4 Science-Backed Ways to Prevent Burnout

Founding a startup is intense, and can easily lead to burnout if you don’t pay attention to your mental and physical needs.

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A survey from Gallup found that the average American worker puts in 47 hours at the office each week. For startup founders, this number often goes even higher, which can lead to added physical and emotional strain.

While starting a new business can be exciting and invigorating, the initial rush that comes from launching a startup doesn’t last forever. As the stress and everyday responsibilities of running your own business settle in, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed, especially when working long hours.

If you’re not careful, all these factors will contribute to the bane of any entrepreneur’s existence: burnout. Burnout can result in fatigue, irritability and decreased productivity. It can harm your problem-solving and creative thinking abilities. Over time, Mayo Clinic reports that it can even contribute to heart disease and type 2 diabetes, while also increasing the likelihood of substance abuse.

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Even though startup founders have a heavy workload, finding a balance so you can avoid burnout is essential for your long-

term health and success. Thankfully, a few science-backed strategies will help you avoid burnout and get better results.

1. Take a break before you feel burnout symptoms.

Though many famous entrepreneurs tout the value of working anywhere from 60 to 100 hours each week to make their business a success, research has found that this level of overwork will typically have a negative outcome in the long run. This level of chronic overwork makes you far more likely to get burned out – and it may not even help your productivity.

As an article from the Harvard Business Review reports, "In a study of consultants by Erin Reid, a professor at Boston University's Questrom School of Business, managers could not tell the difference between employees who actually worked 80 hours a week and those who just pretended to…Reid was not able to find any evidence that those employees actually accomplished less or any sign that the overworking employees accomplished more."

Overwork doesn't increase productivity. For many, it actually increases the risk of making costly mistakes as they become more and more tired. Allow yourself to take breaks to avoid burnout. Even a short walk can provide meaningful mental relaxation and clarity.

2. Find meaning in your work.

Startup founders should never chase a potential business idea just because it seems like a good money-making opportunity. To continue to be motivated over the long run, you must pursue meaningful ideas that you are truly passionate about.

This became abundantly clear during a recent email conversation with Chris Ferry, founder of Boca Recovery

Centers. He explained, “I found my passion by founding an addiction treatment center because I’ve lived through addiction. I know how harmful it can be. That gives me the drive to keep doing what I do every day because the job has meaning to me. No matter what industry you’re in, finding meaning is what will help you keep going, no matter what.”

Ferry’s sentiments are backed by scientific research. An APA interview with Howard S. Friedman notably connected working in a meaningful career with a longer life. Finding greater meaning in your work ensures that you won’t get burned out, even when stressful situations arise.

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3. Spur creativity by continually learning.

Learning doesn’t stop after you graduate from school. As Adam Sinicki details for The Bioneer, the principle of neuroplasticity means that learning new things in adulthood forces your brain to make new connections. This allows it to come up with more creative solutions, drawing upon learning experiences in one area to address other challenges.

While you can certainly learn new skills that are relevant to your work to improve your neuroplasticity, this doesn’t have to be the case. Improved creative thinking can result from learning to play a musical instrument, cooking a new recipe or even memorizing a poem.

As you continue learning outside of work, your brain will be better equipped to deal with the problems that arise at work. Creative and innovative solutions will keep your thinking fresh so you can avoid the feeling of monotony that often precedes burnout.

4. Prioritize your relationships.

Though some suggest that you need to take a step back from certain relationships to successfully grow your startup, these very same relationships can offer much-needed relief from work-related stress. In fact, the famous 80-year Harvard Study of Adult Development found that “warm relationships” were the biggest predictor for happiness later in life.

It’s not just that hanging out with family or friends allows you to escape the stresses of work. In many cases, having the opportunity to talk about your situation with those who are closest to you will help relieve stress and prevent burnout.

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In other words, making time for warm, loving relationships with friends and family will help you stay happy and avoid getting stressed out. Talking through the issues you are facing with your startup could even help spur new ideas that get you out of a mental rut. Neglecting these relationships because of tough times at work will only cause more trouble for your overall well-being.

Long hours and stressful conditions are a natural part of the startup life. But you don’t have to let them result in burnout. By implementing these strategies, you can sidestep this problematic condition so you can achieve balance and be more productive.

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