

How Positive Practices Help Reduce Burnout

Career 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:

- **P**acing for performance, such as setting achievable goals;
- **U**ndoing unhelpful thinking patterns through mindfulness meditation and breathing;
- **L**everaging leisure time, like spending more time in nature;
- **S**ecuring a support system; and
- **E**valuating 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.”

Caterina Cavallaro



Deputy General Counsel

VGW Holdings Limited

Caterina Cavallaro is deputy general counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

Groups.

In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.