

# Burning Bright(ly) vs. Burning Out: Staying Mentally and Physically Healthy in Today's Work Environment

BY NATALIE ROONEY

The Great Resignation and the pandemic have created historic labor shortages. Everyone is trying to do more with less, in many cases while still working remotely. How can you avoid burnout? Here are some strategies for you and your team.



**B**urnout is real, and it's taking its toll on America's workforce. Recent data reveals:

- 52 percent of survey respondents reported experiencing burnout in 2021, up from 43 percent in Indeed's pre-COVID survey, and 67 percent say burnout has worsened during the pandemic.
- 77 percent of respondents to a 2021 Deloitte survey say they've experienced burnout at their current job, with more than half noting more than one occurrence.
- 91 percent say the quality of their work has been negatively impacted by having an unmanageable amount of stress or frustration.
- 83 percent say job burnout can negatively affect their personal relationships.
- Nearly 70 percent of professionals feel their employers are not doing enough to prevent or alleviate burnout.
- The average share of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety disorder and/or depressive disorder, has increased dramatically, from 11 percent in January-June 2019 (before the pandemic) to 41 percent in January 2021 (during the pandemic), according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Burnout can have major negative effects on our health and lives, including:

- Excessive stress
- Fatigue

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- Insomnia
- Irritability
- Anger

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

- Sadness
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Weakened immune system

(Source: Mayo Clinic.)

## ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYEES

**Put yourself first.** How do employees balance their career goals with their mental health and well-being? One way is by setting boundaries. “It’s natural to think that setting boundaries could be a detriment to your career, but on the contrary, taking care of ourselves is professional,” says Lisa Hackard, CPA, an audit partner with KPMG LLP. “As CPAs, we have such an important role in the capital markets. When we show the synergies of tending to our health and executing our responsibilities, it sets the

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stage and is grounded within the code of conduct and our professional standards. We don’t talk about it nearly enough, though.”

There are many things employees can do to prioritize their mental health and well-being. Hackard suggests taking time to identify how stress shows up for you personally. “When my stress shows up, I speak more rapidly, my sleep is disrupted, and I skip meals,” says Hackard. She asks those around her to watch for these signs and let her know when they arise so she can refocus on her well-being. Hackard finds relief from early morning outdoor exercise, meal planning, and making sleep a priority. She also makes a point to connect with family and friends, even if it’s via text. “Identify how stress shows up for you, get help from others, and use that as feedback to kick in on your health and well-being habits, allowing you to perform at your best and not burn out,” she advises.

Other suggestions to keep stress at bay and make your physical and mental health a priority:

- **Check in with your coworkers.** “We start every team call with ‘how are you today?’” Hackard says. “It’s an opening to start a conversation, go deeper, and share a little bit more than the standard response of ‘fine’ or ‘good.’” This process of sharing is really role modeling to let others see we all have our challenges and the ways we work through them.”
- **Refresh your understanding of your organization’s resources** including your employee assistance program (EAP) benefits and policies and procedures.
- **Get to know community resources.** Know where to go and practice accessing and using local resources so you’re familiar with them for yourself and can also direct colleagues to these resources if they need help. (See sidebar)

**It’s more than OK to ask for help.** Accounting professionals may feel apprehensive about asking for help, but Hackard reminds us that reaching out is something CPAs already do every day. “If professional standards aren’t clear or we can’t find the resources we need, we ask for help, and we’re good at that,” she says. “We don’t hesitate to ask clients, partners, or colleagues for clarification. We also don’t hesitate to ask for help when it comes to perfecting our golf swing, refreshing our wardrobe, learning a new language, or landscaping our yards. We ask for and benefit from expert help when a subject is less familiar to us. Asking for help with our mental health is no different.”

When it comes to mental health, however, Hackard says historically we didn’t see as many examples of people reaching out. “Now, everyone has an opportunity to be that example by using their employer’s resources or turning to their trusted network. Remember, we know how to do this already!”

Hackard also reminds everyone that your crisis is just that – **your** crisis. Rather than considering if you *need* help, consider if you *could benefit from* help. “Maybe you just want to speak with someone. It can be momentary when you need a resource,” she says. “You can ask for help anytime.” Hackard adds an important point: For mental health issues that are disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act, you should talk to your HR department about accommodations.

## RESOURCES:

### Mental health support and resources:

- Johnson Depression Center
  - [coloradodepressioncenter.org](http://coloradodepressioncenter.org)
- Man Therapy
  - [mantherapy.org](http://mantherapy.org)
- NAMI:
  - [nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf](http://nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf)
- Center for Workplace Mental Health
  - [workplacementalhealth.org/getmedia/fd8a9b98-b491-4666-8f27-2bf59b00e475/Working-Remotely-During-COVID-19-CWMH-Guide](http://workplacementalhealth.org/getmedia/fd8a9b98-b491-4666-8f27-2bf59b00e475/Working-Remotely-During-COVID-19-CWMH-Guide)
- Suicide Crisis Line: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
  - [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- Colorado Crisis Services
  - 1-844-493-TALK (8255)
  - [coloradocrisisservices.org](http://coloradocrisisservices.org)
- Safe2Tell
  - 1-877-542-7233
  - [safe2tell.org](http://safe2tell.org)
- Crisis Text Line
  - Text START to 741-741
  - [crisistextline.org](http://crisistextline.org)

