

Well@Work Podcast

Episode 17: Recognizing and Managing Burnout

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children, this podcast is being brought to you by grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Emily Smith discusses how to recognize and manage symptoms of burnout. And now, Emily Smith.

Hello, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. On today's Well@Work podcast I would like to talk with you about burnout. While you may feel exhausted at the end of a long and challenging day, you likely can get a good night's sleep and feel refreshed after, that may not be the case if you are experiencing burnout. Caused by chronic stress, burnout is the cause of physical and emotional exhaustion and is characterized by psychological, emotional, and physical symptoms. Burnout may leave you feeling helpless, overwhelmed, unappreciated, cynical. Physically burnout may bring headaches, gastrointestinal problems, changes in sleeping or eating habits, and lowered immunity. You may turn to food, alcohol, or drugs, to cope with or escape daily stress. Our emotions become blunted, we might lose hope and motivation, become detached, and may show signs of depression.

This is exactly what happened to Jeanette. Jeanette is a nurse at a hospital in an urban area. Once COVID-19 patients began coming in, the hospital asked staff to volunteer to work on the new COVID units after a brief training. Jeanette began working overnight on a new COVID unit; she was reusing PPE, she didn't know her co-workers well because they were from all over the hospital, she constantly worried she might get sick. Several staff members quit, were quarantined, or called in sick to work, so Jeanette had to work additional shifts to address staffing shortage. In the midst of it all, there were threats of pay cuts and furloughs as the hospital struggled with financial stability due to cancellation of elective procedures. Jeanette was exhausted, fearful, and hopeless; her eating decreased, she had trouble staying asleep, and didn't know where to turn. Jeanette was suffering from burnout.

As the world reels from the impact of COVID-19, all of this may resonate with you. The following are tips to help combat burnout. Tip one is to be on the lookout for signs of burnout. Exhaustion without relief after rest, frequent illness due to lowered immunity, changes to your sleep or eating habits upset stomach, headache, or body aches; feeling defeated, cynical, detached, withdrawing from others; using alcohol, drugs, or food to cope; angry outbursts. Listen if a co-worker or loved one asks you if you're feeling okay, it may be the cue you need to do a self-check. Check out our website listed in the video description for access to a free burnout screener that is linked to helpful resources.

Tip two: determine what you can and cannot control. Talk to your supervisor or manager about ways to combat burnout in the workplace. This might include scheduling more breaks, a protected time for even just a short lunch away from the action, increasing peer support and finding ways to honor the commitment and sacrifices made by staff. Burnout is not just an individual responsibility; even small organizational changes can make a big difference.

Tip three is to find ways to reduce your overall stress. Schedule time for self-care, exercise, mindfulness, and social time weekly. Build the time into your week by setting a calendar alarm if you need a reminder start with five minutes, aim for something that you can accomplish in a short amount of time that brings you joy or peace which may improve your mood. You may find it easy to go over those five minutes the next time. Make time to eat healthy foods and stay hydrated. Try to get seven to eight hours of sleep, exercise 30 minutes and cut back on your tech use daily. These can be challenging when you're feeling overwhelmed but may make a big impact.

Tip 4: Reach out to those closest to you when you need help. If you are in quarantine to protect those you love from COVID-19, consider a regular virtual check-in with your biggest fans: your kids, parents, or best friend. Consider a phone call, a comforting voice can lift your mood and may make you feel more comfortable confiding in someone. If you have a supportive supervisor or co-worker, consider making a weekly lunch date. Building strong ties at work can help relieve stress and get you through the toughest days.

Tip five: end your day with a brief reflection. Ask yourself questions like: what am I most proud of today? Who or what am I most grateful for? Did I remain focused on what matters to me? And if not, what can I do tomorrow to reset my focus? This may be easier with peer support. These days of crisis can feel especially isolating and you may not feel your friends and family will understand what you have encountered during the day and you may find it easier to relate with a peer. Consider arranging with a coworker to walk together to your cars at the end of your shift to ensure you make time for this reflective conversation. If this isn't possible, consider marking a landmark on your drive home from work as a reflection point; some days you may need to stop at this landmark for a moment of meditation to ground you before heading home, but it may just be a way to mark the division between work and life. For more information on how to address burnout during these challenging times, check out our website and remember to stay well at work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website, and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.