

Employees Are Burning Out – and the Culprit Isn't What You Think

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Imagine you're headed home from work, unwinding by listening to your favorite podcast. Your phone chimes with an email from your boss. They want you to revamp a slide deck. Rather than resting, you spend the evening working and come into work the next day fried.

All of us have encountered this kind of microstress – a term I coined with my co-author, Karen Dillon, in our recent book “The Microstress Effect.” Microstressors are small but stressful moments that add up to harm our health, work performance and personal lives. Data suggests that these small negative interactions are up to five times more impactful than positive ones.

Very stressful events trigger our brains' fight-or-flight mode, a response that helps us identify and deal with stress. But microstressors are minor enough that our brains don't always notice them, even as our bodies produce stress hormones like cortisol. Research suggests that microstressors can accumulate in our bodies. Our brains then pick up on the fact that something's wrong, but without always knowing what's responsible for our mood.

Microstress helps explain why employees are so burnt out. As a professor at Babson College who has studied the workplace for decades, I believe every company needs to tackle microstress if it wants to reduce burnout and boost productivity. Here are

three ways you can reduce stress in your organization.

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Reject “toughing it out”

High-performing people are used to toughing it out. Push through the next deadline, convince yourself it will ease off after that and repeat as another deadline emerges. But no one can work at a perpetual sprint without sacrifice. I’ve spoken to some executives who worked their way to exorbitant wealth at the cost of multiple divorces and ruptured relations with their children.

Toughing it out also falsely assumes that working longer and harder means working better. This isn’t always true. My research suggests that we spend up to 85% of our time on collaborative work – from check-ins to project meetings to all-hands and more. We can cut down on that time and boost output by being more intentional and efficient in how we collaborate.

Reject a culture of toughing it out in favor of one that focuses on working smarter. And recognize that burnt-out employees innovate less and are more likely to leave their jobs.

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Identify and target microstress through team interventions

Messages from the top signal organizational priorities. But the best place to address microstress is at the team level.

I recently worked with a group of employees to tackle

microstress. Each Monday, the employees emailed me describing a new microstressor they wanted to focus on that week. Maybe a colleague was asking for too much help on projects. Maybe their boss kept shifting expectations. Maybe family obligations were creating too much pressure. On Fridays, they sent me an update on their progress in tackling that microstressor.

For three weeks, I noticed only incremental movement. But in week four, employees began to see how working to control microstressors could make a big impact in their lives. There are three important lessons from these experiments:

First, awareness of microstress can help us solve it. Employees need examples, a list they can look at and say, “Oh, yeah, I know that feeling!” In my work, we used “The Microstress Effect” app, which catalogs different sources of microstress.

Second, because microstress consists of dozens of small things, don’t try to solve everything at once. Reducing stress shouldn’t cause more stress. Take microstressors one at a time and begin with an easier one – not the most impactful – to build momentum.

Third, microstress should be addressed at the team level. Teammates should be paired up in groups to generate ideas for actions to reduce microstress, as well as to build accountability by updating one another about their progress. This team structure also recognizes that we can be a source of microstress for others and that the only way we can communicate about our stress is in a supportive, open environment.

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Be proactive, set new norms and change culture

Too often, it's easier to absorb microstress than to do something about it. If you've ever shied away from an uncomfortable conversation—even though avoidance led to lingering stress — then you know what it's like. But microstress accumulates in ways that are devastating to our well-being, so it's important to be proactive. One very effective step in tackling microstress is to change the culture to avert stressful moments.

In one exercise I do with companies, we list out collaboration tools in one column, from video chats to instant messaging to email. The second column focuses on the positive ways these tools should be used. In the third column, we brainstorm norms of use we'd like to improve.

Let's take emails for example, one of the most common causes of microstress. Employees often feel like they're drowning in emails that take too long to read and respond to. Moving forward, a team might agree to write emails only in bullet points to prioritize brevity.

Some people might see this as silly. Who has the time to set up systems for how we email one another? When we're in constant firefighting mode, we feel too busy to think of tweaking systems. But not tweaking those systems and changing culture is why we're so busy. A few hours of proactive work now can save hundreds of hours and prevent microstress down the line.

Microstress can harm you, your team and your business. The stressors may seem small, but that doesn't make them any less important. So, reject toughing it out. Encourage teams to identify and target microstress. And then work together to generate new norms and change culture.

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