

Factsheet – Burnout.

What is burnout?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes burnout as an ‘occupational phenomenon’ caused by ‘chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.’

The NHS describes burnout as ‘a state of physical and emotional exhaustion’ caused by constant pressure in a person’s job.

According to WHO, individuals experiencing burnout have:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion,
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job,
- Reduced professional efficacy.

Importantly, the only of these three that is visible to others is reduced professional efficacy. In other words, burnout may look like a lower quality or output of work in an employee who otherwise appears fine.

Burnout is not recognised as a medical condition. Instead, it is referred to as a ‘syndrome’ that is only referred to in the context of work and employment.

What causes burnout?

Since the term ‘burnout’ was first recognised in the 1970s, it has been linked to various common risk factors.

It is no coincidence that these are included in the UK’s Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Management Standards:

- Demand (workload, work patterns, work environment)
- Control (including autonomy at work)
- Support and being part of a team
- Relationships (including being treated fairly and with respect)
- Role (whether people understand their role and their roles are not in conflict with others in the organisation)

- Change (how this is managed and communicated).

Failure in some or all of these areas over a period of time can lead an employee to 'burn out.'

For disabled employees, a failure to make workplace adjustments can significantly contribute to burnout. Employees who cannot work with the adjustments they need in place may have to work harder and longer to achieve the same results. This also affects the risk factors of control, support and relationships, as stated above.

If measures aren't taken to address burnout, it can spiral – as worsening quality of work and exhaustion lead to greater stress, which causes further decline in work quality. This can eventually lead to a crisis, which may manifest in many different ways.

Signs and symptoms.

Burnout can affect both physical and mental health.

Spotting the signs that an employee is experiencing burnout will require knowledge of how that person behaves when they feel normal. Only someone who knows the person, such as their manager or colleagues, can say confidently that they are behaving abnormally.

Generally, an employee may:

- Have a lower quality and / or quantity of work
- Struggle to meet deadlines
- Take more time off work than usual
- Seem irritable or short-tempered.

Burnout does not just affect a person while they are at work. It can quickly affect every part of their lives and impact their families too.

Untreated burnout can lead to severe physical and mental health problems such as:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Anxiety and depression.

These can lead to more health problems and prolonged absences.

The fatigue associated with burnout is a serious risk factor for accidents, for example, misdiagnosis, drug or surgical errors in healthcare. For HGV and delivery drivers, the risk

of road accidents increases due to fatigue or distraction. The HSE states that fatigue is responsible for 20 per cent of accidents on major roads.

For customers with burnout, they may miss deadlines for returning information to you, be less patient or maybe even aggressive towards your staff, or miss meetings and appointments. This can make for even more stress for all involved and exacerbate an already difficult situation.

Legal duties.

The Equality Act 2010

In the UK, employers have a legal duty to:

- prevent discrimination, and
- provide reasonable adjustments

for their disabled employees. This means that it is unlawful for employers to treat applicants, job candidates and employees unfavourably because of their disability.

The Equality Act also requires employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for their disabled employees.

Is burnout a disability?

In short: it depends.

However, approaching burnout using the framework of disability allows employers to act swiftly and effectively to prevent burnout and support employees who experience it.

Different countries have different legal definitions of disability. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 defines a disability as a physical or mental health condition that has a substantial impact on a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Generally speaking, this means that it has to affect a person's ability to work for at least 12 months.

However, instead of trying to work out whether the condition meets the legal definition of a disability, employers should ask themselves, 'How can I support this employee?'

Using the framework of disability, employers can support employees by making adjustments. These should enable the employee to work at their best and reduce and/or remove the conditions that caused burnout.

Health and safety law.

As well as equality law, burnout also concerns health and safety law.

As explained above, burnout is exclusively concerned with employment. Employers therefore have an obligation to prevent, as far as possible, their employees from burning out.

Employers can face legal action if they fail to take reasonable care to:

- Provide a safe place of work,
- Provide a safe system of work,
- Provide adequate plant and equipment,
- Recruit competent and safety conscious staff.

Therefore, employers should take steps to prevent work-related burnout in their employees.

How to prevent burnout.

Communication.

- Listen to what employees are saying. What are their challenges, what are they suggesting will help or is helping?
- Ensure that staff know how and where to get support quickly and easily.
- Advise them of any changes as soon as possible in an easy way for them to access.
- All communication should be easily accessible to all staff. There will be individuals who are not fluent in English or have disabilities such as dyslexia, hearing loss or sight loss.
- Encourage communication and team events. Good peer support is recognised as a good form of protection against burnout.

Training.

- Train all managers to understand the real risks associated with burnout, know its early signs, and encourage them to act on them promptly.
- Training should also empower employees to recognise it in others, including their customers.

Stress risk assessments.

- Carry out stress risk assessments as these include the leading causes of burnout.
- Stress risk assessments can be a valuable tool to measure if burnout is a risk, the key issues, and the effectiveness of any measures taken.
- Regularly review workloads and work patterns
- Check that employees are not working excessive hours and becoming overly fatigued.
- Plan for the long run. Some employees will volunteer for far more than they are realistically able to take on. This can be for various reasons, including trying to support their tired colleagues. Be prepared to say 'no' so that you can protect them in the longer term.
- Encourage employees to take their annual leave so that they can switch off from work and recharge.
- Reduce unscheduled changes to shifts and work tasks. Frequent and sudden change is stressful for most people but is especially so for some individuals who have disabilities.

Control.

- Employees should have some say in when they take breaks, holidays, and how they manage their work and workload.
- All employees should be encouraged to say 'no' to extra hours, shifts or changes. They are best placed to know how tired they are becoming and if they have non-work commitments have.

Recognition, reward, and support.

- Publicly and personally recognise the work employees and teams are putting in. Recognition can go a long way towards feeling valued even if no practical resources can be found to support the individuals immediately.
- It is important to recognise that employees will still have stressors in their lives outside of work. These will impact how well someone can do their job without burning out.
- There will also be people who have existing, or develop, health conditions and disabilities during this time. The importance of workplace adjustments for these individuals cannot be underestimated.
- Encourage staff to follow healthy lifestyles in their diet, exercise, sleep, and stress management during their working day if possible.

Suggested adjustments.

Employers have a duty to make changes – known as adjustments or accommodations – to support employees experiencing mental ill-health.

What is appropriate will depend on the individual, their job, and the organisation.

Adjustments for an employee experiencing burnout could include:

- Flexible, hybrid or remote working
- Different or flexible working hours
- A reduction in the level of output expected of them. It can be reasonable to reduce the quantity of work, though not to reduce the quality of work. This must be carefully managed to avoid resentment from other employees whose workloads are not being reduced.
- Assistive technology – This could help if it lets them work more efficiently. Examples include speech-to-text software or an audio notetaker.

Working out the right adjustments will involve the manager talking to the employee about what they need, as well as input from expert teams such as Occupational Health, HR and other relevant teams as needed.