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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Preventing Burnout – The Importance of Vacation Time

An interesting phenomenon has been happening in workplaces for a while but seems to have intensified in recent years. More and more people are declaring that they are burnt out. At the same time, people are becoming more reluctant to take time away from work. While it's true that some associate it with the whirlwind of changes that we collectively have experienced while living during a global pandemic, and we can agree that this may have intensified it, we think it's worth some closer examination.

This article will examine what exactly burnout is and where you can experience burnout. We'll also examine ways to counteract it through greater self-awareness and a change in approaches to everyday living. Finally, we'll discuss the importance of disconnecting from the situations that may be causing burnout. You can often repair your health and well-being by taking breaks, including vacation time.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a feeling that people sometimes develop when they have been living with intense "prolonged or repeated stress" for a very long time, and cannot see any possible ways to resolve it.[1] There are three parts to feeling burnt out: exhaustion, cynicism, and feeling like you aren't able to do the things you used to do well.[2] Another way to look at it is that "more simply put, if you feel exhausted, start to hate your job, and begin to feel less capable at work, you are showing signs of burnout."[3] But, while burnout is usually something we associate with work, partly because of how much time we spend there, it can also begin to appear in "other areas of life, such as parenting, caretaking, or romantic relationships."[4]

What are some of the signs of burnout?

Burnout can surface in many different ways. Most of the time, people begin to feel:

- Exhausted – both mentally and physically. They might develop insomnia or even experience nightmares.
- Resentment – expressed in cynicism, frustration, anger, and irritability.
- Less compassionate – this is sometimes called compassion fatigue and can happen when "someone becomes numb to the suffering of others, feels less able to display empathy towards them, or loses hope in their ability to help."[5]

- Incompetent – like they are no longer doing things they know how to do well-enough. Sometimes this is described as having imposter syndrome, where you begin to doubt your "abilities and accomplishments…[and] fear being exposed as a fraud."[6]
- Like they are unable to complete tasks efficiently – which might show up as missed deadlines or feeling apathetic about everyday activities such as housekeeping tasks.[7]

Ways that you can prevent the overwhelming feelings of burnout

When you recognize that there are symptoms, it's important that you "don't just ignore [them] and assume they don't matter."[8] We tend to discount what we are experiencing and buy into what is socially acceptable: working hard is the only path to success.[9] Instead, reach out to get support from your doctor or mental health professional. They can help you address some of the problems that create chronic stress that, left unattended, will lead to burnout. You can also work on creating better balance in all aspects of your life.

At work

If you feel symptoms of burnout, start to address them by speaking with your manager to discuss how you can get support. It may mean that you need to ask for more clarity about your role and areas of responsibility. Not having this can be confusing and exhausting. You should also talk about workloads and address any inequity you have experienced in your discussion. Honesty and transparency will help someone who is experiencing burnout feel heard and reduce or stop the feelings of hopelessness in the situation. The goal is to create a more rewarding work environment that feels collaborative. While it could be difficult, consider sharing any observations about favouritism, unfair compensation practices and mistreatment you have observed. Most employers realize they must create a positive working environment to retain staff. Senior leaders may not be fully aware of these types of problems that can exist within their organizations.

Here are some ways to address and prevent burnout while at work:

- If your workplace experiences busy times, find out how long they are expected to last: it should not be forever. Studies have revealed that "employees who say they have enough time to do their work are 70% less likely to experience high burnout."[10]
- Instead of avoiding breaks and lunches by working through them, join your co-workers and enjoy some social time. Withdrawing can contribute to feeling isolated and depressed about what you are experiencing.[11]
- Move more during the day. Take walks or even conduct walking meetings to get a change of scenery and a fresh perspective. Exercise helps improve your mood.
- Use food to nourish your body and help protect your mental and physical health. Pack your lunch and snacks. Healthy food choices will help you feel better and stay fuller during the day. Bringing your lunch can also help with finances.

