

HR Burnout Signs You Need to Know About



Chronic stress doesn't just make you sick—when it turns into full-fledged **occupational burnout**, it can upend your career and change the trajectory of your life. And no one is immune. Almost 2 in 5 (**36%**) of all US workers say they're burned out, with 40% of Millennials reporting the highest levels of burnout, followed by Gen Z (39%).

Here's what you'll gain from this article:

- A breakdown of what occupational burnout is and isn't
- An assessment of your own burnout risk as an HR professional
- Advice for spotting burnout in yourself and others
- Expert tips for mitigating burnout individually and organizationally

As an HR professional, you're responsible for supporting everyone at your company, from the people leaders to the individual contributors to the **interns**. But the reality is you can't help anyone when you're running on empty with your check engine light on!

In fact, has your check engine light been on for a while now? Is it getting harder and harder to focus with all the clanging going on under your hood? You're in the right place! We hope the resources you find here will help you refuel and get your internal engine back in working order.

Editor's note: This article includes quotes from internal and external, known and anonymous sources. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

What Is Occupational Burnout?

The term "burnout" is often used interchangeably with "exhaustion," but job burnout, or occupational burnout, is more than just exhaustion. It runs deeper than apathy, and it describes more than feelings of futility.

According to leading burnout expert **Dr. Christina Maslach**, occupational burnout is the experience of all three dimensions of burnout—**exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy**—on a daily basis.

"HR professionals on the frontline are bombarded with emotions, complaints, and problems from so many different personalities on an ongoing basis. Add in all the regulations we have to deal with and it can be a nightmare. We have to understand that it's okay to let it go and not carry the burden with us once the day ends."

MELINDA | HR MANAGER | US

The following is a brief summary of Dr. Maslach's approach to measuring occupational burnout, with the basics for how to self-assess, but remember: this article is for informational purposes only.

Follow these instructions for an informal, unofficial measure of any burnout symptoms you may currently be experiencing. We encourage you to reach out to your **employee assistance program** (EAP) or a mental health professional for a formal assessment and personalized assistance.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) Definition of Occupational Burnout

Using Maslach's method for **measuring occupational burnout**, an individual can rate themselves in the following three categories to determine *if* they're experiencing burnout and *how* burned out they are:

1. **Physical and emotional exhaustion**—the feeling of being overextended emotionally and physically by the work.
2. **Cynicism or depersonalization**—feelings of indifference, apathy, or even hostility toward the work or the people you work with or serve.
3. **Professional inefficacy or personal lack of accomplishment**—the negative evaluation of one's own capabilities, impact, or effectiveness.

THE RATING SYSTEM

The **official MBI assessment** offers varying statements (e.g., "I doubt the significance of my work.") and asks the individual how often the statement is true for them. Then they answer on a scale of 0 to 6, from "Never" to "Every day."

- (0) Never
- (1) A few times a year or less
- (2) Once a month or less
- (3) A few times a month
- (4) Once a week
- (5) A few times a week
- (6) Every day

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Take an Informal Burnout Test

Want to try it out? Consider each of the original statements below and rate how often the statement feels true for you. Add up your scores in each category to see how burnout might be affecting your daily life. (Note: These statements are the original work of this article's author and are intended to resemble what might appear in an official MBI assessment.)

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CATEGORY 1: EXHAUSTION

Statement	Score
"I can't do this anymore."	
"I can't remember the last time I wasn't tired."	
"There isn't enough caffeine in the world to get me through today."	
Total	

CATEGORY 2: CYNICISM

Statement	Score
"I can't care anymore."	
"I'd quit today if I could."	
"I barely have the minimum left to give, but that's all you're getting."	
Total	

CATEGORY 3: PROFESSIONAL INEFFECTICACY

Statement	Score
"Nothing I do matters anyway, or makes a difference."	
"I have no future here, but I feel stuck."	
"I'm not doing this job well anymore, but I can't see how to get back on track."	
Total	

THE RESULTS AND WHAT THEY MEAN

For the purposes of our informal exercise, an eyebrow-raising score would be anywhere from 12 to 18 per category, which would mean you rated yourself a 3, 4, 5, or 6 for each of the three statements in the category. We strongly recommend you reach out to trusted individuals for support and seek professional intervention.

It's possible to score high in one or two areas and low in others, in which case Dr. Maslach has other terms besides "burnout" to describe what you may be experiencing. This specificity can help when putting together a **personalized intervention or recovery plan**.

Burned Out: A high score in all three categories

Disengaged: Scores highest in the Cynicism category

Overextended: Scores highest in the Exhaustion category

Ineffective: Scores highest in the Efficacy category

Engaged: A low score in all three categories

Burnout Symptoms You Shouldn't Ignore

It's easy to brush off feelings of fatigue or irritability as "just another bad day," especially in a demanding field like HR. However, it's crucial to recognize when these feelings might be signs of something more serious. Ignoring these symptoms can have significant consequences for your **wellbeing** and your ability to effectively perform your role.

"Acknowledge the burnout. Don't try to suppress it."

