Job burnout in your company? How to spot it, how to deal with it.

Internet is buzzing with confessions and complaints of employees describing their symptoms of job burnout. Due to the growing number of urban myths, we've decided to have a look at this issue. Find whether you, your employees or colleagues are also at risk.

The term "job burnout" is usually mentioned in the media in one of two contexts. It either becomes the subject of guide-type articles, which skilfully and hilariously present a handful of fashionable lifehacks. Or it is used as a label to describe the controversial behaviour of CEOs of large companies. Unfortunately, such texts are not only unethical (no serious specialist will diagnose anyone at a distance), but also blur the meaning of the term itself. Furthermore in the contrary to the pictures from colourful guidebooks, job burnout is a serious matter.

That is why we are putting aside the adventures of the Silicon Valley's Golden Boys and presenting reliable information about job burnout.

Job burnout. What it is and what it is not.

Recent studies indicate that job burnout increases the risk of cardiovascular disease as much as obesity, smoking or high level of cholesterol. In addition, people with this condition are at risk of heart attack, coronary heart disease, stroke and even sudden cardiac death. Type II diabetes, male infertility, sleep disorders and musculoskeletal disorders are also more likely to occur.

All this shows what a serious condition a job burnout may be. It should be added, however, that contrary to the commonly available information, not every stressful situation or temporary lack of faith in one's abilities at work means burning out right away. So when should we start worrying?

3 elements of job burnout

According to the definition, burnout is the body's prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stress. According to psychologist Christina Maslach (PhD), the pioneer of job burnout-related research, it consists of three components:

- **Emotional exhaustion:** a sense of constant fatigue and inner emptiness,
- **Depersonalization:** cynicism, lack of enthusiasm, passivity,
- **Downgrading one's own achievements:** lack of productivity, no sense of purpose

Noticing one or more of these symptoms in yourself or your employees should come as a serious warning signal. Maslah wrote in the journal "Burnout Research": "People kind of switch to doing the bare minimum instead of doing their very best". What is the reason behind this kind of behaviour?

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Stress is very often mentioned as the main reason for job burnout. This is a sort of simplification, though. Researchers divide stress into distress and eustress. Only one of them should be avoided. **Eustress** is a positive phenomenon. It gives us energy and motivates us to achieve better results. It is a mechanism with a short-term effect, which makes us feel that we can cope with obstacles. Although we are under pressure, it is not an unpleasant feeling.

The effects of **distress** are different. First of all, we perceive it as something negative, and its effect is long-term. This kind of stress paralyses us, lowers our self-esteem and deprives us of the willingness to act.

