Recognizing and Preventing Burnout

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

Burnout can be identified along several dimensions in which one’s experience is characterized by:

- **Loss of meaning**: A diminished sense of purpose at work; Can no longer embody personal values in the context of the job; Perception of repeated obstacles to success as the norm rather than the exception.
- **Exhaustion**: Having reached or exceeded emotional or cognitive reserves; Fatigue and/or other stress-related impairments; Inability to perform to one’s own and others’ standards; Reduction of discretionary effort.
- **Detachment**: Expression of cynicism in the form of negative or inappropriate attitudes toward colleagues and recipients of services; Skepticism of the institution’s espoused values; Withdrawal from work-related social activities or service obligations.
- **Lost sense of personal efficacy**: A perception of personal under-performance or futility of effort; The perceived absence of organizational recognition and support; A sense of lost value to the team, discipline or institution.

Chronic stressors may include:

- **Workload and hours**: Excessive demands and long hours due to a significant volume of work, perfectionistic striving, or irregular distribution of tasks; Incompatibility of work and caregiving responsibilities; Unpredictability of necessary infrastructure supports such as child care and transportation; Lack of time for restorative activities; Intrusions by work during time off.
- **Uncertainty**: Perceived job instability; Decreases in workplace and personal resources; Inability to forecast institutional decisions; Fears about personal safety in the workplace.
- **Discomfort**: Physical or relational conditions in the work environment that undermine optimal functioning or emotional steadiness; Microaggressions and other forms of discredited identity that compromise inclusion; Improper ergonomics that lead to pain or physical impairment.
- **Grief**: Anticipation of a probable or possible loss; Actual losses of loved ones, social relationships or structures; Disrupted plans for the future; Disenfranchised or stigmatized relationships that cannot be expressed or acknowledged at work; Deaths of figures who represent deeply held personal values, future possibilities, or social legacies.
How to Help

Managers should strive to build and maintain trusting relationships with all employees, some of whom may be struggling privately with loss and overwhelm. Personal bonds and a sense of community in virtual and campus-based workplaces can promote resilience and moderate unhealthy behavior.

- **Check in routinely**: Meet with your team to clarify expectations around workflow and process; individual check-ins can create space for more personal conversations. Maintain a focus not just on completion of tasks, but also on the sense of meaning that many derive from their work and count on to help survive tough times. Promote informal connections between and among teams.

- **Share your awareness**: Acknowledge the magnitude of current challenges. Make your availability clear, even as it changes, to discuss concerns. Encourage compassion as a path to coping with disappointment in the shortcomings of our colleagues, our leaders, and ourselves.

- **Foster resilience**: Go beyond acknowledging strong performances by noting the innate strengths that employees bring to their work. Encourage them to reflect upon how they may have grown through adversity in the past, and how they might tap into that growth now. Examine your own level of optimism and what you are – and aren’t – conveying to your team. Cultivate your own resilience through [training resources](#) at Harvard.

- **Remain adaptable**: Maximize your flexibility as employees deal with inevitable breakdowns in dependent care and other critical resources that make work possible. Create space for candid discussions about workload and burnout, and explore creative ways in which shifting priorities might offer opportunities to defer or even eliminate some secondary goals.

- **Recognize altered boundaries**: Convey your understanding that the boundaries between family and work are blurred, and those who live alone may be experiencing acute effects of social isolation. Time itself may feel distorted, leading to longer work days. Note that, now more than ever, self-care is essential to personal sustainability and so to the University’s mission.

- **Offer resources**: Regular reminders of available supports, irrespective of individual concerns, are important in reducing stigma, fear of reprisal, and ambivalence about seeking help. Leaders should encourage others to explore Harvard’s resources. Remind them that whether or not they need help, everyone deserves support for their unique concerns, however large, however small.
  - Familiarize yourself with the [range of supports](#) Harvard offers to staff and faculty.
  - Demonstrate caring for the whole person by pointing them to relevant [resources](#) to assess their ergonomic and physical fitness needs.
  - Stay on top of [sick time policies](#), now temporarily amended due to COVID-19.
  - Remind employees that taking [accrued vacation time](#) is critical to maintaining wellbeing.
  - Note that [Harvard’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP)](#) is available to staff, faculty and managers who seek free and confidential consultation, counseling, and time-saving services. Emphasize access to the [EAP](#) through chat and telehealth functions.

- **Model good self-care** — Be mindful of sending emails late at night, on weekends, while on vacation and at other times that might signal an expectation that the ideal worker should be “on” endlessly. Take vacation time yourself, and maintain 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 [work/life supports](#) at Harvard. Most employees look to their managers for emotional intelligence, not just technical proficiency. Remember that no leader, no matter how successful, is immune to burnout. But while profound stress is normative at this time, burnout is not. So make use of the resources that you promote to others and know that your wellbeing matters to many. If you’re doing well, you can help others be well too.