

Fix Burnout—Without Blowing Up Your Life

After an intense 20 months of pandemic work and life, many are reaching a breaking point. Here's how to retake control.



Illustration: Daniel Downey

By Ray A. Smith
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The emails are piling up, unread. Deadlines are blown. Once jovial video calls are now tense. You suspect burnout.

The feeling is an increasingly common one. In a September survey of nearly 700 professionals by consulting firm [Korn Ferry](#), 89% said they were suffering from burnout. [Some workers are leaving their jobs](#) as a result. Others are moving to other cities or making similarly drastic changes.

But you don't have to quit your job to combat burnout. There are ways to self-assess, [work with your manager](#) and improve your mental health.

“There is a tendency for people to view burnout as a personal mental health issue, so it's their problem, not anybody else's. And if it's your problem, then you're the one that's going to have to fix it. But there's a whole other part of this, which is the workplace and the chronic job stressors that are the sources of burnout,” said Christina Maslach, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley.

For those looking to address their burnout and not shake up their lives too much, here are some steps to try.

Take a personal inventory

Burnout isn't a medical diagnosis, according to the Mayo Clinic, but its signs can manifest mentally and physically. Running through a series of questions can help determine whether you are burned out, depressed or suffering anxiety.

- Are you more impatient with co-workers or clients? More critical of co-workers and clients than before?
- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Are you using food, drugs or alcohol to feel better or simply not feel?
- Have your sleep habits changed?
- Do you have unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems or other physical complaints?

Jennifer Moss, author of a new book on burnout, says answering yes to such questions could suggest you are burned out. The source of those feelings might be unrelated to work, considering all the impacts of the pandemic.

Ms. Moss and other burnout researchers recommend people who acknowledge the issue probably won't be cured with an extra day off work or trip to the spa. Instead, workers and employees should work together to find a more permanent solution, such as more manageable workloads and timetables, says Ms. Moss.

Devise a plan of attack

Before talking to a manager about feelings of burnout, make a plan and have your thoughts in order, says Lauren McGoodwin, host of the Career Contessa Podcast and author of "Power Moves: How Women Can Pivot, Reboot, and Build a Career of Purpose."

"If you're springing it on them, there's a good chance it's being emotionally fueled," she says of raising the topic of burnout.

Venting might feel good when talking to a friend but could distract your manager from your ultimate goal: help. Instead, she suggests composing an email that states you want to talk about the job's target goals and expectations and how to best meet them.

Ensure the conversation stays positive. Remember it is reasonable to ask your boss to help you prioritize projects, delegate and take vacation time.

"You'll get further in the conversation if you focus less on blaming them and more on asking for help," she says.

Adjust goals and expectations

At many organizations, employees and bosses are being asked to do more with fewer resources as [some workers quit](#) and businesses choose [to stay lean](#). High performers with perfectionist

tendencies need to evaluate whether the duties they have been given can really be done by one person, Ms. Moss says.

People are beating themselves up by asking, “Why can’t I meet these goals?” They might be trying to push past the pandemic to “normal,” Ms. Moss says, and ignoring their taxed mental state.

Think we, not me

Frame any tricky conversation by demonstrating why alleviating burnout is good for the company, as well as its workers, says Dr. Maslach, who created the Maslach Burnout Inventory, a widely used measurement tool used to diagnose burnout symptoms. She recommends discussing what is going well and then asking, “What could we do better?” The “we” and focus on ways to be even better make clear the goal is to help the boss, and the company, continue to perform as well as possible.

Workers with ideas to help solve burnout for themselves and their colleagues should stress that those potential solutions could help get rid of chronic stressors affecting many, not just themselves.

“If there ever was a time to say let’s think outside of the box and redesign the work environment, this is it,” Dr. Maslach says.

Say no to saying yes

Workers need to reset boundaries that blurred during the pandemic, says Emily Ballesteros, a burnout management coach who went viral earlier this year with a TikTok criticizing the eight-hour workday.

“A lot of people have gotten into the bad habit of the knee-jerk response of yes” any time managers make requests, Ms. Ballesteros says. When faced with another task, she suggests this response: “Can I check my calendar and get back to you?”

Pausing before taking on more work means you are thoughtful, not reactive, Ms. Ballesteros says. Plus, genuinely considering a request shows your manager that you want to make sure you can accomplish what is being asked.

“You have to know what your limits are with your time and your abilities,” she says.

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