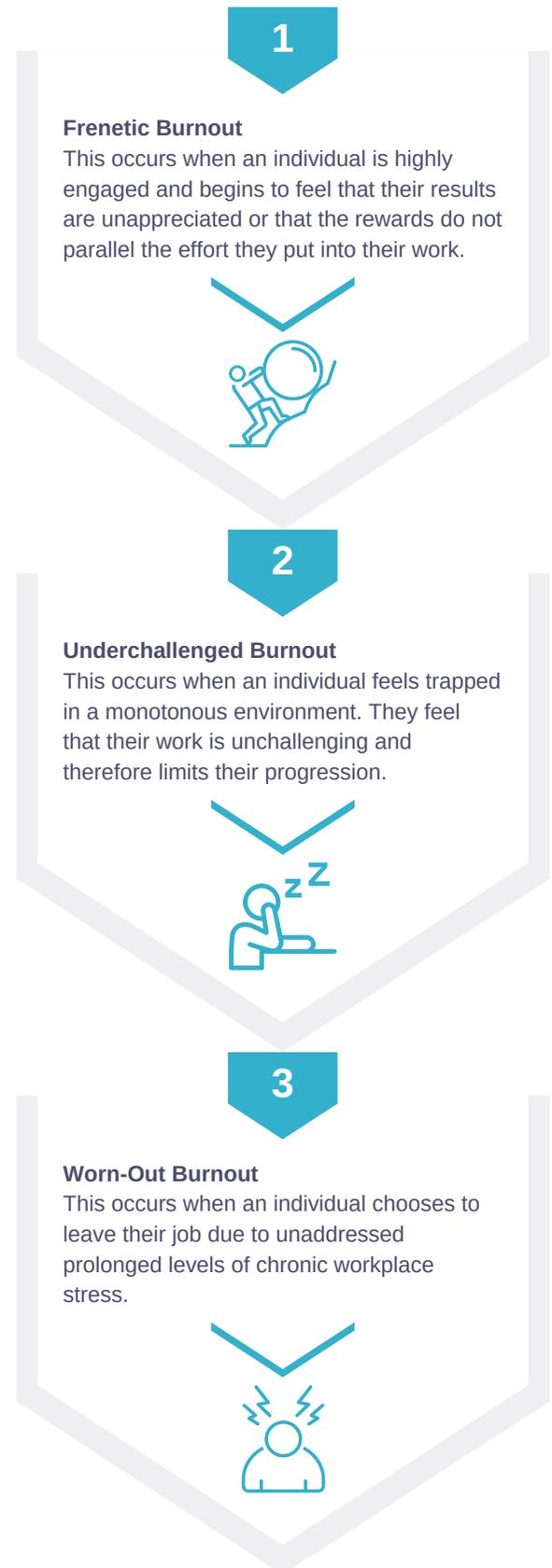
Here are common symptoms:

- Increased levels of anxiety
- Headaches, body aches and pains
- Lack of sleep or poor quality of sleep
- Chronic Fatigue
- Prolonged cynical outlook towards work and life
- Poor performance or decreased productivity
- Decreased enthusiasm or interest in work-related opportunities
- Absenteeism
- Depersonalization
- Increase in job turnover

If you or your team are exhibiting these symptoms consider the following:

- **Acknowledge the problem.** Approach your team or employee with sympathy and an open mind. Ask open-ended questions to allow them to provide you with further insight into the current situation.
- **Identify the origin.** Work collaboratively to consider what triggered the problem. Assess historic data to determine potential patterns such as a spike in turnover, illness or absenteeism.
- **Consider causation.** Engage in dialogue to examine underlying triggers or scenarios that may have contributed to the problem. Consider what was going on in the organization that may have contributed to the issue (i.e. any major changes such as a restructuring, new work processes or policies or leadership changes?)

It is important to recognize that a person's level of engagement within an organization can oscillate when experiencing burnout. However not all burnout manifests in the same way. The cause of burnout and corresponding behavioural symptoms can vary. **There are three common types of burnout to be aware of:**



The following are some suggestions on how to improve employee engagement and wellness by **addressing**, **monitoring** and **mitigating** against possible burnout.

Sanctify Routines & Rituals

Emphasize the importance of routines and rituals. It doesn't just help simulate the idea of being productive or getting ready to 'go' to work, it also helps establish clear distinctions between work and home. If your employee values the ability to go running or do some form of exercise before the start of their workday consider how you can bake in time to make this happen. One possibility is ensuring all morning meetings begin a half hour later to enable your team to use the additional time to practice any early morning ritual they value. Alternatively, if certain members of the team value an uninterrupted lunch consider the viability of blacking-out noon meeting times. A great example, is retail giant Walmart. Early in the onset of the pandemic the retailer recognized signs of employee burnout. They quickly mandated undisturbed lunch times to ensure employees had an hour of uninterrupted personal time.

Go Analog

In most instances, technology has helped us through improved virtual collaboration tools that have allowed us to move into the world of remote work more seamlessly and effectively. However, research demonstrates that new does not always equal better. Favouring audio calls over video calls is also a good way to lower the overwhelming nature of remote meetings. Research tells us that humans can communicate more emotion through their voice. This takes away the idea of 'having to be on' during a virtual meeting and allows employees to conserve their energy.

Formalize 'Wellness' in the Employee Lifecycle

One reason people experience burnout is because they are unable to recognize early signs of feeling overwhelmed or stressed. The best course of action would be to ensure everyone in an organization is aware of what to look for. By integrating and formalizing, 'wellness' as a key element of all aspects of the employee lifecycle you give authority and credence to its importance. How do you do that? Consider starting from the beginning. Integrate and embed wellness as part of an employee's orientation and training sessions, and continue through to professional development goals. Ensure succession and leader-based metrics are holistic and prioritize the health and wellbeing of the team versus solely financial or conventional targets. Promote and make available resources to your team that allow them to anonymously disclose feelings of burnout without fear of reprimand or impact to career progression.

Instill 'No-work' Break-times

By formalizing break-times with defined rules (i.e. no lunchtime meetings), you are able to cultivate the importance of balance. It is important that while on breaks employees are encouraged to disconnect from work. The breaks need to be as distinct as possible. By mandating breaks or short vacation periods for employees, you allow your team the opportunity to focus on other personal health and well-being priorities. By advocating the principle of '**disconnect to reconnect**', you enable teams to develop greater resilience, capacity and commitment to ongoing engagement.

Humanize your Leadership

Having a hard day at work? Struggling with the multiple competing priorities of work and home life? Well, you are not alone. Leaders that are able to transparently share their struggles humanize their leadership and enable employees to feel more comfortable expressing their own challenges. However, remember when modelling the behaviour you'd like to encourage you must be authentic in your desire to help. Humanizing your leadership can only work if it is done with compassion and a genuine commitment to improve the work lives of your employees and teams. Additionally, once you have created a safe place to acknowledge health and wellness challenges you must make resolution a priority. Freely expressing your challenges can be easier when it comes from a position of power. Therefore it is particularly important to pay attention to subtle cues your team demonstrates and take tangible action to make improvements.

The negative effects of burnout can inadvertently seep into various parts of an organization and cause **detrimental** effects. By **proactively** addressing and equipping your teams with the **tools, resources** and **methods** to manage burnout you can prevent the loss of your **most valuable asset, your people**.



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