

HealthTech

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What is burnout and what can we do about it?

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a term coined in the 1970s to describe an extreme state of exhaustion by psychologists Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North.

The World Health Organization (WHO) in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) includes burnout as an occupational phenomenon. The ICD-11 definition states:

“Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- *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.” (i)*

What Are The Stages of Burnout?

The research paper, *Staff Burn Out (ii)*, identifies 12 stages of burnout.

1. Compulsion to prove oneself (excessive ambition)
2. Working harder
3. Neglecting own needs
4. Displacement of conflicts and needs
5. No longer any time for non-work related needs
6. Increasing denial of the problem, decreasing flexibility of thought/behavior
7. Withdrawal, lack of direction, cynicism
8. Behavioral changes/psychological reactions
9. Depersonalization: loss of contact with self and own needs
10. Inner emptiness, anxiety, addictive behavior
11. Increasing feelings of meaninglessness and lack of interest
12. Physical exhaustion that can be life-threatening

Do you think your organization has a problem with burnout?
Need some help or advice?

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It's important to note however, that the stages of burnout are not sequential and an individual may stay at one level of burnout for a long period of time, or cycle between several stages.

Other authors and researchers have also published stages of burnout, and although some have fewer stages, they generally follow a similar outline to that developed in the 1970s.

What are the Consequences of Burnout?

Researchers estimate that annual burnout-related turnover costs are \$9 billion for nurses and \$2.6 to \$6.3 billion for physicians (iii). These estimates do not include turnover among other types of health workers. An article published in *Vital Signs* (iv) by the CDC included the following startling statistics:

46% of health workers reported feeling burned out often or very often in 2022 compared to **32%** in 2018.

13% of health workers reported harassment at work in 2022 compared to **6%** in 2018.

78% of health workers agreed that they trusted management in 2022 compared to **84%** in 2018

82% of health workers reported that their workplace conditions supported productivity in 2022 down from **91%** in 2018.

44% of health workers intended to look for a new job in 2022, up from **33%** in 2018.

According to *Addressing Health Worker Burnout* (v), the consequences of burnout are significant including:

Health Workers

- Insomnia, heart disease, and diabetes
- Isolation, substance use, anxiety, and depression
- Relationship and interpersonal challenges
- Exhaustion from overwhelming care and empathy

Patients

- Less time with health workers
- Delays in care and diagnosis
- Lower quality of care
- Medical errors

Health Care System

- Health workforce shortages and retention challenges
- Limited services available
- Risk of malpractice and decreased patient satisfaction
- Increased costs

Community and Society

- Erosion of trust
- Worsening population health outcomes
- Increased health disparities
- Lack of preparedness for public health crises



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What are the Factors That Contribute to Burnout?

Factors that contribute to burnout reach far beyond that of a specific organization or individual including societal and cultural factors. According to *Addressing Health Worker Burnout* (vi) organizational and workplace factors include:

Organizational

- Lack of leadership support
- Disconnect between values and key decisions
- Excessive workload and work hours
- Biased and discriminatory structures and practices
- Barriers to mental health and substance use care

Workplace and Learning Environment

- Limited flexibility, autonomy, and voice
- Lack of culture of collaboration and vulnerability
- Limited time with patients and colleagues
- Absence of focus on health worker well-being
- Harassment, violence, and discrimination

How Do We Prevent Burnout?

Strategies for preventing burnout are multi-faceted and require involvement and commitment from multiple constituencies according to Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General.

“We must seize this moment to reimagine and create a health care system where patients, communities, and health workers can all thrive. That will require us to take a whole-of-society approach, one that addresses systems-level challenges associated with organizational culture, policy, regulations, information technology, financial incentives, and health inequities. This calls for collaboration from a variety of public and private stakeholders, as well as community partners, to tackle the root causes of health worker burnout, while rebuilding trust among all our communities.”

“Burnout manifests in individuals, but it’s fundamentally rooted in systems.” (vii)

Eleven (11) strategies that organizations can take to help prevent staff and provider burnout are included in *Addressing Health Worker Burnout*. (viii) The publication also includes action steps for each strategy.

1. Transform workplace culture to empower health workers and be responsible to their voices and needs.
2. Show health workers how much they are valued
3. Build a commitment to the health and safety of health workers into the fabric of health organizations.
4. Review and revise policies to ensure health workers are not deterred from seeking appropriate care for their physical health, mental health and/or substance use challenges.
5. Increase access to high-quality, confidential mental health and substance use care for all health workers.
6. Develop mental health support services tailored to the needs of health workers.

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Eleven (11) strategies continued...

7. Rebuild community and social connection among health workers to mitigate burnout and feelings of loneliness and isolation
8. Help health workers prioritize quality time with patients and colleagues.
9. Combat bias, racism, and discrimination in the workplace.
10. Work with health workers and communities to confront health misinformation.
11. Invest in health prevention and social services to address health inequities

Where Do We Start?

Deciding where to start can be overwhelming. A comprehensive internal assessment is a recommended first step. Regardless of whether you take a big step or a little step, it's important to start!

Organizational Assessment Template

- 1) What data tells us that we have a problem with burnout?
 - Increasing turnover
 - Increasing overtime
 - Increasing use of registry and travelers
 - Number of open positions
 - Poor staff and provider satisfaction
 - Poor inpatient and outpatient satisfaction
 - Increasing number of complaints or grievances
 - Number of harm events including hospital-acquired infections, medication errors and falls with Injury
 - Incidence of violence against staff
- 2) How much is burnout of staff and providers costing us?
 - Cost of turnover including recruitment and training costs
 - Cost of overtime
 - Cost of registry and travelers
 - Cost of locums providers
 - Lost revenue due to lack of staff creating limitations on volume
 - Cost of medical malpractice
- 3) What strategies from the *Addressing Health Worker Burnout* are in place now and are working well?
 - How do you know?
 - What data tells you the strategies are working?
- 4) What strategies recommended in *Addressing Health Worker Burnout* are in place now but need to be strengthened?
 - How do you know?
 - What data tells you the strategy is working?
- 5) What strategies recommended in *Addressing Health Worker Burnout* can we start working on tomorrow?
- 6) What human and financial capital do we need to tackle burnout? What is the cost - benefit equation?
- 7) What data will tell us when we are improving?

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Conclusion

HealthTech hopes that this publication will assist you in both identifying burnout in your organization and to develop strategies to prevent burnout for the sake of:

Your Staff, Your Organization, and Your Community

References

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starts with a conversation.

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