

## Two factors overlooked in burnout-prevention efforts

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Five factors can completely inoculate employees against burnout, performance experts have found based on 20 years' research and experience.

In a [new whitepaper](#), leadership and transformation specialist **Andrew May** and wellbeing expert Dr **Tom Buckley** suggest burnout manifests on two levels: individual and organisational.

They define individual burnout as "an outcome of chronic depletion of an individual's coping resources resulting from prolonged exposure to work-related stress with insufficient recovery".

Common symptoms are exhaustion, disconnection, alienation from work, and reduced performance, however these can also present in stress and distress.

"There are distinctions to be made: burnout is typically related to work or caring roles from which there is no sense of relief. Exhaustion is a natural response to stress, but in the case of burnout it is chronic."

Meanwhile organisational burnout impacts culture, and is triggered when an organisation "is in a paralysed state which it can no longer positively change on its own".

"This is multifactorial with common triggers including constant change and transformation, reorganisation, workforce inadequacies or increasing complexities and difficulties dealing with them," the authors say.

"When it comes to burnout, leaders inadvertently contribute to increased risk through their own behaviour and the way they reward employees. Publicly recognising employees working long hours can send messages that to be successful, you must work long hours."

Burnout is booming because of the additional support leaders are asking of employees on the back of a "fast-paced digital revolution", series of natural disasters, and the pandemic.

But five factors provide inoculation against burnout:

- Active recovery;
- Purpose alignment;
- Restorative sleep;
- Physiological capacity; and
- Social connectedness.

"We are not saying these factors 'help you reduce burnout' or 'reduce the risk of burnout'," May stresses. "We are making a bold declaration that if you build these five factors into your life *you will not burn out*."

He suggests that while sleep, exercise, and socialisation are well-known by employers to have protective effects, many organisations are just now beginning to understand the importance of active recovery and purpose alignment.

### Active recovery

May says active recovery is the factor that employers are most confused by, but is just as important as the other factors in preventing burnout.

"Active recovery is *not* doing a day of back-to-back Zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings because we're working from home, sitting down all day, not moving – our mitochondria, our body, our brains, go to sleep," he tells HR Daily.

"We go, 'I've had such a big day, I need a glass of wine or an icy cold beer, and I'm just going to watch a couple of re-runs on Netflix', thinking 'I'm switching off', [but] that keeps the... brain in beta."

"Active recovery is getting your body to relax or get into parasympathetic activation, and trying to get your body out of beta... and just relaxing the brain a little bit."

Turning passive recovery into active recovery involves low-intensity physical activities, and can include anything from taking a walk or doing yoga to gardening, cooking, or sitting in a sauna.

May says employees need active recovery when they become noticeably tired or don't have their usual "spark".

However, he says it is important for HR to "put [their] oxygen mask on first" to limit "compassion fatigue".

"[HR does] everything for everyone, and put [themselves] last," he says.

"If you don't have capacity and time for yourself... as an HR professional, you're not going to [be your best for others](#)."

### Purpose alignment

The second factor that drives "the most conversation" is purpose alignment, May says.

Employers have been talking about organisational purpose for the last five-to-10 years, but they have largely neglected workers' *individual* purpose, he says.

Further, "doing the work on, 'what is it for you that gives you meaning, where do you find fulfillment', it's actually hard".

May says some of the ways employees can find their purpose include:

- Finding common themes among activities that cause them to work in "flow";
- Asking how a current role contributes to personal wellbeing, relationships, and learning;
- Supplementing hobbies to compensate for roles that don't provide an employee with "meaning"; and
- Investing time into coaching and reflection.

"It normally takes a couple of months of homework to then get really clear [on], 'what is your crystal-clear purpose, what it is that guides you'," May says.

"And when you work that out, if you have a role in an organisation that aligns with your personal purpose, great things happen."

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