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Why burnout is not about hours worked

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Regardless of the intensity of your role, burnout is not inevitable. Nor is it the result of the hours you work.

We have worked with those who work 80 plus hour weeks and never burn out. Yet others have found themselves on the burnout scrapheap working 38 hours or less each week. It is true that long hours can backfire. Research shows that stress and exhaustion cause a decrease in efficiency and an increase in mistakes, meaning that the productivity of people working 60 hours a week can be less than two-thirds that of those working 40 hours a week.

But, this is not the case for everyone. Just as productivity cannot be measured by hours worked, neither can burnout.

While some research suggests the odds of burnout double when people start working more than 60 hours per week, compared to 40 hours a week, a mediating factor is sleep. Not giving yourself adequate recovery time is more important than whether you work 40 hours or 80. This fact surprises many people.

Sleep is just one of the factors that is more significant than how many hours you work. We will look at each of these, but first, it is important to note that the workplace also plays a part here. Burnout, as a survey of 7,500 full-time employees by Gallup found, is not just a personal problem but one leaders must address by considering the environment they create. According to the Gallup survey, the top five reasons for burnout are:

- Unfair treatment at work.
- Unmanageable workload.
- Lack of role clarity.
- Lack of communication and support from their manager.
- Unreasonable time pressure.

As individuals, we also have the power to inoculate ourselves against burnout. Based on our work we have identified five factors that inoculate against burning out. We are not saying these factors 'help you reduce burnout' or 'reduce the risk of burnout.' We are making a bold declaration that if you build these 5 factors into your life you will not burn out.

1. Purpose alignment

Alignment of purpose with personal values has strong links to improving satisfaction with life. Not only does a sense of purpose and meaning in our work enhance our wellbeing and help us to bounce back faster, it is often the difference between the energised 80 hour-a-week workers and the depleted 40 hour-a-week ones.

2. Active recovery

While yoga, diaphragmatic breathing and a walk alone won't prevent burnout, physical relaxation and switching off psychologically are key to sustaining energy levels, reducing fatigue, nurturing creativity, and enhancing emotional intelligence.

3. Restorative sleep

Quality restorative sleep is vital to recovery, hormone balance, brain function and memory. Consistent quality sleep creates a buffer against ongoing daily life stressors and risk of burnout. This means switching off devices 30 minutes before bed; aiming for 7-8 hours a night; keeping your bedroom dark and cool and consistent sleep and wake times.

4. Physiological capacity

Optimal physiological capacity refers to the body’s ability to have reserves and adapt in a range of situations, especially in response to challenging tasks or stressful times. Physical activity enhances cognitive flexibility, boosts energy levels, reduces chronic lethargy, boosts mood, increases social cohesion and can reduce symptoms of mild depression – all buffers against future burnout.

5. Social connectedness

Flourishing relationships and connection with the community are fundamental to pleasure, meaning and fulfilment in life. We are social beings who need both support and connection. Quality time with those we love and those we respect provides a buffer from work stresses, re-energises you and gives you the support and stability to navigate tricky patches.

Recovery Stress



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