A Vulnerable Workforce: How COVID-19 is Increasing Burnout and Work-Related Trauma

Burnout is an occupational phenomenon resulting from workplace stress that is not being successfully managed. It can lead to feelings of exhaustion; increased negative thoughts related to one’s job; creating mental distance from a profession; and reduced professional efficacy. The term burnout was originally coined to describe the repercussions of performing high stakes work in the “helping professions,” but researchers and mental health professionals now recognize that everyone is vulnerable to burnout (IQWiG).

Experiencing stress is normal and stress-related exhaustion is not always cause for concern. However, typical stress is situational or task-related; that is, the stress ends once the project is finished or the event is over. With burnout on the other hand, the stress is constant and significant, and there is no end in sight. With no real sense of closure, burnout can take a serious toll on physical and mental health (SHRM).

The root cause of burnout depends on an individual’s personality, profession, work environment, and personal life. Some of the common causes of burnout are:

- Feeling permanently overworked or under-challenged
- Being under time pressure
- Having conflict with co-workers
- Overcommitting
- Experiencing sudden changes in your work environment, work load, or organizational structure
- Lacking a sense of control

Any one or a combination of these workplace experiences can deplete a person’s physical, mental, and/or emotional resources over time (IQWiG).

How the COVID-19 Pandemic is Increasing Burnout

The pandemic has impacted our work lives – how we work, the hours we work, and the projects we are tasked with – and significantly changed many aspects of our homelives. Stress related to job insecurity, lack of boundaries between work and home, overworking, increased reliance on technology, isolation, health concerns, and caring for children at home during the workday has increased the workforce’s overall vulnerability to burnout. Even those with secure jobs and no children at home have lost their typical avenues for relieving stress, like socializing with friends, visiting the gym, and traveling (SHRM).
The Role of Employers

Employers play an important role in addressing burnout. On top of being flexible and understanding during this period of extreme uncertainty, employers should also lead by example.

Employers should encourage and empower employees to:
- Participate in affinity groups and employee assistance programs
- Use paid time off, even when travel isn’t possible
- Speak up when expectations, workloads, or work-from-home processes are negatively impacting their mental health and/or personal lives
- Develop processes and schedules that meet both the company’s and employee’s needs

Sources

Cornell University
Department of Justice - Office for Victims Crimes
Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Healthcare (IQWiG)

The Expansion of the “Front Line”

Front line workers addressing mental illness, addiction, and suicide are often at the forefront of discussion related to burnout and secondary traumatic stress, the subsequent emotions that result from knowing about another person or group’s traumatic experiences and the stress that comes from wanting to help, but not being able to do so (Office for Victims Crimes). Chronic work-related stress and secondary trauma is no longer limited to law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, and those who work directly with victims. The conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have extended the group of workers at the frontlines to include those whose job functions cannot be performed remotely in the following industries: healthcare and behavioral healthcare, protective services, agriculture, transportation and logistics, energy, public works, janitorial and maintenance, food sales and service, and general retail.

Essential workers at the front line are on average disproportionately less educated and come from minority communities and communities of color, earning below average wages, with many in the bottom wage quartile (Cornell University). The essential, in-person nature of their work means that these workers are afforded less opportunities for rest and face greater health risks than those working from home. Additionally, child care has been an additional source of stress for essential workers throughout the pandemic, with schools and daycares closed. The great deal of uncertainty related to the economy, education system, and the reopening of states across the country increases the chance of burnout for essential workers, many of whom have been catapulted to essential status by the onset of the pandemic.

Asking for Support

Though burnout is not a medical diagnosis, it should be taken seriously. Burnout will not go away unless sufferers address the underlying causes, take steps to improve their thoughts and emotions related to work, and seek support (The Mayo Clinic).

If you are experiencing burnout talk openly with your employer, consider alternative options or take a leave of absence, and seek out support. In addition to employee assistance programs, consider the following free, confidential resources:

**CRISIS TEXT LINE**
Text 4Hope to 741741

**OHIO'S COVID-19 CARE LINE**
1-800-720-9616

**SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE**
1-800-273-8255

The Week of Appreciation is an opportunity to show support and appreciation to those who work directly with individuals struggling to overcome substance use disorders and mental illnesses. This includes first responders and anyone else on the front lines who may experience burnout or secondary trauma as a result of their work with individuals in need.

Sources

The Mayo Clinic
Society for Human Resource Management