

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Work-life balance: Avoid workplace burnout



DR. DORIAN LO, PRESIDENT,
EXPRESS SCRIPTS CANADA

Work-life balance is critical to avoid burnout. Learn how to identify and prevent it for continued success in your career and life.

According to a recent survey, **one-third of Canadian workers** said they are more burned out on the job today compared to a year ago.

The daily grind and pressure of work, in addition to potential stressors at home, can magnify the individual tasks on our plate and make us feel like a mountain is ahead for us to climb.

The World Health Organization classifies workplace burnout as an occupational phenomenon characterized by mental exhaustion, prolonged stress, detachment and a decline in job performance.¹ Other symptoms of burnout include altered sleep habits, fatigue, irritability and sadness. When left unaddressed, burnout can lead to other serious medical issues, including thyroid problems, vitamin deficiency or depression.²

Burnout, however, isn't always easy to spot.

Here are some of the signs of burnout that you should keep in mind for yourself, colleagues and loved ones:

- **Exhaustion.** Burnout will leave you feeling physically and emotionally depleted. The physical symptoms may include headaches, stomachaches and changes in appetite or sleep.
- **Isolation.** People with burnout tend to feel overwhelmed. As a result, they may stop socializing and confiding in friends, family members and colleagues.
- **Escape fantasies.** Dissatisfied with the never-ending demands of their jobs, people with burnout may fantasize about running away or going on a solo-vacation. In extreme cases, they may turn to drugs, alcohol or food as a way to numb their emotional pain.
- **Irritability.** Burnout can cause people to lose their cool with friends, colleagues and family members more easily. Coping with regular tasks like preparing for a work meeting and tending to household tasks also may start to feel insurmountable, especially when things don't go as planned.
- **Frequent illnesses.** Burnout, like other long-term stress, can lower your immune system and make you more susceptible to colds, the flu and insomnia. It can also lead to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety. It's important to speak with a trusted member of your healthcare team if you're experiencing any of these symptoms.

Recognizing burnout, its causes and how to prevent it is essential in order to maintain a positive work experience and environment.

Read: [Beyond expressing your love to others on Valentine's Day, consider self-care too](#)

Without a healthy work-life balance, chronic workplace stress can manifest and, if it is not recognized and managed, an employee can experience burnout.

Due to the global pandemic, modified work environments (i.e., work from home) combined with social isolation guidelines should encourage all of us to be mindful of the causes so burnout can be prevented at its earliest stages.

The technology that we depend on can also be one of the greatest contributors to burnout.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, technology blurred the line between our work and home life. We hear the ding or feel the vibration from our smart phone and it can be hard to resist the impulse to check the new notification.

Our increased accessibility and need to be in the loop can lead to responding afterhours, which can set an unhealthy expectation with our colleagues and prevent us from socializing with family and friends or just enjoying some personal downtime – crucial activities to help maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Watch: [How are seasonal depression and the impacts of COVID-19 affecting mental health, and what can people do to stay well?](#)

Employers should also take proactive steps to help avoid burnout amongst their workforce. Not only does burnout result in lower engagement, productivity and effectiveness, it can also lead to higher health plan costs, increased occurrences and durations of absences due to illness or a reduced commitment to the job and the organization, and higher turnover due to decreased job satisfaction.

Information and programs that help employees plan, track and encourage a healthy work-life balance are one tool that employers can implement.

For example, some organizations have introduced programs to help employees and their family members build and strengthen their resilience by encouraging them to focus on activities that strengthen social connections and increase mindfulness, in addition to being physically active. Believing that small changes can lead to big results, organizations might also consider introducing resources to help employees improve their lifestyles in areas such as sleep, resilience and eating. Cigna introduced one such program recently and early results show that the lives of employees are being impacted in a positive way.

Introducing even small changes geared to improve employees' work-life balance allows organizations to take the lead in supporting employees and caring for their physical and mental health alike.

¹ World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

² Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/mentalhealth_jobburnout.html