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BEATING BURNOUT

HOW TO FOSTER A CULTURE OF RESILIENCE AND
BOOST PRODUCTIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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Burnout is often left out of the conversation when leadership talks about employee well-being. After all, it's not a classified medical condition, and the effects are not as straightforward as most mental health conditions.

That said, burnout is a significant issue affecting many workers across industries and companies. McKinsey recently conducted a study (between February and April 2022) of 15,000 employees and 1000 HR leaders in 15 countries. From their research, Mckinsey established that **1 in 4 employees suffered symptoms of burnout**. Using the study as a base would translate to 25% of your employees suffering from burnout at least once.

The effects of 25% of your employees experiencing burnout would result in:

Massive loss of productivity

Decreased levels of engagement

Significant employee turnover

Overall drop in revenue

> ## 25% OF YOUR EMPLOYEES SUFFER FROM BURNOUT AT LEAST ONCE
> **-MCKINSEY.COM**

WHAT IS BURNOUT EXACTLY?

Burnout describes chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by severe mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, burnout happens when an employee feels overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and incapable of meeting the demands and pressure of work or life.

The WHO does not recognize burnout as a medical condition. However, in the **11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases** (ICD), burnout is classified as an occupational phenomenon.

The ICD offers three characteristic dimensions of burnout, as explained below.

Feelings of energy depletion and exhaustion

Increased mental distance from the job coupled with feelings of negativism and cynicism

Decreased professional efficacy

WHEN DOES BURNOUT START?

We're in an age where hustle culture is considered normal and even encouraged. It also doesn't help that technology adoption has increased, making it harder to identify the blurred lines between work and personal life. We have Slack and work channels that are always on, and the first thing most employees do when they wake up is check their work emails.

This culture has placed undeniable pressure on employees. Before long, work-related stress is unbearable, and burnout slowly seeps into the life of your employees.

> **BURNOUT DESCRIBES CHRONIC WORKPLACE STRESS THAT HAS NOT BEEN SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED**

THE EARLY SIGNS OF BURNOUT IN EMPLOYEES

Because it's not a classified mental health condition, it can be difficult for employers and managers to single out burned-out employees. However, there are several signs managers need to be on the lookout for:

1. TAKES LONGER TO COMPLETE TASKS AND STARTS TO MISS DEADLINES:

One of the most significant indicators of burnout is an employee taking longer to complete tasks. If a top performer suddenly or gradually starts submitting assignments late or asking for unreasonable deadline extensions, they may be dealing with burnout.

Remember: One dimension of burnout is increased mental distance from one's job. This means that burned-out employees view their work in a negative light and hence have no motivation to do it on time or even complete it.

## 2. EPISODES OF INCREASING IMPATIENCE AND REACTIVITY TOWARD COLLEAGUES AND CLIENTS:

Burned-out employees also experience cynicism and distrust towards peers and management. This cynicism may manifest as impatience and negatively speaking of other employees and clients. The affected employee may lash out at employees and other customers, making it challenging to work with them.

3. HAVING DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING:

Employees facing burnout find it difficult to focus. They might space out during meetings or when working at their desks.

4. INCREASED ERRORS IN THEIR WORK:

Aside from late deliveries, burned-out employees also submit work with avoidable mistakes. Simple tasks that were often meticulously done will now be riddled with errors. Sometimes, these errors may cost your company significantly.

