**Burnout: The Epidemic**

*Prepared for The Journal Record; June 17, 2019****EXTENDED VERSION***

The American workforce is burning out at a record pace. In fact, just last month, the World Health Organization classified it as an “occupational phenomenon.” They describe it as a result of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Note that it is not classified as a medical condition, but they are in the process of developing evidence-based guidelines on mental well-being in the workplace.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Symptoms:**

Many of us will recognize symptoms such as physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of hopelessness and frustration, depression, sleeplessness and anxiety, negativity and cynicism[[2]](#footnote-2), then withdrawal and reduced efficacy. [[3]](#footnote-3)

**Who is most vulnerable?**

Different groups may feel other symptoms more acutely than other workers. For example, executives may feel more isolated because they typically do not have a peer to discuss issues within the company.

Same with those in caretaker roles such as the medical profession or, in business, those in the frontlines such as customer service or human resources. Those who handle toxic issues (e.g. complaints, grievances, harassment) are bound to get poisoned by the toxicity at some point.[[4]](#footnote-4) (See Causes below.)

According to a 2018 SHRM piece[[5]](#footnote-5), Dr. David Ballard with the American Psychological Association shared this insight: “Interestingly, people who are really invested in their work…can be more susceptible to burnout than other people” because their identities are so closely tied to their work.”

This means that those who are most devoted will also be the most susceptible to burnout.

**Burnout affects bottom line:**  
Disengagement from burnout results in higher turnover, increased healthcare costs and lower productivity. According to a 2018 Gallup poll, about two-thirds of the workforce are burned out.

These employees are twice as likely to be seeking jobs elsewhere and more likely to take a sick leave, with 23% of those winding up in the emergency room.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Ethics and Burnout:**Causes of burnout essentially boil down to some basic ethical issues, with a few suggestions on how to overcome these breaches:

1. **Lazy leadership:** Of course, leaders what their top people on tough projects. But, it is unfair to perpetually penalize competent workers by having them fulfill work assignments left undone by others. A learning curve is one thing, but a failure to intervene by taking the initiative to correct slackers can turn high performers into toast.

Recommendations for anticipating and overcoming these issues were recently published in a 2018 *Harvard Business Review* article by Matt Plummer titled appropriately, “How Are You Protecting Your High Performers from Burnout?”[[7]](#footnote-7) A few pointers include:

* *Allow some autonomy*:  
  Let high performers occasionally pick their projects.

***Uncertainty Can Foster Burnout:*** *Citing their recent State of the American Workplace report, Gallup indicated discovered that only 60% of workers can strongly agree that they know what is expected of them at work and it is exhausting them.*

* *Energize:* Pair high performers up with other high performers so they can build on one another’s ideas.
* *Be diligent*: As Plummer points out, “Demands unrelated to core work are unsuspected drivers of burnout because they each feel so insignificant and it’s hard to keep track of their aggregate effect.” This is especially true of those in service-oriented fields. Employees need to be able to approach their leaders with questions and seek guidance on priorities so that they are empowered to say no to requests.

1. **Distrust due to lack of role clarity and shifting priorities:** The Gallup research also revealedthe extra strain that employees feel when accountability and expectations are moving targets.

Likewise, when the company practices don’t align with ethical values, burnout is sure to result. Be clear on your organizational principles and stick to them.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. **Unrelenting stress:** For one person, this could mean dealing with an uncooperative coworker or inadequate training. More commonly though, it indicates unrealistic

deadlines have been set without adequate resources to accomplish the work. Unfortunately, the strongest performers are often given the most challenging

assignments. They can wear themselves out to achieve the goals - only to be “rewarded” with even more demanding workloads and expectations. Because they are so task-focused and goal-oriented, high performers rarely see the onslaught of burnout coming. By then, the damage is done.

1. **Lack of organizational humanity:** In other words, companies should tie employee well-being to their culture. For example, high performers sometimes view taking vacation time as a desertion. Managers should insist that it is the employee’s *duty* to take a break.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Gimme a Break:**  
  
Shockingly, according to a SHRM report, more than 662 million days went unused in 2016 and a little more than half of employees ended 2016 with unused vacation days.

Shockingly, according to a SHRM report, more than 662 million days went unused in 2016 and a little more than half of employees ended 2016 with unused vacation days. That may be because we are feeling more compulsion to stay in the office. At least 60% of the workers surveyed indicated that work-related pressure has been steadily increasing and that leads to burnout. HR leaders believe that burnout is one the top reasons for a lack of staff retention.[[10]](#footnote-10)  
  
Some experiments indicate that productivity increases substantially and creativity surges after employees have taken time to rest and recover. That could be because vacation time allows the body to recharge and positively impacts mental health. Of course, those effects are diminished when we try to pack in too much in too little time.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Don’t applaud people for working themselves to death. One mistake that organizations make is equating working excessively long hours with success. While that may happen during peak seasons, it should not be the norm. Help employees set boundaries in this 24/7 world, by encouraging connections with their home base and friends for better balance.

Also, if managers repeatedly notice an employee failing to either take a lunch break or grab a bite at their desk, that’s a trouble sign, too.

