

Burnout at Work Isn't Just About Exhaustion. It's Also About Loneliness

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Executive Summary

More and more people are feeling tired and lonely at work – and it's having an impact not just on individuals but organizations too. The authors' research shows that 50% of people across professions are burned out. Experts and companies have struggled to figure out how to counter this growing level of burnout. Many recommendations focus on relieving stress, teaching mindfulness, or reducing workload – all of which treat burnout as an individual condition. But its link to loneliness suggests that greater human connection at work may also be key to solving the burnout problem. Leaders and managers can play a key role in helping people feel less lonely, and therefore, less burned out at work by promoting a workplace of empathy and inclusion, encouraging employees to build networks that can provide emotional support, and celebrating collective success that fosters a sense of belonging.



More and more people are feeling tired and lonely at work. In analyzing the [General Social Survey of 2016](#), we found that, compared with roughly 20 years ago, people are twice as likely to report that they are always exhausted. Close to 50% of people say they are often or always exhausted due to work. This is a shockingly high statistic — and it's a 32% increase from two decades ago. What's more, there is a significant correlation between feeling lonely and work exhaustion: The more people are exhausted, the lonelier they feel.

This loneliness is not a result of social isolation, as you might think, but rather is due to the emotional exhaustion of workplace burnout. In researching the book [The Happiness Track](#), we found that 50% of people — across professions, from the nonprofit sector to the medical field — are burned out. This isn't just a problem for busy, overworked executives (though the high rates of [loneliness](#) and [burnout](#) among this group are well known). Our work suggests that the problem is pervasive across professions and up and down corporate hierarchies.

Loneliness, whether it results from social isolation or exhaustion, has serious consequences for individuals. John Cacioppo, a leading expert on loneliness and coauthor of [Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection](#), emphasizes its tremendous impact on psychological and

physical health and longevity. **Research** by Sarah Pressman, of the University of California, Irvine, corroborates his work and demonstrates that while obesity reduces longevity by 20%, drinking by 30%, and smoking by 50%, loneliness reduces it by a whopping 70%. In fact, **one study** suggests that loneliness increases your chance of stroke or coronary heart disease — the leading cause of death in developed countries — by 30%. On the other hand, feelings of social connection can **strengthen our immune system, lengthen our life, and lower rates of anxiety and depression.**

As anyone who has experienced it can attest to, loneliness is an emotionally painful feeling; it even **registers as physical pain** in the brain. The social repercussions of this discomfort directly impact work productivity because people disengage. And both the **Smith School of Business at Queen's University** and the **Gallup Organization** have shown the extreme costs to companies of disengagement: almost 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, 16% lower profitability, and a 65% lower share price over time.

In the meantime, experts and companies have struggled to figure out how to counter growing levels of burnout. Many recommendations focus on relieving stress, teaching mindfulness, or reducing workload — all of which treat burnout as an individual condition. But its link to loneliness suggests that greater human connection at work may also be key to solving the burnout problem.

In fact, **research** has demonstrated the link between social support at work, lower rates of burnout, and greater work satisfaction and productivity. After all, the most important factor in work happiness, a **UK study showed**, is positive social relationships with coworkers. Workplace engagement is associated with positive social relations that involve feeling valued, supported, respected, and secure. And the result of feeling socially connected, **studies** show, is greater psychological well-being, which translates into higher productivity and performance. This is true in part because social connectedness leads to higher **self-esteem**, which means employees are more trusting, empathic, and cooperative — leading others to trust and cooperate with them. So what can leaders and employees do?

Promote a workplace culture of inclusion and empathy. **Research** by the University of Michigan's Kim Cameron, author of *Positive Leadership*, shows that workplaces characterized by caring, supportive, respectful, honest, and forgiving relationships lead to higher organizational performance overall. You want to encourage community and value warm, friendly, and understanding relationships between people. Empathy, in particular, may be a protective factor against burnout and work exhaustion, **studies** suggest. Jane Dutton, professor at the University of Michigan and coauthor of *Awakening Compassion at Work*, persuasively **argues** that compassion can foster greater workplace resilience overall.

Encourage employees throughout the organization to build developmental networks. These networks are small groups of colleagues you routinely turn to for task advice or emotional support. At the vast majority of companies, creation of these networks is left up to chance. However, companies can help foster them by assigning onboarding partners and helping employees access and connect with potential mentors, coaches, and peers. Removing barriers to connect, by freeing space in calendars and offering contact information with relevant background information (including hobbies and interests, not just work), can go a long way.

Celebrate collective successes. The happiness arising from a happy hour is short-lived. But celebrating collective successes helps create a sense of belonging and attachment in organizations. One of the best examples we have seen of this was at Awethu, a startup incubator in South Africa. Each time a new employee was hired into a venture, a bell rang, and everyone stopped what they were doing to cheer. This kind of ritual builds solidarity, increases a sense of belonging, and can help guard against burnout.

The stakes for companies are high when it comes to loneliness and burnout. Recent **studies** estimate that loneliness costs employers in the UK billions of dollars each year and employee

burnout costs the U.S. health care system **hundreds of billions of dollars** each year. The research is clear. Now it's time for managers and leaders to take steps to battle these epidemics.



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