However, as Steven Berglas Ph.D. remarks in "Psychology Today", not everyone who experiences distress in their work should immediately go to the Human Resources department and ask for dismissal: "Distress can be relieved with minor adjustments to your work environment". And this is exactly what distinguishes distress from job burnout. **Burnout is about the very essence of your work.** An element that cannot be altered by introducing frugal innovation changes to work organisation or through an honest and assertive conversation with your boss or partners regarding expectations. This is exactly what makes it much easier to prevent job burnout than to treat it. How to do it?
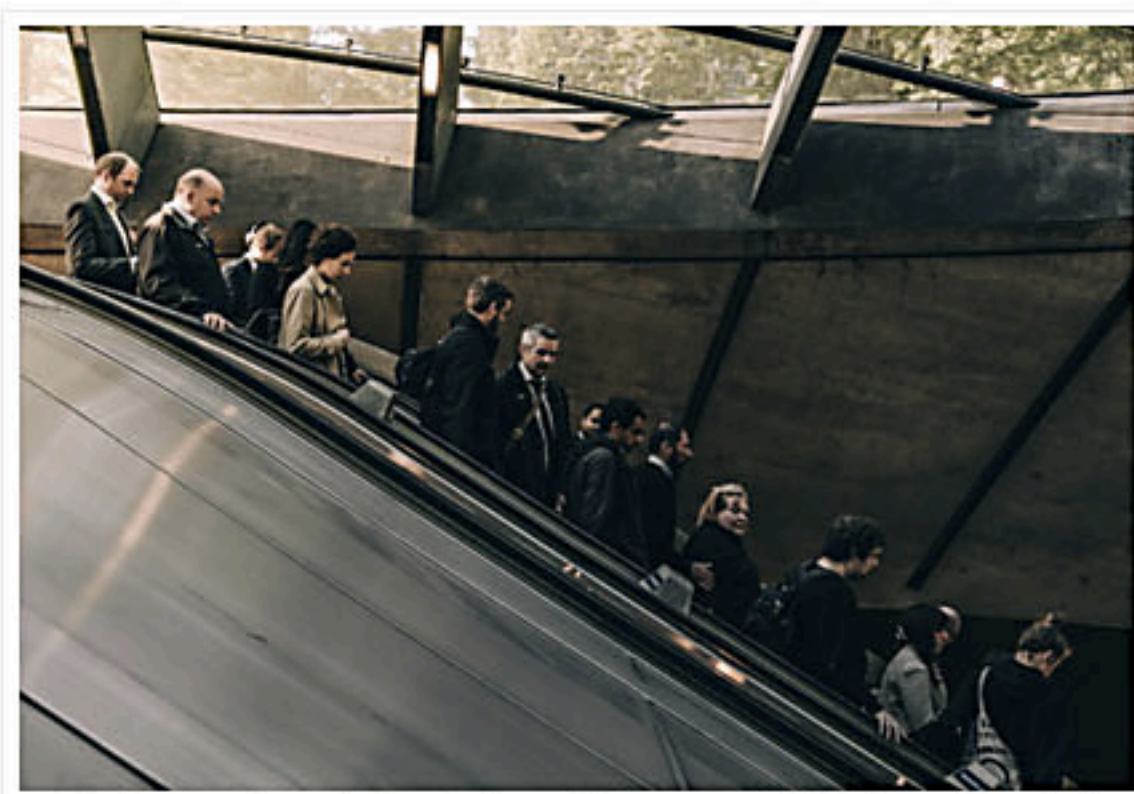
Job burnout is an inclined plane – how to stop it? / photo: Unsplash

Good practices – 6 steps to prevent your job burnout

What should we do to make sure that job burnout won't affect us? According to Julie Radico, PsyD, assistant professor of family and community medicine at Penn State's Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, the most important thing is to listen to your and your team needs: "What works for you may not work for me," said Radico at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention. This does not mean that she didn't provide examples of good practice (which are listed below). However, it is important that everyone adjusts them to their individual needs and carefully observes the changes he is experiencing.

1. **Say "yes" to mindfulness:** You don't have to turn into a Zen master straight away, but it won't hurt you to develop a habit of 10 min. breaks between your daily duties. Devote them to thinking about the good things you have recently encountered. You can also encourage your team to do so.
2. **Change the way you perceive work:** Try to distance yourself from your tasks. Contemplate what you think about them, how you feel about them and what are your needs related to them.
3. **Work out:** Research suggests that both cardio and endurance training are effective in preventing job burnout. The secret? Exercise when you are snowed under with duties and most stressed-out, not when you have time for the gym.
4. **Don't become a recluse:** Don't give up meeting your friends. They are not only a support group which you can share problems with, but they will also tell you if they notice something alarming in your behaviour.
5. **Get involved:** If your job does not provide you with a sense of purpose, find one after hours. Get involved in helping others or local political activities. Be active, not passive.
6. **Get disconnected:** Both mentally and technologically. Find time to turn off your phone, email and forget the worries of everyday life. It works!

Management hints – 3 steps to prevent job burnout in your company

According to "Harvard Business Review", there are some well known, but underestimated steps every responsible manager should take:

1. **Encourage real weekends and holidays.** Burnout happens when people aren't given enough time to disconnect, rest, focus on other aspects of life and recharge. It is important for leaders to create an environment where taking time off is not only allowed but championed!
2. **Expand wellness programs and benefits** – paid family leave, flexible work options and employee assistance programs among them.
3. **Create a culture of recognition** by encouraging people to simply say "thank you" when reports, colleagues and even bosses do their jobs well. According to "HBR", the research shows that companies with high-recognition cultures benefit from less turnover and better performance, probably in part because the environments feel less stressful, or the expressions of gratitude enable people to better cope with the demands they face.