1. **Gratitude Counts:** Most of the research performed related to burnout by medical professionals. That is understandable, considering burnout at those levels can be dangerous for their patients and an expensive liability for their facilities. Interesting, research showed that acts of gratitude promoted resiliency and was energizing. I   
   particularly liked this blog post by Paula Davis Laack[[12]](#footnote-12) who has indicated an expertise in burnout prevention:

“ Expressions of gratitude also help people feel socially valued, and the effects of gratitude spill over to others. [Studies](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/98/6/946/) shows that helpers who received a brief thank you were motivated to assist not only the person who provided the “thanks,” but also other unrelated people. In [addition](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/98/6/946/), a manager’s expression of gratitude increased the number of calls made by university fundraisers (Grant & Gino, 2010).

As I mentioned above, a simple thank you helped me feel confident and like I was having an impact. Interestingly, it has been shown that giver burnout has less to do with the amount or quantity of giving and more to do with whether the giver perceives that their giving is having an impact (Grant, 2013).”

Gratitude should be central to an organization that wants to retain their most valued employees. Significant research indicates that appreciation and positive feedback is a major factor in employee engagement. That’s why it is difficult to understand why more managers struggle with expressing gratitude. [[13]](#footnote-13) These attitudes could change when executives take time to model praise either publicly or in personal acknowledgements such as notes. (Note that there is a negative downside to this when an expression of thanks is used to manipulate or is superficial in the approach.)

**Summary:**

Simply put, burnout is a symptom of dysfunctional organizational behavior that can be corrected using some of the tips outlined in this article. But, it starts with having integrity at the heart of the organization. An organization that truly respects and values all employees’ well-being does recognizes their needs and strives to value them as human beings – not robots.

(See also next page on self-preservation tips.)

**Survival Tips for High Performers:**

If you’re a high performer who would like to do further research on how to survive burnout, here are a few more resources to consider exploring that go beyond the eat right and exercise mantra:

Job Burnout: How to Spot it and Take Action  
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>  
Job burnout is a critical problem for healthcare providers, so it is no surprised that Mayo Clinic has paid particular attention to the phenomenon. This article offers some practical advice for any professional experiencing job burnout.

The Thrive Guide to Healing from Burnout:  
<https://thriveglobal.com/stories/life-after-burnout-science-recovery-tips-strategies/>  
This may be an interesting read for overachievers and those undervalued.

When Burnout is a Sign You Should Leave Your Job” *Harvard Business Review* <https://hbr.org/2018/01/when-burnout-is-a-sign-you-should-leave-your-job>  
Stress can color our thinking. This offers some good tips to help more objectively analyze the situation.

Why Some People Get Burned Out and Others Don’t, *Harvard Business Review*  
<https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-some-people-get-burned-out-and-others-dont>

*Shannon Warren is Founder of the Oklahoma Business Ethics Consortium.*

1. World Health Organization (2019) *Burn-Out an ‘occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases* <https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mayo Clinic (2018) “Job Burnout: How to spot it and take action.” <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ali, Shainna (2019, May28) “Five Signs of Workplace Burnout” *Psychology Today,* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201905/five-signs-workplace-burnout> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniel, Teresa A. (2019,March 13) *Viewpoint: How HR Can Protect Itself from Toxic Emotions; SHRM* <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/viewpoint-how-hr-can-protect-itself-from-toxic-emotions.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gurchiek Kathy (2018, January 18) “How to Prevent Executive Burnout and Keep Your Leader from Unraveling” *SHRM* <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/keeping-your-leader-from-unraveling-preventing-executive-burnout.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gallup (2018) “Employee Burnout: The 5 Main Causes” <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/237059/employee-burnout-part-main-causes.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Plummer, Matt (2018, June 18) “How Are You Protecting Your Employees from Burnout?” *Harvard Business Review* <https://hbr.org/2018/06/how-are-you-protecting-your-high-performers-from-burnout> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Valcour, Monique (2018, January 25) “When Burnout is a Sign You Should Leave Your Job” *Harvard Business Review* <https://hbr.org/2018/01/when-burnout-is-a-sign-you-should-leave-your-job> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Preston, Camille (2019, June 10) “Why Business Leaders Should Make Vacation Time Mandatory: Four Evidence-based Reasons to Prioritize Vacation Time This Summer,” *Psychology Today* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-health-in-the-workplace/201906/why-business-leaders-should-make-vacation-time-mandatory> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. SHRM (2017) “Infographic: The Problem with Burnout” <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0817/pages/infographic-the-problem-with-burnout.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Laack, Paula Davis, “Do Your Clients Say Thanks? How Gratitude Impacts Resilience and Burnout” *Paula Davis Laack,* <https://www.pauladavislaack.com/do-your-clients-say-thanks-how-gratitude-impacts-resilience-burnout/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Besheshti, Naz, (2018, November 20) “Benefits of a Year Round Atititude of Gratitude, *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2018/11/20/benefits-of-a-year-round-attitude-of-gratitude-in-the-workplace/#6992e7631bc5> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)