

Beating the COVID Burnout

Why are So Many Workers Leaving in Drove?

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be over. So, just as a sense of normalcy is returning, why are America's workers reporting record levels of burnout? And why is it driving what's being called the "Great Resignation"?

Psychiatrist Mark Goulston, MD, says burnout (characterized by depletion, cynicism, and reduced productivity) is a normal response to the extreme stress and trauma caused by a global pandemic that has dragged out for over a year—and the delay is no surprise.

"Burnout happens progressively and cumulatively," says Dr. Goulston, co-author along with Diana Hendel, PharmD, of *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD* (Harper Horizon, ISBN: 978-0-7852-4462-2). "Spend a year working long hours under stressful circumstances, trying to also homeschool your kids, feeling isolated, grieving all these losses, and worrying about the safety of your loved ones and yourself, and eventually you will hit a breaking point.

"It takes time to reflect on and process what you've been through," he adds. "It makes sense that many people are just now getting to that breaking point."

The Onus for Fixing the Problem

Obviously, a cadre of burned-out employees is bad for engagement, innovation, productivity, and all the other factors that make a company hum. What's more, the pandemic has given employees a lot of time to think and reassess their lives. And many have concluded that life is too short to work for companies that don't seem to care about them as human beings (hence, the mass exodus).

The onus for fixing the burnout problem is on both parties, say the authors.

"Leaders need to take burnout seriously," says Dr. Hendel, an organizational trauma expert. "Get intentional about monitoring your employees' mental health, which is intertwined with burnout, and intervening when needed. This matters in the best of times, but especially in the wake of a traumatic event like COVID.

"But also, employees need to take responsibility for managing their own stress and building up their own resilience," she adds.

Here are five tips for workplace managers, supervisors, and other business leaders:

Stand firm against stigma. Burnout absolutely impacts people's mental health, say Drs. Goulston and Hendel. When it's untreated, people can become depressed and anxious, and they may be at greater risk for substance abuse and possibly even suicide. That's why a holistic approach to fighting burnout includes making sure employees feel safe enough to come to you when they're struggling.

"We need to do all we can to bring mental health issues into the light—and to stand firm against the stigma that discourages people from talking about it," says Dr. Hendel.

Make sure people feel comfortable accessing the EAP. An employee assistance program (EAP) helps employees with issues that affect their health and mental and emotional well-being. If your organization has an EAP, make sure that people know the services it offers, and that they can access them confidentially. Reinforce the message that there is *no shame* in using an

EAP. And if you do not currently have an EAP, consider setting one up now.

Talk up the subject of mental health. Don't assume people "just know" you care about this issue. They probably don't. Say the words "I want you to be mentally and emotionally healthy. Please come to me if you need help. My door is always open." And don't just say it once. Say it, announce it, write it, and reinforce it, over and over.

Regularly meet with employees one-on-one so you're more likely to be aware of their personal struggles. This is a good leadership practice anyway as it builds strong connections between leaders and employees. But *especially* in tumultuous times like now, it helps you know if they're grieving a loss, or their spouse has lost a job, or their child is struggling in school. The better you know your employees, the more likely you'll be to intervene when they need it.

Be aware of the signals you're sending. (People need to feel psychologically safe to tell the truth.) It's crucial for leaders to allow people to feel their emotions and to talk about it when they are having a tough time. Pay attention to the signals you're sending. Never penalize people, overtly or subtly, for bringing their secret struggles into the light. Never imply that this is a sign of "weakness" or that they are finding a reason to shirk their duties. And, if you think you'd never do this, know that it's possible to subconsciously push people away through stigmatizing them.

"We often stigmatize others because what they are going through hits too close to home about our own mental and emotional issues," says Dr. Goulston. "It seems that most of the world copes with anxiety and depression—opposed to healing from it—by trying to run away from it by keeping busy. Hearing about

someone else's issues can get in the way of our being able to run from ours."

...and five more for EMPLOYEES

Tell your employer how they can help.

First, assume your employer *wants* to help; after all, it is to their benefit *not* to have a burned-out employee. Maybe you need a more flexible work schedule or hybrid arrangement (partly remote, partly onsite) to help you balance work and home priorities. Maybe you need more training or different kinds of projects to get you

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out of your funk. Maybe you need your company to consider upgrading the mental health benefits it offers.

"Employers can't always meet every request, but most will do their best," says Dr. Hendel. "Don't be afraid to ask. If you don't, they probably won't even realize you're struggling."

Prioritize sleep, diet, and exercise. They are your foundation. A healthy lifestyle may not get to the root of your burnout problem, but it can make you more resilient so you can better tackle those root causes. Go to bed early enough to get the rest you need. Cook a batch of healthy meals

at once so you can have several lunches and dinners ready when you are. Make time to exercise; you will feel physically and emotionally better when you move your body several times a week.

