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How Positive Practices Help Reduce Burnout

Skills and Professional Development



“Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!”

- The White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) called burnout an “occupational phenomenon,” a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, constant workplace stress is preventing us from switching off our stress response and increasing burnout.

Author and rest advocate, [Alex Soojung-Kim Pang stated](#), “Exhausted workers can’t give their best, take less initiative, and are more cynical.” According to Pang, short-term benefits from overwork and delayed vacations are “more than offset by the long-term costs of errors, lost productivity, and higher turnover.”

While burnout is an issue at the company level, it also affects us as individuals. We can empower ourselves by identifying it and implementing positive practices to counteract its negative effects.

What is burnout?

The WHO described [burnout](#) as:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- Reduced professional efficacy.

International burnout expert, [Dr Jacinta Jiménez](#) in [The Burnout Fix](#), cited [Professor Christina Maslack and Michael P. Leither](#)'s work and identified the mismatches between people and their jobs that can lead to burnout:

- Workload (high job demands and inadequate resources to complete the job);
- Low levels of job control (not having the appropriate level of responsibility or access to the tools needed to do a good job);
- Insufficient reward (lack acknowledgment and/or financial reward);
- Low social support (high levels of workplace conflict);
- Absence of fairness (unfair promotions or evaluations); and
- A conflict in values (misalignment with personal and company values).

[Flow](#) expert, [Steven Kotler](#), in [The Art of Impossible](#), also described burnout as the result of “working long hours under specific conditions: high risk, a lack of sense of control, a misalignment of passion and purpose, and long and uncertain gaps between effort and reward.” He went on to state that “unfortunately, these are all conditions that arise during our pursuit of [high, hard goals](#).”

What are the signs of burnout?

Stressors activate the stress response in our bodies. Emily and Amelia Nagoski in [Burnout](#), identified external stressors (including work, money, and family) and internal stressors (including self-criticism, body image, and identity).

They described stress as “the neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter one of these threats [... which] activates a cascade of neurological and hormonal activity that initiates physiological changes to help you survive.”

We choose the best survival option: **flight** (escaping the threat), **fight** (conquering the threat), or **freeze** (you “play dead” until the threat goes away, or someone comes to save you).

Once the threat has gone, we should be able to complete the stress response cycle, but increasingly, we aren't becoming stuck in one or more of the traditional survival options. According to Nagoski, other signs we need to deal with the stress include:

- Doing the same, apparently pointless, things over and over again (e.g., checking things, picking things up, thinking obsessive thoughts, or fiddling with your body in a routinized kind of way); or,
- Our bodies feeling “out of whack” (e.g., being sick often).

Nagoski suggests finishing the stress response cycle through physical activity, such as taking deep and slow breaths, engaging in positive social interaction, and laughing.

Positive practices for beating burnout

As we move back to a more structured work life, these daily practices can help us prevent burnout.

PULSE method

Try Dr. Jiménez's [PULSE](#) method with the following practices:

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- **Pacing** for performance, such as setting achievable goals;
 - **Undoing** unhelpful thinking patterns through mindfulness meditation and breathing;
 - **Leveraging** leisure time, like [spending more time in nature](#);
 - **Securing** a support system; and
 - **Evaluating** how to regain control of our time and priorities.

Rest and recovery

According to German sociologist Sabine Sonnentage, we should engage in the four factors of [rest and recovery principles](#):

1. **Relaxation** through a pleasant and undemanding activity;
2. **Control** over how to spend our time, energy, and attention;
3. **Mastery experiences** that channel [flow](#) and make our lives [more meaningful](#); and
4. **Detachment** from work interruptions.

Active recovery

[Kotler](#) advocates active recovery to flush out stress hormones allowing the body to mend. Practices include protecting our sleep (try a dark room, cold temperatures, and no screens), restorative yoga, Tai Chi, long walks in the woods, Epsom salt baths, and infrared saunas. He advocates taking time away from work every 10 to 12 weeks.

Meditation

[Goleman and Davidson](#) describe studies that indicate stressed out workers are unable to down-regulate their emotions because of enlarged amygdalae and weakened connections between areas in the prefrontal cortex. A [regular meditation practice](#) can help to quieten the mind — try meditating before an important or stressful meeting or schedule time just after.

Manage your energy

Activate your [default mode network](#) after a depleting activity to recharge your brain.

Rethink your day and engage in practices that do not deplete your energy. In a recent [podcast](#), Holly Ransom stated she learned to manage her energy, “Knowing what energizes me and what I need to mentally and physically recharge myself and make sure that it is a building block of every day and every week, not something I slot in if I’ve got time on a Friday after work.”

Looking after our well-being is essential for ourselves and our companies. In a recent [podcast on beating burnout](#), Dr. Jiménez stated, “The most important tool you have in this world to make an impact is you, and if you fail to invest in that tool, especially as a leader in an organization, you are going to run the risk of damaging the thing you, your people, and your teams need to make an impact in the world.”



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