WORKPLACE PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Recognizing and Preventing Burnout

Harvard has long recognized that staff and faculty bring their whole selves to work, and that the competing demands of work and personal obligations sometimes collide. Today, with so many working from home, our work and family lives are integrated as never before. These conditions have the potential to intensify existing stress and to create new stressors along the way. Managers and employees alike should be aware that burnout is a consequence of prolonged exposure to chronic work-related stress.

Chronic stressors include:

- **Workload and hours** — Excessive demands and long hours due to a significant volume of work, irregular distribution of tasks, work demands that conflict with child or elder caregiving requirements, and unpredictability of necessary infrastructure supports for things like transportation and child care.
- **Uncertainty** — Perceived job instability; sudden decreases in financial resources; insufficient information regarding personal safety relative to work conditions.
- **Discomfort** — Physical environment, including conditions that do not support concentration or innovation; ergonomically substandard workspaces that lead to pain or mobility restrictions.
- **Grief** — Different forms including: anticipatory grief over a probable or possible loss; grief over losses of loved ones, social relationships or structures; disrupted plans for the future; disenfranchised grief that cannot be expressed or acknowledged in the workplace; and the death of figures who represent deeply held personal values or opportunities.

Burnout occurs when work has lost meaning, stressors constantly outweigh supports, and one feels unable to achieve existential goals. **Burnout is experienced along several dimensions including:**

- **Exhaustion** occurs when one has reached or exceeded their emotional or cognitive reserves, and so is unable to perform to expected standards in work and/or other domains. This under-performance is often in sharp contrast to past performance.
- **Cynicism** can be the outward expression of loss of meaning in the job or faith in the institution, and may reflect a decline in belief in leadership’s commitment to the employee’s welfare.
- **Ineffectiveness** can result from an awareness of personal under-performance, a sense of lost value to the institution, or the perceived absence of organizational recognition and support.
- **Health** is frequently impaired; early manifestations include insomnia, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, impaired memory, and new or exacerbated medical conditions.

How to Help

Managers should strive to create spaces in their own crowded work lives to build and maintain trusting relationships with all employees, some of whom may be struggling privately with overwhelm and burnout. Personal bonds and a sense of community in the workplace can moderate unhealthy or unproductive behaviors of individuals and teams.

- **Check in routinely** — Touch base with your team about workflow and process, but also check in with people on an individual level to see how they are doing, while being mindful of their
potential reluctance to signal distress. Ask open-ended questions that help you determine if there is a need for you to clarify your expectations or learn more about others’ expectations and demands on their time.

- **Share your awareness** — Acknowledge that many employees feel overwhelmed and anxious. Make clear to them your availability (even as it changes, week to week) to answer questions and discuss concerns. Maintain a focus not just on completion of tasks, but also on the sense of purpose and meaning that many find in their work and rely on to survive difficult times.

- **Remain flexible** — Maximize your flexibility as employees deal with inevitable break-downs in dependent care and other resources they count on. Create space for candid discussions about workload and burnout, and explore creative ways that shifting priorities might offer opportunities to defer or eliminate some goals.

- **Acknowledge altered boundaries** — Convey your understanding that for some, the boundaries between family and work are blurred, and the loss of social cues and rituals challenge our recognition of when the day should both begin and end, when to hunker down and when to pause, when to resist distraction and when to welcome it. Don’t forget that there are those who live alone and are experiencing loneliness and other effects of social isolation.

- **Offer resources** — Regular reminders to teams of available supports, irrespective of individual concerns, are important in reducing stigma, fear of reprisal, and ambivalence about help-seeking in general. Departments and units should remind employees to care for themselves and to explore the resources that are available to them.
  - Familiarize yourself with the range of supports Harvard offers to staff and faculty.
  - Demonstrate caring for the whole person by asking employees if they have assessed their ergonomic and physical fitness needs; point them to relevant resources to do so.
  - Remind employees that taking accrued vacation time is critical to maintaining wellbeing.
  - Note that Harvard’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is availability to staff, faculty and managers who seek free and confidential consultation. Emphasize access to the EAP through chat and telehealth functions.

- **Model good self-care** — Be mindful of sending emails at late hours, over weekends, and at other times that might signal an expectation that one should be “on” all the time. Take accrued vacation time with only as much connectivity to work as is necessary. If it feels comfortable for you to do so, indicate to others that you have used various wellbeing supports at Harvard. Most employees look to their managers for emotional intelligence, not just technical proficiency. Don’t forget that leaders at all levels are just as vulnerable to the risk of burnout as anyone. Profound stress is normative at this time; burnout is not. Make use of the resources that you promote to others and know that your wellbeing matters, too.