Burnout Toolkit

Burnout Toolkit

A guide for line managers to help you recognise the warning signs and support your team

Contents

What is burnout?

A healthy level of stress can often act as a motivator, with many employees thriving in high-pressure environments. But long-term stress can pose a risk, particularly to the talented individuals within your company who are continuously striving for excellence. Back in 2017, a five-year study by Awbery found that the mental health of 20% of top performers was affected by corporate burnout.

Definition of burnout:

 "a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed"
(World Health Organisation)

Symptoms:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from your job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to your job
- Reduced professional efficacy

Ways in which you can help to prevent burnout within your team

1. Set clear expectations regarding workloads, deadlines and out-of-hours use of technology

2. Ensure workloads are fair and manageable

3. Role-model a healthy work/life balance and discourage excess working hours

4. Use 1-2-1s to monitor ongoing pressure/stress levels

5. Regularly check-in with your team to monitor wellbeing

6. Normalise talking openly about mental health

7. Be approachable and demonstrate empathy

8. Proactively encourage wellbeing within the team (AXA PPP have a wealth of wellbeing resources to support employees and line managers – click here to visit their Health & Wellbeing hub)

How to recognise the signs

An employee who is at risk of burnout may exhibit some of the following behaviours:

- Low mood and/or low energy levels
- Frustration
- Short tempered and easily irritated
- Deterioration in performance
- Lack of focus
- Increased sickness absence
- Presenteeism – continuing to work whilst visibly unwell

- Negative attitude towards work
- Feelings of hopelessness or diminished self-worth
- Inability to switch off —working long hours, emailing late at night
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Breakdown of work relationships

What to do if you suspect a team member is at risk of burnout

1. Find the right time to have a private conversation

If you're working in the office then it might be easy to find an opportunity for a quiet chat, but if you are working remotely then you will likely need to arrange a time in advance. Either way, ensure that they have a private space in which they can talk freely and comfortably (without other colleagues or members of the household within earshot).

If you're working remotely, **click here** for our top 10 tips for having a challenging conversation in a virtual setting.

2. Frame the conversation and set a supportive tone from the outset

Explain what has given you cause from concern. If there has been a deterioration in performance, be mindful of raising it at this stage as it may cause them to feel defensive and shut down. Some examples of ways to open the conversation are:

- "You don't seem like yourself recently, is everything ok?"
- "I noticed you've been emailing late at night over the past couple of weeks —talk to me about your workload at the moment"
- "You seemed a bit frustrated in yesterday's meeting, is everything ok?"

3. Fact-find

In order to be able to put the right support measures in place, you need to gather as much information as possible to identify what might be causing them to feel this way. Bear in mind that some employees might find it difficult to open up and ask for help or they may view their struggle as a sign of failure. In these situations, it's important to demonstrate empathy, avoid judgement and let them know that there is no shame in feeling the way they do. Some examples of questions to ask to better understand how they are feeling are:

- How are you feeling physically at the moment?
- How are your energy levels?
- How are you feeling towards work just now?
- On a scale of 1-5, how much pressure do you feel you're under just now (where 1 is a healthy level and 5 is unmanageable)?
- Do you feel that your work is appreciated?
- Is there anything causing frustration for you work-wise at the moment?

- Do you feel that your workload is realistic?
- Do you feel that you can comfortably get through your workload within your working hours?
- Do you feel that work is having an impact on your home life?
- How do you usually feel on a Sunday night?
- Do you feel as though you have control over your work?

4. Take action

Once you have an understanding of how they are feeling as well as the work-related causes/triggers, you can put measures in place to support them in making a recovery. Ask them what you can do to help and try to avoid making assumptions —let them tell you what they need. Don't be afraid to offer suggestions though, as they may be looking for a steer from you as to what would be acceptable. Some considerations may be:

Adjustments to work/workload	Adjustments to working environment	Adjustments for increased wellbeing
■ Review deadlines —can any be moved? ■ Are all activities necessary/critical? Do they all align with business objectives? ■ Is work distributed fairly between team members? ■ Can work be distributed elsewhere? ■ Can any changes be made to give the employee more control over their work? ■ Can you help to manage expectations with key stakeholders to allow deadlines to be adjusted? ■ Can you give them permission to say 'no' to requests if they don't have capacity? ■ Review meetings in diary & decline requests which are not business critical ■ Is there anything preventing them from being able to do their job well? Are there barriers that you can help to resolve or issues that you can escalate?	■ Flexibility in working hours, such as an earlier start/finish time or additional breaks ■ Could you consider allowing them to work a weekend day and take a day off through the week instead (if they would benefit from working at a quiet time without distraction)? ■ Reduced working hours ■ Set rules for working out of hours ■ Permission to swap video calls for phone calls or turn their camera off on video calls ■ If in the office —permission to find a quiet space to work or wear headphones for a period of the day ■ If working remotely —permission to work 'offline' for a period of the day to help concentration	■ Authorised paid leave—it can be worth considering a period of authorised leave if the employee is burnt out to allow them time to recover ■ Increased sick leave or pay ■ Adjustment to sickness absence trigger points (eg. if your sickness policy usually triggers a meeting after 10 days, you could extend this where reasonable) ■ Schedule regular catch-ups, purely with a focus on wellbeing

It's important to ensure that you address the causes of the burnout as well as the effects. If you offer 2 weeks' paid leave but the employee returns to the same workload and pressures, then the problem will likely reoccur.

5. Get additional support if required

It's usually advisable to encourage them to speak to their GP if they haven't already. You can also consider using resources available within your business such as an Employee Assistance Programme, Mental Health First Aiders or Occupational Health.

Communicating with the wider team

When a member of your team is struggling it can have a knock-on effect to their colleagues which can be difficult to manage. There may be limits to what you can communicate due to the sensitive nature of the issue, which may lead to assumptions and frustration within the team. You might also be wary of opening the floodgates —if one person is granted a leave of absence or flexible working hours, will everyone else then ask for that?

Below are some tips that you may find useful:

1. Ask the employee what information they feel comfortable sharing with the rest of the team

2. Communicate clearly with the team and ensure they understand the situation

3. Meet challenges head-on —if any of the team are disgruntled, explain constructively that, whilst you can't communicate the details, the measures in place are necessary and valid and that support will be given to anyone who needs it and evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Be explicit in setting out your expectations regarding the behaviours required from the team during this time

4. If colleagues are required to pick up extra work, ensure that this is recognised so they feel valued and appreciated

5. If you are struggling with additional work as a result, try not to fuel the fire and let your frustration show. Role-model empathy and champion a supportive team culture

6. Treat it the same as you would a physical illness or complaint

Bear in mind that if the team see you taking steps to actively support a struggling employee, it will likely have a positive impact on how they view you as a manager as well as the wider organisation. Employees who have trust in their employer are usually more engaged and productive. So, whilst you may be concerned that some might see it as an opportunity to take advantage, these instances are few and far between and instead this may be an opportunity to cement your relationship with your team.