Meditate daily. A simple meditation routine can help you maintain a more relaxed state overall and manage anxiety and stress. If you're new to meditation, try not to overthink it. Simply find a quiet moment, close your eyes, and begin slowly breathing in and out. Focus on your breathing but allow your emotions and thoughts to rise and flow through you naturally. Don't fret if you can meditate for only a few minutes at a time. Start small and add more time when you are ready.

"You can also use your meditation time to do a quick body scan," says Dr. Goulston. "Start at the top of your head and intentionally scan your entire body, noticing any areas where you may be holding onto extra tension. Mindfully release any tension you become aware of."

Let people know exactly what you need (and what you don't) when you're stressed out. The people in your life want to support you, but they may not know how to go about it—especially when your anxiety or stress levels are high. For example, tell family members, your partner, and coworkers that you prefer they give you a few minutes of privacy when you're visibly struggling, and ask them not to bombard you with chitchat until you've had a chance to calm down. It is much easier when everyone is on the same page.

Consider checking in with a pro. It can be extremely useful to talk out what you're experiencing with a trained professional at least once. *Use the resources you have available to you to set up a confidential check-in either with your EAP, a social worker, a mental health professional, or a chaplain and discuss how you are doing.* You might find that this is

very beneficial to your well-being and decide to make it a routine practice.

Summary

Finally, notes Dr. Hendel, whether you're a leader or an employee, give yourself a little grace. It's been a doozy of a year, and we're all still feeling our way through.

"COVID has been incredibly stressful, and life is forever changed—and it's not the last traumatic event we'll weather," she notes. "We live in a time of chaos, and there *will* be disruptions from time to time. Employers and employees are just going to have to figure out how to get through them together." ■

*Dr. Diana Hendel is the co-author of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD* (Harper Horizon, December 2020). She is an executive coach and leadership consultant, former hospital CEO, and the author of *Responsible: A Memoir, a riveting and deeply personal account of leading during and through the aftermath of a deadly workplace trauma.**

As the CEO of Long Beach Memorial Medical Center and Miller Children's and Women's Hospital, Hendel led one of the largest acute care, trauma, and teaching hospital complexes on the West Coast.

*Dr. Mark Goulston is the co-author of *Trauma to Triumph: A Roadmap for Leading Through Disruption and Thriving on the Other Side* (HarperCollins Leadership, Spring 2021) and *Why Cope When You Can Heal? How Healthcare Heroes of COVID-19 Can Recover from PTSD* (Harper Horizon, December 2020). He is a board-certified psychiatrist, fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, former assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA-NPI, and a former FBI and police hostage negotiation trainer. He is the creator of *Theory Y Executive Coaching* that he provides to CEOs, presidents, founders, and entrepreneurs, and is a TEDx and international keynote speaker.*

*Mark hosts the *My Wakeup Call* podcast, where he speaks with influencers about their purpose in life and the wakeup calls that led them there and is the co-creator and moderator of the multi-honored documentary *Stay Alive: An Intimate Conversation about Suicide Prevention.**

Mental Health Days are Crucial

If you'd call out sick for a fever, why not for a panic attack? Here's how to benefit from mental health days.

Many employees are afraid to call out when they're feeling emotionally ill. Typically, this is not the company's fault but rather a personal struggle; sometimes, workers believe they should push or distract themselves. But there's a fine line between "giving in" and looking after yourself.

Mental health should be treated with as much importance as physical health, said Vicki Salemi, a career expert at Monster. If you'd call out for a fever, why not for a panic attack? Here's how to benefit from mental health days.

Give Yourself What You Need

Admitting you're struggling, and being aware of your struggle, is the first step. From there, be your own best friend, and do only what you think will ease your emotional strain.

Ask yourself what will make you feel better in this moment. Is it rest? A good book? A shopping spree? Lunch with your sister or an old friend? Whatever it may be, focus on what you need and how you can fill that void in a healthy way.

"If you're doing what you need to take care of yourself in a way that matters most, that is how your mental health day should be spent," Salemi said. "There's no right or wrong answer on what you do with the time," she stated. "The point is, you are taking one, and you're recharging your batteries."

Don't Worry about Judgment

Will your colleagues or managers believe you're slacking on a project? Do they think you used your mental health day as an excuse to skip work?



But their opinions are none of your business. No one can fully understand what you're dealing with except you. Be willing to accept that and be willing to accept yourself. "Normal" is not universal; it is unique to every individual.

Additionally, you don't need to label your day off. If you're uncomfortable calling it what it is, simply tell your employer that you're under the weather (because you are!) and treat it as you would a physical illness.

Does Your Workplace have a Mental Health Policy?

Many of us spend more time at work than we do with our loved ones. As a result, the workplace can be a place of connection and inclusion, or it can be a place that has negative effects on your mental health. Workplaces that have mental health policies care for everyone's well-being and provide a place where everyone feels supported. ■

Additional source: Business News Daily