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Here are some of the key symptoms to look out for:

- **Excessive fatigue:** Feeling unusually tired and drained, even after rest or sleep. This isn't just physical tiredness; it can be emotional and cognitive exhaustion as well.
- **Increased cynicism and detachment:** Developing a negative or overly detached attitude towards your job and the people you work with. You might find yourself becoming more distant, irritable, or less invested in your work.
- **Reduced professional efficacy:** Feeling less competent and productive at work. You might experience a sense of ineffectiveness, struggle to concentrate, or feel like your accomplishments don't matter.
- **Irritability and impatience:** Becoming easily frustrated, short-tempered, or reactive with colleagues, employees, or even people in your personal life.
- **Headaches, stomachaches, or other physical complaints:** Experiencing more frequent physical symptoms that can be related to **occupational stress**, such as headaches, stomach issues, muscle tension, or changes in sleep or appetite.
- **Changes in sleep habits:** Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or feeling unrested even after sleeping.
- **Withdrawal from social activities:** Losing interest in socializing with colleagues or friends, and wanting to spend more time alone.

- **Lack of motivation:** Feeling a lack of enthusiasm or drive for your work, even tasks you used to enjoy.
- **Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope:** Turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with stress and negative emotions.

Recognizing these **symptoms in yourself or a colleague** is the first step toward addressing burnout. If you identify with several of these signs, it's important to take them seriously and explore strategies for managing employee wellbeing as well as your own.

A Guide to Mindfulness in the Workplace

Part of burnout management is finding ways to regulate the emotions caused by difficult moments at work. Get insight and advice on adopting mindfulness practices in the workplace for yourself and your teams.

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What Contributes to HR Burnout?

In an address at an IT Revolution event, Dr. Maslach described burnout as "a prolonged response to chronic situational stressors on a job," and shared how one of the first applications of the term was to describe what happens to ball bearings when exposed long-term to "an abrasive environment without a key resource." They burn out.

"One of the biggest challenges HR professionals face is the inability to talk about confidential workplace matters, especially as they are being personally affected."

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In the case of ball bearings, the missing key resource is oil. For humans, Maslach identifies seven core needs:

1. Autonomy
2. Belonging
3. Competence
4. Positive emotions
5. **Psychological safety**
6. Fairness
7. Meaning

“Leaders passing the buck or not taking accountability, blaming HR, etc.—these are ways you take a hit that are frustrating.”

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Experts at **Mayo Clinic** agree: when these core needs are unmet or undermined, burnout ensues. This can look like:

1. **A lack of autonomy and control.** You feel you have little say in how your work is done, when you work, or the decisions that directly affect you. Instead of being empowered, you feel infantilized or **micromanaged**.
2. **Demand overload.** The workload, deadlines, or expectations consistently exceed your capacity. You don’t have the resources to keep up, whether that means your department is understaffed or you’re **tied down by manual tools and processes**.
3. **Insufficient reward.** You’re underpaid or underacknowledged. A little **recognition and appreciation** would go a long way in helping you feel less demoralized and more valued, but there’s also not much opportunity for growth where you are. You often find yourself wondering what it’s all for.
4. **A socially toxic work environment.** You feel constantly drained or on edge because of negative interpersonal dynamics—bullying, harassment, distrust, poor communication, or even **toxic positivity**, the fake-it-’til-you-make-it approach to good vibes in the office. And it’s taking a toll.

5. **Unfair practices.** It’s hard not to become cynical when you **witness or experience favoritism** in the ways workloads or shift schedules are determined, promotions are given, or discipline is meted out.

6. **Value conflicts.** Your core personal or **ethical values** clash with the demands or culture of your workplace. You feel at odds or unimpressed with the way things are done or with the direction of the company, and you’re demotivated by the dissonance.

The Hostile, the Unfair, and the Toxic

Read the latest data on how bad bosses affect employee satisfaction, company culture, and retention, and what HR can do to intervene.

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HR and the Pressure to Drive Business Impact

“The reality is that we are here to support employees, leadership teams, and business outcomes. Centering an ‘HR is for people people’ narrative sometimes misses the business impact we can have when we do the role right.”

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The first version of the MBI was designed for the human services—e.g., healthcare, law enforcement, social activism—occupations known to attract people passionate about solving problems.

Often in these fields, it can feel like no matter how hard you work, or how much you give, it will never be enough. Sound familiar? This type of pressure puts people in human services at particular risk for **compassion fatigue**, but what about HR?

There's certainly some crossover between human resources and human services. The toll it takes to support multiple employees, especially for an HR team of one, can lead to compassion fatigue, which is expressed in the cynicism category of burnout. That's why it's so important for HR to maintain boundaries and keep the scope of their role in check.

"It's important to note that as HR professionals, we need to keep caring for employees only within the context of the workplace. We should help employees have positive experiences and can provide career guidance, protection from harassment/hostile work environments, etc. However, we cannot feel responsibility or provide counsel to them for what happens outside of the workplace. This is outside our realm of responsibility and would be better to direct them to a professional therapist."

