




Lifelink Workwell

Preventing burnout: A guide for employers







Burnout is a significant threat to organisational wellbeing, performance, and retention. Rising workloads, financial pressures, emotional labour (the effort required to stay calm, patient, or positive during challenging interactions), and workplace change mean more employees often struggle, feeling unable to talk about it.

Burnout isn't a personal failing. It is caused by chronic, unmanageable stress. Employers play a crucial role in creating systems, cultures, and environments that protect wellbeing. With understanding and the right strategies, burnout is preventable. Small, consistent changes can create healthier teams and stronger organisations.

Understanding burnout

The World Health Organization recognises burnout as an occupational phenomenon from chronic workplace stress. Three core experiences define burnout:

1. Exhaustion: A profound mental, physical, or emotional fatigue that rest alone does not resolve.
 2. Mental distancing/cynicism: Feeling disconnected, negative, or indifferent toward work.
 3. Reduced professional effectiveness: Lower concentration, confidence, or productivity.
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Burnout develops gradually and is not caused by weakness or poor coping skills. It emerges when sustained pressure meets insufficient resources, recovery time, or support.

Why burnout is rising

Today's workplaces bring elevated pressure, change, and complexity:

- Workload intensity: 55% of workers say work has become more intense and demanding. (1)
- Reduced ability to disconnect: 61% report feeling exhausted at the end of most working days. (1)
- Lower psychological safety: Only 11% of employees feel comfortable discussing mental health with their manager. (2)
- Higher expectations: 60% of employees and 75% of the C-suite have considered leaving their job for one that better supports wellbeing. (4)

Accumulated pressures without supportive structures in place increase the risk of burnout, even among highly committed, high-performing employees.






What leads to burnout?

Burnout stems from organisational, team, and individual factors, but mainly workplace-related issues, including:

- Chronic high workloads or understaffing.
- Unclear expectations or conflicting priorities.
- Limited autonomy or control.
- Lack of recognition or meaningful feedback.
- Poor communication or inconsistent leadership.
- Weak team cohesion or psychological safety.
- Emotional labour (managing your feelings to support others even when the situation is difficult) or exposure to distress.
- Limited recovery opportunities during the working day.

It's usually the cumulative effect that matters, especially when pressures become normalised over time.






Recognising the signs of burnout

Burnout develops slowly and can be easy to miss, especially in resilient colleagues. Signs may include:

- Emotional Signs: Feeling overwhelmed or defeated, irritable, unmotivated or lacking enthusiasm, disconnected, or a decreasing sense of accomplishment.
- Cognitive Signs: Difficulty concentrating, slower decisions, forgetfulness, or reduced problem-solving or creativity.
- Physical Signs: Fatigue, sleep problems, headaches or muscle tension, stomach issues or appetite changes, or frequent illness.
- Behavioural Signs: Withdrawal, procrastination or avoiding tasks, more mistakes than usual, higher absence or presenteeism.

The impact of burnout on organisations


Burnout is not only a personal health issue but also a significant business risk. Research shows:


- Poor mental health accounts for 51% of long-term sick leave. (1)
 - 35.2 million working days were lost in 2022/23 due to work-related ill health. (5)
 - The UK loses 19.6 days per person for stress, depression, or anxiety each year. (5)
 - Only 24% of managers have received any mental health training. (2)
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What employers can do

Preventing burnout requires a whole-organisation approach grounded in empathy, clarity, and consistency. The following strategies are practical, evidence-based, and effective for teams and organisations of all sizes.


1. **Make regular, supportive check-ins the norm** – discuss workload, stress, challenges and team pressures empathetically and without judgement. Even short, thoughtful check-ins build trust and psychological safety (where people feel able to speak openly without fear of blame or negative consequences).
 2. **Provide clear priorities and manageable workloads** – set realistic timelines, prioritise tasks, reduce unnecessary work, and clarify responsibilities. When expectations are clear, pressure decreases, and performance improves.
 3. **Support healthy boundaries and recovery** – encourage breaks, protected lunches, reasonable working hours, and annual leave.
 4. **Build connected, supportive teams** – foster belonging through regular check-ins, peer support, inclusivity, and psychologically safe spaces. Connected teams cope better, innovate more, and remain resilient under pressure.
 5. **Strengthen access to wellbeing support** – make counselling, EAPs, workshops, training, and peer networks visible, accessible, and encouraged. Clear signposting removes barriers and normalises help-seeking.
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6. **Equip managers with confidence and skills** – train them to spot early signs of burnout, hold supportive conversations, adjust workloads, and care for their own wellbeing.
 7. **Show genuine recognition and appreciation** – acknowledge effort, celebrate achievements, and highlight contributions. Meaningful appreciation boosts morale, motivation, and connection.
 8. **Address structural and organisational pressures** – review organisational design and processes to reduce unnecessary stress. Addressing root causes, not just symptoms, is the foundation of sustainable change.
 9. **It all starts at the top** – leaders who model balanced behaviour and encourage it across the business play a crucial role in shaping culture. Preventing burnout requires an ongoing commitment to creating a workplace where all staff feel safe, valued, and supported.

Responding to burnout when it happens

Even in supportive workplaces, burnout can still occur. When someone is experiencing burnout, it's important to recognise this is not a short-term wellbeing dip, but a state of chronic stress that affects physical and psychological health.

At this stage, minor adjustments alone are unlikely to help. Recovery often requires time away from work, rest, and structured support.






Employers can respond by:

- Supporting time off and recovery - burnout may require some sickness absence, phased returns, and realistic expectations to allow recovery.
- Using HR and Occupational Health support - Occupational Health can advise on reasonable adjustments, recovery timescales, and safe returns to work.
- Providing access to counselling or coaching - therapeutic support can help individuals understand stress patterns, rebuild coping strategies, and develop self-compassion.
- Holding compassionate, non-judgemental conversations - open discussions focused on wellbeing and not performance help build trust and psychological safety.
- Encouraging healthy recovery routines - rest, good-quality sleep, balanced nutrition, and gentle physical activity support recovery.

A supportive, clinically informed response protects long-term health, reduces relapse risk, and supports a safer return to work.

References:

- (1) MHFA England - Ten workplace mental health statistics for 2023
 - (2) Stevenson, D., & Farmer, P. (2017). Thriving at Work: A Review of Mental Health and Employers
 - (3) Indeed for Employers - Work Burnout Epidemic 2023
 - (4) Deloitte - Workplace Well Being Research 2023
 - (5) HSE - Working days lost in Great Britain
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