

# Nine ways for SMEs to avoid burnout during COVID



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Small businesses have been the hardest hit by COVID-19 and the recovery process is predicted to be “slow and uneven”. Stress levels are already significantly elevated and with no clear end in sight to the effects of the crisis, there is a heightened risk of burnout for many owners and operators.

Now, arguably more than ever, there is a need to think about how to avoid burnout and implement a plan to help you and your business stay afloat throughout this period and beyond.

This is because although many businesses have got through the first phases of the pandemic on adrenaline alone, it is not sustainable. When we operate from fear and in panic, we overload our stress system and inevitably hit a wall. The outlook, however, is not bleak. In fact, crises such as this can become opportunities to find better, more sustainable ways of working. It may be borne out of necessity, but it ultimately benefits our businesses and our personal lives in the long-term.

Here are nine tips for combatting burnout:

- 1. Restorative sleep.** Adequate sleep is so important that even the slightest amount of poor sleep negatively affects memory, judgement and mood. Sleep helps our brains and bodies recharge, enhancing their capacity to cope with stress. While we may be inclined to sacrifice sleep in times of stress, it is essential to prioritise sleep and see it as part of an ongoing stress-management plan.
- 2. See the light.** Research shows workers who are exposed to sunlight in the morning sunlight sleep better at night and feel less stressed. It also helps to calibrate our circadian rhythm – our bodies biological clock – which significantly impacts physical health, our ability to sleep and mood.
- 3. Prioritise nutrition and hydration.** Eating whole foods (lean protein, more vegetables, healthy fats and oily fish) and drinking water can alleviate stress by boosting soothing serotonin levels and reducing levels of cortisol and adrenaline. Eating well also supports our immune system and stabilises blood pressure and blood sugar, helping us cope better with stress.
- 4. Work out.** It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you do something. Walk, run, lift, swim, paddle, cycle, play sport, dance. Do whatever you enjoy as physical exercise pumps up endorphin production, the brain's feel-good neurotransmitters act as a buffer to the physical impact of stress (by strengthening our cardiovascular, digestive and immune systems), and provides both mental and physical relief.
- 5. Connect with community.** Connecting with other small businesses in your community as well as industry associations provides a unique source of support, the opportunity to share and receive advice as well as a greater sense of connection.
- 6. Healthy coping strategies.** These include practising mindfulness or meditation; deep breathing, keeping a thought journal; getting out in nature regularly; breaking down challenges into small, bite-sized tasks; celebrating small wins and achieving goals; incorporating fun, laughter and play into your life; exercise, gardening and cooking.
- 7. Time with loved ones.** Time spent with family and friends as well as self-care are regularly the first things to fall by the wayside when the going gets tough, but these are the very same things that help relieve stress and provide support so we can stay the course. I ask my clients to put these important activities in their diary each week before anything else.
- 8. Create boundaries.** With many people working from home and working to save their business, 9-to-5 has gone out the window. Temporal boundaries are essential for wellbeing as well as our ability to engage with our work effectively. Finding your own optimal Operating Rhythm allows you to harness the natural fluctuations in energy levels throughout the day while also creating boundaries around your time.
- 9. Know the red flags.** Recognising the signs that you are not coping allows you to take action before they overwhelm you. Red flags include consistently not sleeping, having a short fuse, withdrawing from friends or family, experiencing muscle tightness or tension headaches, avoiding physical activity and drinking to excess and not looking after yourself physically or mentally.

*Andrew May, Founder and CEO, StriveStronger and author of “MatchFit”*

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