Personal life

Instead of taking on everything at home, enlist support from family members. Ask for help by dividing up age and ability-appropriate tasks. You don't need to do it all. If you are feeling burnout, it may also affect your personal life because you will see everything through a lens that's clouded by negative thoughts, frustration, and difficulty. Often, we can become set in what we believe to be the right way to complete a task. We might cringe when we observe someone else taking a different approach. If someone has accepted the responsibility, resist the temptation to rush in with corrections. Offer tips or share best practices, if asked, but let them determine how they will get the job done to make it their own. It will help you disconnect from the responsibility you feel towards the task. With newfound time, you can embrace your creative side or find time for other hobbies you've been putting off. Take an exercise class, laugh and dance or do any other activities you enjoy with people you care about.

The importance of taking time for yourself

Becoming more aware of what you must stop doing to reduce stressors and avoid prolonged situations that can lead to burnout requires self-awareness and commitment. Catch yourself when you start to fall into old patterns since these can result in self-sabotage and wipe out any progress you have made to address burnout.

- **Plan your time and establish boundaries to protect it**
  - Take breaks during the day without feeling guilty or fearing that you won't get everything done on time. Remember that sacrificing breaks, long or short, is often a learned or observed behaviour that we simply conform to. Demonstrating a solid commitment to yourself and establishing boundaries, even by taking a walk, can inspire healthier habits in other people and create a shift in accepted behaviour.

- If you tend to bring work home with you and dedicate evenings and weekends to it then, it's time to rethink those habits and determine why you feel obligated to do so. Recognize them as choices and be prepared to explore other paths.
- Enjoy an extra day off or several. Disconnecting from work can initially be frightening, but once you embrace it, you'll realize the benefits are tremendous.

- **Study your everyday routines at home and work**
  - Do you start doing something for yourself each day or move forward on autopilot? Creating room for reflection and greater self-awareness is a form of self-care that demonstrates kindness.
  - Embrace time away from obligations and responsibilities. While there is value in starting small, expand your thinking to include ways you can make minor adjustments.
    - Instead of sitting down to watch TV for hours, interrupt your usual routine by going outside for a walk – even if it's just around the block.
    - Turn on your favourite music while housecleaning so you can dance and sing. Consider wearing headphones for a more immersive experience.
  - Curious to explore a new place? Want to sign up for a class to learn how to do something you've always wanted to learn? Plan a time to go. You can enlist family or friends who may also enjoy it, or go alone. Developing greater self-awareness can be life-changing and give you great insight and increased confidence. We tend to adapt our behaviours to the situations and people surrounding us. Embrace opportunities to become more comfortable spending time with yourself to rediscover who you are, unencumbered by what you believe people think you should be. See the movie you want to see. Eat in a restaurant that you like. Appreciate how different these experiences can be while going solo. You might have conversations and interactions you would never experience as a part of a couple or group. You'll rekindle who YOU are.
  - Put away technology in favour of more prolonged and better sleep. Make it a practice to stop scrolling an hour or two before bedtime. It allows your brain to disconnect and start relaxing before bedtime without being overstimulated.

Value vacation time

If you are fortunate enough to have extended vacation time at work as part of your compensation, then take it. Many employers have policies that don't allow employees who don't use their vacation time to be compensated in cash or carried over from year to year. Vacation tends to be a use-it-or-lose-it situation. Suppose you are regularly avoiding holidays and losing them. In that case, you're missing out on a significant aspect of your total compensation at work. The concern about avoiding vacations is genuine. Studies have shown that "an overwhelming majority of U.S. employees have shortened, postponed or cancelled their vacation time," and a quarter of people asked have "never taken two weeks of vacation at one time."[12]

With many employees continuing to work from home, workers risk increasing their workloads, stress, and burnout. However, those who take vacation time see improvements in the following areas:

- stress reduction
- mood
- mental capacity
- restful and revitalizing sleep
- relaxation
- overall health

It turns out that these benefits boost productivity when someone returns to work from vacation time. It's one of the best ways to gain a fresh perspective and can help reframe your focus to help you avoid burnout.

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