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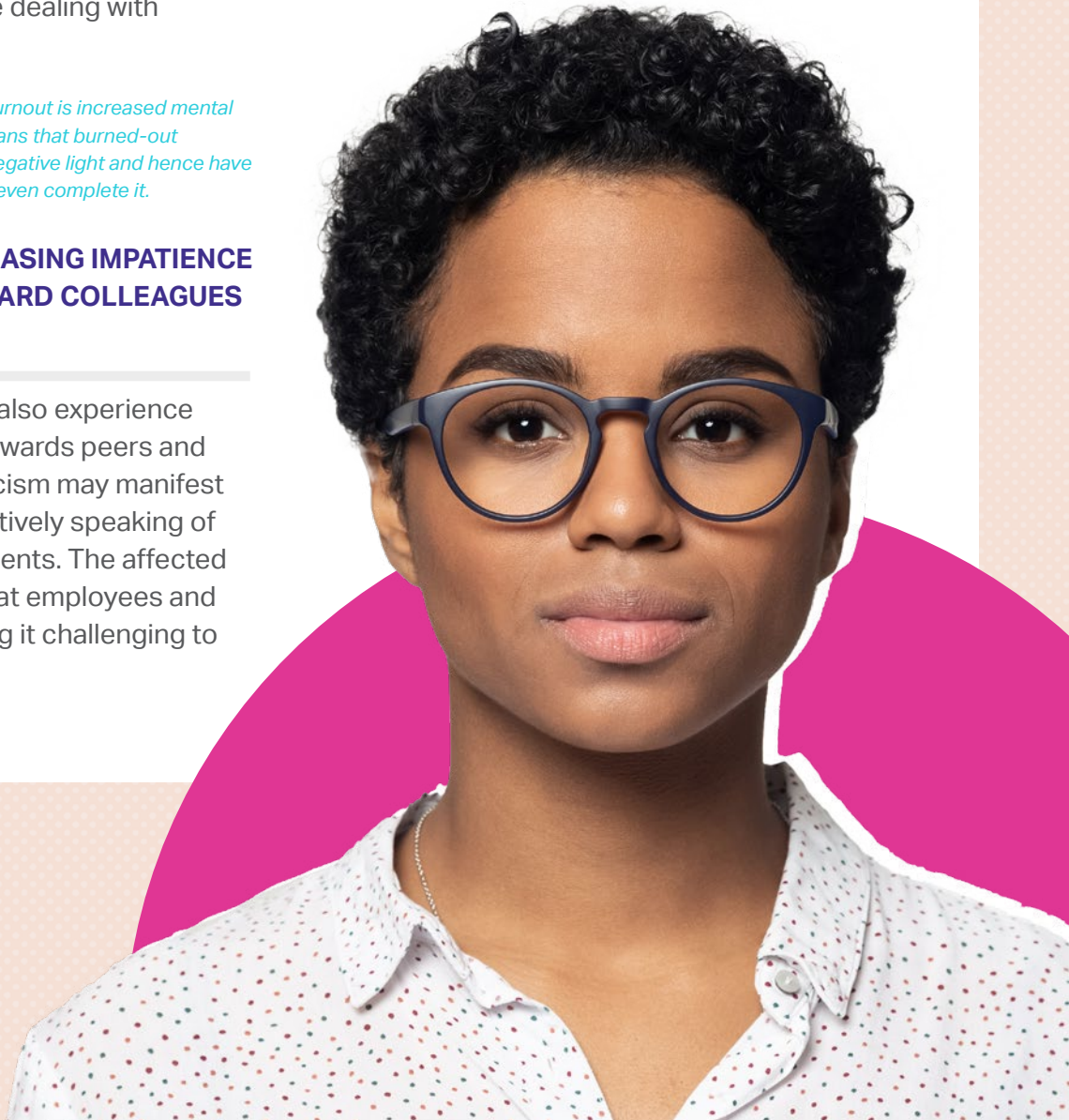
DEALING WITH BURNOUT BEFORE IT OVERWHELMS YOUR EMPLOYEES

If left unchecked, burnout could affect a significant portion of your employees. Without strategies to manage and prevent burnout, your organization will lose significant hours on unproductivity and employee absenteeism.

Unfortunately, some managers and leaders may view burnout as an employee problem. However, burnout is not a 'them' problem. As you'll see below, burnout is most influenced by a company's culture and level of leadership involvement.

WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

Several factors contribute to burnout in the work environment. Research shows that ineffective communication is one of the most significant causes of workplace stress. While it may not seem like a big deal, ineffective communication is the 'first domino' that starts a spiral of stress, eventually leading to burnout.

Below are other factors that employers should look into;

1. UNREALISTIC DEMANDS AND WORKLOAD

Burnout happens when employees deal with more workload than they can handle. Unreasonable demands and workloads heap pressure on employees, leaving them with crippling anxiety and stress. If this stress is not managed successfully, with management's support, burnout occurs.

2. UNCLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Do your employees know what their roles, responsibility, and tasks are? Are they aware of the targets they are expected to hit by the end of the month, quarter, or year?

When these expectations are unclear, employees experience increased overwhelm, anxiety, and pressure.

3. LACK OF AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

Another critical factor that results in workplace stress is feeling powerless. Employees feel unstable when they have no control over their work and are not involved in decision-making. Instability is likely to breed apathy and cynicism, contributing to burnout.

4. BAD WORKPLACE CULTURE

A bad workplace culture is the perfect breeding environment for burnout. Burnout is inevitable when employees have to walk on eggshells, have no say in decision-making, and deal with micromanagement on top of everything.

Workplace cultures that also support work-ism and busyness deny employees a healthy work-life balance.

5. ISOLATION

Remote working greatly benefits most employees but can also lead to isolation, perpetuating loneliness, stress, and disconnection. Eventually, employees develop a negative attitude towards work and feel as if they don't belong. If no mitigation is taken to address this, the employee's negativity grows, and it shows in their work and engagement.

> **EMPLOYEES FEEL UNSTABLE WHEN THEY HAVE NO CONTROL OVER THEIR WORK AND ARE NOT INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING.**

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6. UNFAIR TREATMENT

Unfair treatment at work, even if subtle, contributes significantly to burnout. The tiny, irritating, and painful experiences caused by unfair treatment leads to many workplace stresses and eventually, burnout

Unfair treatment can look like managers zeroing in on an employee for mistakes, even if they are not the only ones responsible. It could also look like one employee being on the receiving end for most work piles.

7. DISCONNECT FROM PERSONAL AND COMPANY VALUES

Another overlooked cause of burnout happens when employees disconnect their values from company values. For employees to be engaged and productive, their personal values must align with the company's.

Employees start to care less about the company or their work when a disconnect happens. But this is preventable by constantly communicating company values and offering incentives for employees to work toward these values.

8. EXTERNAL STRESSORS

Sometimes burnout is not directly related to work. Remember, employees have a personal life outside work. They might be dealing with other stressors, such as a health condition or caring for a loved one.

> **WORKPLACE CULTURES THAT ALSO SUPPORT WORK-ISM AND BUSYNESS DENY EMPLOYEES A HEALTHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE.**

STRESS IS PART OF THE WORKPLACE LIFE

We've already established that stress contributes significantly to burnout. However, is stress a black-and-white villain in the workplace? Not really. There are some gray areas employers need to be aware of.

It's not possible for employers or employees to live without a certain stress level. In fact, research, as you'll see below, shows that the perfect amount of stress can be good and lead to optimal performance.

In the 1900s, two psychologists developed a theory showing the link between stress and performance.

The theory, known as **The Yerkes-Dodson model**, suggests that performance increases with physiological or mental stress, but only up to a certain level. In other words, healthy stress can boost engagement and performance. Conversely, unhealthy stress can lead to lost productivity, disengagement, and workplace burnout.

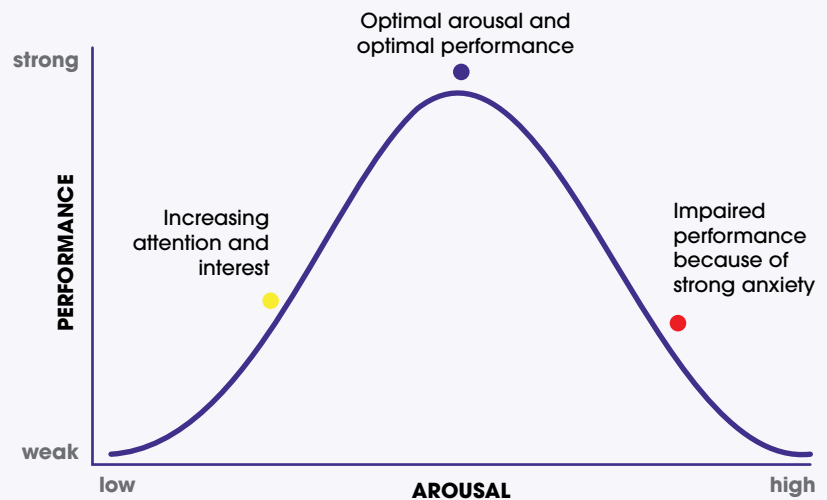## YERKES-DODSON LAW BELL CURVE

THE YERKES-DODSON CURVE shows that low stress (arousal or interest) results in low performance because there's no motivation. If employees are not exposed to a healthy amount of stress, boredom takes over. This is most common in tasks that are all about repetition and routines. Employees in such tasks are not challenged or motivated, so their performance is average or low.

