

# Managing Burnout During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal routines for millions of people around the globe and has pushed all of us into new territory. We may be anxious about the impact of the virus on ourselves and our loved ones. We have had to navigate new risks and regulations around whether and when we can leave our homes, adapt to working remotely, or figure out how to juggle professional and family responsibilities. And this is all coming on top of anything we were feeling burdened and stressed about *before* the pandemic.

It is no wonder so many of us are (at least periodically) feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. You may even be wondering if you are experiencing burnout. If so, our companion tips sheet *Understanding Burnout During COVID-19* explains more about what causes burnout and how it appears in our lives. This resource shares 6 tips that can help you prevent and manage burnout during this pandemic.

## 1. Recognize warning signs of stress and burnout

It is important to understand burnout and how it often shows up in our lives. This helps us recognize any warning signs of burnout that appear and realize we need to make choices and take action to address those. Our companion tip sheet *Understanding Burnout During COVID-19* will help you better be able to “recognize.”

## 2. Remember this

The current pandemic presents an unusual and intense array of pressures and stressors. It has disrupted normal routines in every area of life—from work to family to grocery shopping. Adapting to these changes and demands and constantly having to weigh risks and new instructions in order to make decisions is exhausting.

As a result, many of us are going to feel periodically exhausted and overwhelmed during this pandemic. Many of us are going to feel we have less capacity to do our jobs, and that our roles and/or organizations are demanding more than we can give.

That is not necessarily because we are experiencing burnout. Burnout is typically described as a type of work-related stress. However, for many of us, this pandemic has made our entire lives feel like a brand new type of hard work. So, if you are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, disengaged, helpless, or sad right now, that is very unlikely to be all related to your job. Remember that you may have less capacity for work right now because of all the extra stress you are under. So do not assume you are experiencing the classic work-related burnout and make any hasty decisions. Instead, put the next 4 tips into practice, and give yourself some time to see how your feelings and thoughts change.

### 3. Identify reasons

Burnout is a process—it does not happen overnight. Instead, burnout is caused by the accumulation of stress and strain over time. Reversing that process requires undoing the damage by understanding the causes, managing stress, seeking support, and making other changes that can build resilience over time.

**First, it is helpful to identify what the biggest contributors are to the way you are currently feeling.** Sometimes this will be obvious. Sometimes it might take time and reflection to uncover. Many times, there will be more than one contributor.

**If you are struggling to identify likely causes, ask yourself where you feel resentment.** Often, feelings of resentment point to something important that is missing. For example, you may realize that you feel resentful because your manager is scheduling virtual check-in meetings every morning at 8am.

**If you are still having trouble figuring it out, use the “5-Whys” technique to get to the root of the problem.** The “5-Whys” involves asking “Why?” about an issue 5 times in a row to get to the root cause. For example, if you ask yourself why you are resenting your manager scheduling 8am meetings every morning, you realize it is because it is very difficult to participate and oversee your children during that time. If you ask yourself why that is a problem, you may find yourself saying that your manager does not understand the pressure you are under as you try to simultaneously work from home and also parent children who are full-time at home as well.

Once you discover a root cause, you can look at your options for addressing that cause. We always have choices here. They may not be easy choices, choices we like, or choices that feel comfortable, but we do have choices. So a final step here is to **make a list of your options for addressing a root cause and decide what you will do.**

### 4. Be realistic

Have you ever heard the phrase *Reality Minus Expectations = Disappointment and Frustration*? Our expectations are critical. When we are unrealistically optimistic with ourselves about what we can and should accomplish, the result is often that we feel frustrated, disappointed, and as if we are falling short. So, **strive for realism in what you expect of yourself (and others) during this time.**

There is a reason so many people with caregiving responsibilities – whether that be children, older adults, family members with severe illnesses – may be particularly stressed and exhausted right now. That is because working full-time from home and caregiving at home, just does not work, particularly if those you care for require significant attention. So be realistic. Your productivity is going to be affected (so, too, may your caregiving). That is the reality, and the more you fight against it and hold yourself to unrealistic standards and expectations, the more you are adding to your own stress and distress.

