

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

11-2021

Burnout isn't just exhaustion: Workers can also feel cynical or inadequate

Tina Li Yi NG

Singapore Management University, tina.ng.2019@socsc.smu.edu.sg

Andree HARTANTO

Singapore Management University, andreeh@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Human Resources Management Commons](#), [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology Commons](#)

Citation

NG, Tina Li Yi and HARTANTO, Andree, "Burnout isn't just exhaustion: Workers can also feel cynical or inadequate" (2021). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3471.

https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3471

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3471

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cheryl@smu.edu.sg.

Burnout isn't just exhaustion. Workers can also feel cynical or inadequate

Tina Ng & Andree Hartanto

Published in Channel News Asia, 17 November 2021

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/work-burnout-employee-manager-company-leave-remote-hybrid-2316581>

Employers, take note: There's more to burnout which corporate wellness initiatives alone cannot solve, say SMU researchers.

Nike, LinkedIn and Bumble gave workers a paid week off. Citigroup banned work calls on Friday. Scotland is set to trial a four-day work week without a loss of pay.

Evidently, the huge wave of resignations spurred by the pandemic has forced companies to confront burnout, implementing "burnout breaks" to curb the loss of productivity that comes with working too much.

Though initiatives like "mental health weeks" are widely appreciated, they merely scratch the surface and do not solve the issue. To truly put out the flames of burnout, a precise diagnosis of the problem is critical.

This is especially true in Singapore, the world's most fatigued country where one in two workers feels exhausted and 58 per cent feel overworked, according to Microsoft's Work Trend Index published in May.

NOT JUST ABOUT STRESS AND WORKLOAD

We might think burnout is the same as exhaustion – the result of sitting at our desk for too long, attending too many Zoom meetings and never catching a break.

But there's more to it. Researchers Christina Maslach and Michael P Leiter found that besides exhaustion, burnout comprises cynicism, where you dread and detach emotionally from work, along with inefficacy, where you feel incompetent and stuck.

More recent psychological research highlights the differences in how people experience burnout.

Exhausted employees still believe in themselves and their work, but are simply too lethargic to attend to it.

Those struggling with inefficacy have enough energy and care about their job, but don't feel validated by their contributions.

These are different from those whose burnout experience is dominated by cynicism, where the problem lies in them feeling disconnected from the job.

TACKLING EXHAUSTION

If exhaustion is the main symptom of burnout, organisations and workers should focus on managing workload and building a culture of rest.

This state of persistent fatigue arises when employees have too much to do, with too few resources and little control over their environment.

An always-on, 24/7 organisational culture drains employees and give them little opportunity to recharge. When this kind of overload is a chronic job condition, employees find themselves too depleted to do even simple tasks.

To better align employees' job demands and capabilities, set reasonable expectations. Give employees enough time or information for tasks.

Providing support and flexibility, for instance in work hours, can also make employees feel a greater sense of control over their work.

Reducing job demands is only half of the picture when it comes to relieving exhaustion. For employees to feel truly recharged, giving time to enjoy leisure activities is key.

But this is often not enough. If the overall work culture promotes presenteeism, employees will be discouraged from taking leave or utilising wellness perks.

Therefore, employers should cultivate a workplace culture that values rest. One interesting way companies have tried to achieve this is PepsiCo's practice of "leaders leaving loudly" which, in those pre-coronavirus days of working from the office, encourages senior members of staff to announce when they're leaving early and why.

The idea is to set a positive example to employees to take a flexible approach to work life. A less extreme example could be using Slack statuses to signal that you're with family or taking a break, and prioritising your own time to rest and recharge in order to encourage others to do the same.

SUPPORT EMPLOYEES' GOOD WORK

Another form of worker burnout is feeling unproductive, unaccomplished and incompetent. They do not feel confident they are contributing meaningfully.

Bosses need to provide regular and constructive feedback so employees are certain they're on the right path. Employers must ensure contributions are seen and valued.

This doesn't mean doling out constant praise, but giving credit where it's due.

A study by renowned psychologists Adam Grant and Francesca Gino found people thanked for their efforts experienced significant increases to their self-worth and social value – an antidote to the feelings of inadequacy.

The study also found that gratitude made people more trusting and willing to help each other, which can bolster employee's abilities to contribute meaningfully.

To build a culture of gratitude and appreciation at your workplace, small interventions can go a long way. An experiment among 1,575 healthcare workers from researchers at Duke University showed that writing one letter of gratitude significantly reduced emotional exhaustion, boosted happiness and improved perceptions of work-life balance.

Writing the gratitude letter encouraged people to focus their attention on what was going well which they might have taken for granted. Create spaces in the office that promotes the voluntary, spontaneous expression of gratitude for example.

This could take the form of an online "Gratitude Wall", where employees can express appreciation for their peers, whether it's for their help on an overwhelming project or simply for checking in.

REMOVE STRESSORS FROM THE WORKPLACE

If employees dread and withdraw from work, it's likely the result of a work environment pervaded by interpersonal conflict, unfairness and lack of participation.

On a deeper level, employees may emotionally detach from work because they do not feel like what they're doing aligns with their values.

When stressors like discrimination and unfairness are the reason for employee's withdrawal, promoting a fair and inclusive work culture is key.

Re-evaluating the company's performance evaluation system can be a place to start. For instance, establishing a specific rubric to evaluate employees and requiring evidence to justify these evaluations can make the review process fairer and more consistent.

Employees should also be able to report discrimination and bias. Though employers will not be able to eliminate every grievance and argument among colleagues, they still need to enforce mechanisms for reporting and resolving such issues.

By removing such stressors, employees will be better able to focus on their work.

PRACTISE JOB CRAFTING

Moreover, employers should support employees' efforts in job crafting: Changing aspects of their job to better align with their needs, abilities and preferences while still staying in the same role.

By reframing office tasks and relationships, job crafting makes work more meaningful to us, bolstering our sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Workers should speak to their supervisors to find out how they can focus on tasks that involve their passions. For example, a dentist who values educating others could devote more attention to educating patients on healthy dental habits.

Cultivating relationships is another means of job crafting. For instance, workers can be asked to coach new or less experienced colleagues, which can foster higher quality connections and make work feel more fulfilling.

Making provisions for employee satisfaction and wellbeing has never been more pertinent. It is especially important for employers to support those who see a future for themselves in the organisation but are hindered by burnout.

For employees who do choose to leave, exit interviews are a useful research tool. Gaining feedback will enable employers to adjust employee benefits and corporate culture to yield long-term employee engagement and high performance.

It is encouraging that more attention has been paid to mental health since the pandemic. That said, we need a shift in perspective that emphasises the individuality of our experiences to stem the dissatisfaction we feel at work.

Rather than adopt one-size-fits-all approach to burnout, we need a human-centred one that encompasses an accurate diagnosis and targeted strategies.

Tina Ng Li Yi is a 3rd year student majoring in Psychology, and Andree Hartanto is Assistant Professor of Psychology (Education) at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.