But as you move up the curve and stress increases, so does the performance. At this point, employees are exposed to a good challenge. They have a problem and are eager to solve the challenge because they are skilled in those tasks. The peak shows optimal stress, which produces optimal performance.

However, when stress exceeds what is healthy, the employee cannot cope with their tasks. They might also experience moments of increased anxiety and overwhelm.

Who determines how much stress is optimal?

Only the employee can genuinely understand what stress level produces optimal performance during their tasks. However, employers also play a part in ensuring that employees work on stress levels optimal for their individual needs.

Of course, it's not a black-and-white affair, but the employee's skill levels, personality, confidence, and capacity which can help you understand what optimal stress looks like for each employee.

SO, WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Match an employee's job to their skills— this gives them a good challenge but within their capacity of knowledge and expertise.

Work with the employee's personality— consider an employee's personality when delegating tasks. For example, many introverted and hypersensitive persons may not want customer-facing roles, especially in a busy environment. On the other hand, outgoing, extroverted, and 'people persons' may find it hard to perform tasks with minimal people interactions.

Have open feedback channels— these channels will enable employees to get help when they are stuck, which de-escalates stressful tasks and situations.

HOW HR DIRECTORS AND BENEFITS MANAGERS CAN HELP EMPLOYEES PREVENT OR OVERCOME BURNOUT

We've touched lightly on the role that managers and leaders can play in preventing and reducing employee burnout. Below we'll dive into how managers can help employees prevent or recover from burnout.

1. ENSURE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S PURPOSE IS CLEAR

Are your employees aware of the organization's purpose and mission? Do they know their role in helping achieve this purpose? More importantly, how will reaching this purpose benefit employees? If you have an answer to all these questions, it's harder for burnout to creep in.

How so? Employees often align their values and purpose with an organization. When they know an organization's purpose and how they benefit from it, employees are more motivated and engaged in their tasks.

Don't assume the purpose is clear. Instead, communicate it regularly and show the benefits employees stand to gain when you meet the purpose.

2. SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Employees work best when they know what's expected of them. When expectations are clear, employees feel more in control of their work. Clear expectations also reduce role conflict and ambiguity, both of which contribute to workplace stress.

3. RECOGNIZE EMPLOYEES' EFFORTS

Imagine putting hundreds of hours into a rigorous, high-value project to completion, and all you get is a "good job champ'.

Such a response would be a gut punch to most dedicated employees. It would signal to employees that their work is not valued. When the next project comes around, many employees will not be as willing to put in A+ effort or overtime to complete a project successfully. In fact, they might develop some negativity or apathy toward the project in general.

Managers and leadership can prevent such by properly recognizing an employee's efforts.

Recognition can be as simple as an award during your company's quarterly meeting or something more valuable, such as a promotion or salary increase.

Recognizing your employees shows that you care, and it motivates them, which leads to lower stress levels and burnout.

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4. WORK ON HELPING EMPLOYEES ACHIEVE BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Most employees spend way too much time on work. While it may seem like a plus for employers, too much time spent on work, leaving little to no time for personal goals, and life is unhealthy. It's also a quick accelerator to work-related stress and, eventually, burnout.

HERE'S HOW HR MANAGERS CAN HELP EMPLOYEES ACHIEVE BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE:

Encourage employees to pursue interests outside of work

Provide amenities and resources to help employees destress, such as gym membership packages

Provide remote and flexible working options

Encourage employees to take time off when needed without unspoken guilt

5. EDUCATE EMPLOYEES ON THE SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

Unfortunately, many employees don't know what burnout looks like. The affected employees may take burnout as laziness and not a condition that needs intervention. HR decision-makers and benefits managers can change this narrative by providing training and workshops to help battle burnout.