Here are two questions that can help you set realistic priorities during this time:

- ✓ What are the things that absolutely need to get done?
- ✓ How will I make sure that happens?

**Talk with your manager.** Ask your manager what they think you absolutely need to get done, and then ask them how they will help you hold the boundaries so that those priorities can be accomplished. This discussion can also open the door for you to explain any time and space constraints you are currently experiencing. The more you can do to help your manager understand your constraints and have realistic expectations of your productivity during this time, the better.

## 5. Build resilience by focusing on the basics

When we are under increased stress, we need to get back to basics in how we care for and support our wellbeing. Here is a guide to help us check in on the basics. In general, we should try to pay attention to each of these four categories every day:

- **Body Care:** When it comes to taking care of our bodies, we all instinctively know what this involves. Are you getting enough sleep, exercise, and decent nutrition?
- **Achievement:** For many of us, work gives us this sense of achievement and accomplishment (in fact, many of us can prioritize focusing on this area at the expense of the other three areas). However, there are many other ways to create and experience a sense of satisfaction and achievement, too.
- **Connection:** Taking time to meaningfully connect with friends, family, your partner, or pets is even more important than usual during times of extended isolation. So if you can't see some of these people in person, make time to call or write.
- **Enjoyment:** What do you do just for fun? What gives you pleasure? Even during times of extended stress and pressure, you will cope better if you build in some regular time for fun and enjoyment.

**Ask yourself the following questions:**

- ✓ How well are you doing in each of those four areas every day?
- ✓ Which area are you strongest in? What about weakest?
- ✓ What helps you put these things into action and actually get them done? (We are often far better at knowing what we *should* be doing for self-care than we are at actually doing it, so what strategies can you use to move yourself towards action?)

## 6. Look for effective reframes

One of the hallmarks of burnout is negative thinking—anger, cynicism, feeling helpless, feeling hopeless, feeling numb. This negative thinking often worsens over time.

Those thoughts are telling you important things. They are telling you that something is wrong and out of balance. You will not be served by ignoring them or suppressing them. They are not the whole story. Remind yourself that these thoughts are NOT telling you the whole story.

When you are experiencing burnout, it can be helpful to recognize what you are thinking, and then intentionally introduce some more positive thoughts. For example, you could try **practicing gratitude**.

There are dozens of ways to do this. For example, you can make a list of things you are grateful for, writing them down as you notice them. Or you can focus your gratitude on a specific area (e.g., work) that you are struggling with by writing down how your job is in line with what you value. A quick search online will lead you to many helpful guides.

You can also try a practice called **Name Three Wins**: Before you go to bed at night, name three wins from your day (these do not have to be big accomplishments or achievements! In fact, celebrating small wins such as “I fed my child three meals today” may be a helpful re-calibration for your overly stretched and stressed mind). Over time, this practice will make a positive difference in how you think and feel about your day and your productivity.

After all, most of us are primed to think first about what went wrong and ways we feel we've failed. This is called the negativity bias. But when we start focusing instead on what went right and what positive things we DID do, it literally starts to retrain our brains to identify more positives and it helps us feel better. This all feeds into an upward positive spiral in our lives.

## A final word

If you want to prevent and manage burnout during COVID-19, take a look back over the six tips we have explored in this resource. If you put some time and effort into exploring each of these areas and putting some associated strategies into action, it will go a long way to helping you feel and function better.

- ✓ Recognize warning signs of stress and burnout
- ✓ Remember that these are unusually stressful times, and that this pandemic will not last forever
- ✓ Identify reasons you are feeling particularly stressed, and explore your options for addressing those pressures
- ✓ Be realistic in your expectations of yourself (and others)
- ✓ Build resilience by crafting a plan (and then putting it into action)
- ✓ Look for effective reframes that will coach your brain to look more at positives