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However, it can be frustrating for HR pros when executives and others dismiss this "people-work" aspect of HR as something separate from the work that directly drives business impact.

"I think the compassion angle is one that if we over do it, can make it seem like we don't drive business impact," shares Kelsey Tarp, the director of HR business partners at BambooHR. Helping employees through tough moments takes a toll, says Kelsey, but the day-to-day interactions with difficult leaders who don't appreciate HR's potential for real business impact is just as taxing. "Leaders passing the buck or not taking accountability," she says, "blaming HR—these are ways you take a hit."

We asked Kelsey and other HR professionals what had contributed to their own experiences with burnout in the course of their careers, and the top selections were:

- **Layoffs** or terminations
- Employee **tragedies**, such as death, **bereavement**, and natural disasters
- Busy seasons, such as open **enrollment** and taxes

"One experience early in my career stands out as I had to spend the majority of my days in layoff conversations. It was difficult to process personally because I have genuine care and concern for employees I worked with. I found a therapist to be extremely helpful to me during this time."

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Other specific contributors to HR burnout noted by our respondents include:

- Maintaining **confidentiality** and feelings of isolation
- Employee **investigations** and conflict mediation
- **Compliance** pressure
- Poor **leadership** quality
- Lack of funding for things that will solve issues upstream
- HR being looped in too late on important issues

Advice for Managing Burnout

“HR burnout is very real. As HR colleagues who are aware when other colleagues are going through a particularly difficult time due to work stressors, we can offer support to them. This can make a huge difference, provide tremendous support, and build team unity.”

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Almost **8 in 10** (78%) US workers say good work-life balance is more important to them than a high salary, and **1 in 4** (28%) would trade a salary increase for a 4-day workweek or more paid time off (26%).

Health is priceless, and work-life imbalance puts people on the fast track toward burnout. Here are a few practical tips to protect yourself:

BUILD A SUPPORT SYSTEM THAT “GETS IT”

Certainly lean on friends, family, and your company’s EAP, but when you’re an HR team of one, joining an **HR community** can be an invaluable step toward getting the informed, outside support you need while maintaining confidentiality at work.

“Having an HR team (other HRBPs) is really helpful to chat with and get validation. When you’re a department of one, that can be more difficult. In that case, I recommend using EAPs or other resources available.”

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SET BOUNDARIES

This means more than just taking your breaks and not overworking; it means **mindfully unplugging** when you’re not on the clock, speaking up when the workload gets too much, and not taking on the workload and roles of others.

“Set boundaries. Guard your working hours—the more excuses to go beyond them, the worse it is for your health. Set boundaries also when thinking about your duties and scope of responsibilities. It’s crucial to properly name your role in the company. Don’t replace managers—that’s not your role!”

DOROTA | HR BUSINESS PARTNER | POLAND

PRACTICE SELF-CARE

Keep yourself at the top of your priority list. It’s not selfishness; it’s survival. Allocate time and care toward the things that keep you fueled. And be honest with yourself. The road to burnout is paved with self-deception. If your body is telling you it’s at its limit, listen.

“Between the time I stop working and before I have to deal with all the responsibilities of home, I take time for myself, either exercising or walking outdoors (nature is my favorite way to unwind), or even reading in a quiet place. Not working outside the required hours is also important—HR pros need downtime!”

MELINDA | HR MANAGER | US

ASK FOR HELP

Not just from the people who care about you personally, or your colleagues and supervisor, but from medical and mental health professionals who can give you objectivity as well as confidentiality, which you’re also obligated to maintain as an HR professional.

“My go-to coping strategies for burnout include ensuring I’m getting the self-care I need—good nutrition, rest, exercise, and time outside. Also, going to a trusted therapist who is also required to keep things confidential.”

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Final Burnout Advice from the Pros

WRITE, SHRED, BREATHE

“Another trick I’ve found helps is spending a few minutes at the end of a particularly difficult day to ‘vent’ by writing out all the day’s frustrations and annoyances (adding humor when possible). I then shred the paper in a symbolic gesture of letting it go. It’s like a mini dose of therapy, and while not foolproof, it’s surprisingly helpful.”

MELINDA | HR MANAGER | US

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

“Be honest with yourself. Step away from the computer for a walk, listen to an audio, podcast, etc.”

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TAKE TIME TO LAUGH

“Give yourself time and space to do focus work. I keep space on my calendar for inevitable last minute hot HR potatoes, to solve issues upstream, and for fun and levity with the team. A sense of humor makes a big difference.”

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DON'T FORGET TO ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF TOO

“Set notifications from work apps to ping you only during working hours, and set ‘focus time’ for less interruption during meetings, a healthier head, and to feel less overwhelmed!

If you have too much on your plate, be assertive, speak with your manager about adding someone to the team or for more realistic deadlines. Working longer hours won't help; you will only get more duties as a result.

And most importantly, learn to recognize what can be changed and what cannot in the company you are working in. Don't get angry about what you can't change, as it will only make you miserable. Focus on improving what can be improved. You can't change the whole world, but you can decide where you put your energy!”

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