During the training, employees can learn how to spot burnout and seek help. They can also learn to be more resilient and manage stress before it escalates to burnout.

6. TACKLE THE STIGMA SURROUNDING BURNOUT

We live in a hustle culture where we spend more hours working than with family and personal interests. So, when an employee experiences burnout, it's harder for them to approach management for a workaround. After all, "what will people say?"

Employees fear the stigma, spoken or unspoken, that comes with burnout. Unfortunately, this stigmatization leads to the employee's self-worth and engagement downward spiral.

If management addressed this stigma by openly discussing burnout and offering preventative strategies, it would be easier for employees to take time out when needed. HR managers can also loop in other managers to share their own struggles with burnout or workplace stress. Such vulnerability is a psychological safety net for employees to come out during burnout.

7. CREATE AN OPEN AND POSITIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE

A workplace culture that's open and transparent does a lot of good when you're battling burnout among employees. Such a culture encourages employees to speak out when things are not working as they should.

Positive workplace culture also empowers employees to be part of the decision-making process. In turn, employees feel valued and develop a sense of belonging. These changes reduce negativism, apathy, and anxiety, enabling employees to perform their duties stress-free.

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8. OFFER WELLNESS SUPPORT

This is one of the most effective ways of battling burnout. Why? Because wellness support offers preventative measures before employees experience burnout. And if burnout has already occurred, wellness support helps an employee to recover quickly.

Wellness support is an umbrella term describing the actions, strategies, and resources a company offers its employees to preserve their mental well-being.

These resources are usually housed in an accessible platform, usually an app such as **FitOn Health**. These apps make it easy for employees to choose resources personalized to their needs. In addition, employers can monitor the effects of investing in well-being.

Below we share examples of resources available through a wellness support program:

Access to mental health specialists and counselors

Employee assistance programs

Well-being days (off days for employees to focus on their well-being)

Training materials on de-stressing, building resiliency, and mindfulness
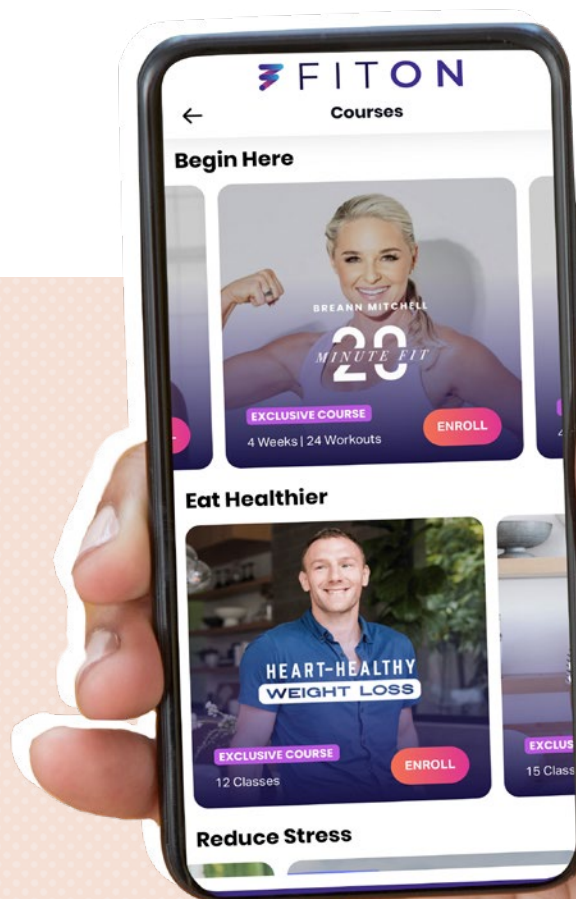
Gym packages that make workouts accessible and affordable for employees

Courses for chronic conditions and care management

Access to gym and wellness coaches

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Overall, stress does not have to end up in burnout.

As shown above, you can do plenty of things to help your employees tackle burnout. A considerable portion of these efforts should be about investing in a wellness program. Doing so will enable your organization to not only battle burnout but also prevent it before it goes out of control. For more information, **contact us today** and our teams will be more than willing to help.