### The Center for Health, Work & Environment, Colorado School of Public Health, CU Anschutz Medical Campus

- [coloradosph.cuanschutz.edu/research-and-practice/centers-programs/chwe](http://coloradosph.cuanschutz.edu/research-and-practice/centers-programs/chwe)
- Health Links™: Putting public health into practice [healthlinkscertified.org](http://healthlinkscertified.org)
- Total Worker Health®: [cdc.gov/niosh/twh/default.html](http://cdc.gov/niosh/twh/default.html)

## ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

David Shapiro is Program Manager for Health Links™, a program created by the Center for Health, Work & Environment (CHWE) at the Colorado School of Public Health on the CU Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora.

In his role, Shapiro talks to companies about their commitment to work safety and well-being and how to enhance that commitment. “We know there’s a connection to health and safety, and when employers focus on safety, people are happier and healthier,” he says. “It’s challenging to provide a safe workspace right now with people working from home.”

**Do a resource check:** What resources are available to employees, and do they continue to be sufficient? You already may have a robust EAP standard, but can you do more? What additional benefits could help? This might be things like offering backup child or eldercare options, evaluating PTO policies, and offering flexible work. Consider establishing employee or business resource groups as a way for employees to come together and discuss challenges and navigate the complexities of life.

“We’ve seen a lot of companies take a deep dive into understanding their mental health benefits,” Shapiro says. Companies are examining whether employees can quickly reach a licensed counselor and whether it’s a covered expense. “We’ve seen real innovation with benefits in the last two years.”

Evaluating resources is important, but it’s critical to make sure the benefits are being used, Shapiro emphasizes. Leaders should reach out to employees in need, demonstrate concern, and share the EAP contact information. Offering their own experience with mental health stress and use of resources provides another way to destigmatize mental health issues. “Have champions in leadership who can speak to the validity of the resources,” he adds.

**Examine your policies and practices:** Little things can make a big difference to relieve stress. At KPMG, calendar invitations are either 25 minutes or 50 minutes long to allow for transition time so people have time to get a drink of water, take a bio break, or check email. Fridays are camera free. Wednesday afternoons are reserved for heads down work time. “These have been fantastic changes,” Hackard says. “Find out what works for your organization.”

**Address safety:** As people are invited back – or are expected to return – to the office, how can you assure them they’re safe? “They’re coming back stressed,” Shapiro says. “Yes, some are eager, but they’re commuting again. It’s stressful.” He suggests talking about things like air circulation and providing masks instead of asking employees to purchase them. “Do your best

to mitigate what we’re all still trying to mitigate in our personal lives – large crowds of people without masks, in the same area. Talk about how you’re putting safety first, and be honest about what is really important right now.”

**Lead by example:** Being an example addresses the behavior side of things, and Hackard says while in theory, it’s the easiest and cheapest thing to do, in reality, changing behavior is challenging. Leaders should talk about the habits the organization has built up for resilience and well-being, and then model that behavior by taking their own PTO, prioritizing their own health and being open about it, and asking for what they need when pressure is building. “People see stress and hear it in our tone,” Hackard says. “If you need more time to review something an employee submitted, say so. If you need someone to step in and speak for you at a presentation, ask for help, and then be comfortable receiving what you need, as well.”

## “It’s important for leaders to create opportunities for conversation and really listen to what employees are saying.”

**Really listen:** Listen to your employees, and get to know them on a personal level. This can be done during the annual performance review or one-on-one meetings. “Check in with team members on their performance but also on their health and well-being,” Shapiro says. “Establish health and well-being goals that aren’t necessarily work related.”

Hackard meets with each of her team members for 15 minutes once a quarter. “There’s no agenda. It’s just a check in on how they’re doing.” Since she began these meetings, she says her team is tighter knit and produces a higher quality work product.

“It’s important for leaders to create opportunities for conversation and really listen to what employees are saying. If employees are being specific, consider what they’re asking. If they’re not being specific, continue to listen, and then ask if there’s something that would be useful,” Hackard says. “Take that feedback and sort out how to respond.”

**Survey:** Surveys are a great way to get a quick read on what’s happening or glean more in-depth information, Shapiro says. Pulse surveys can be as simple as: How are you today? Do you feel safe? Or you

can survey more extensively: Do you feel supported by your supervisor(s)? Does your team care about your health and well-being? “Make that personal connection with people to focus on the health and well-being of your team members,” he suggests. “Not everyone approaches solutions the same way, which is why just telling someone to eat a certain way and exercise doesn’t work. Get to know what’s important to them, and then be willing to make changes—that is the most important part. Be strategic about what you ask. Don’t ask if you can’t deliver.”

**Gather intentionally:** Shapiro points out that a lot of our social connections are made in the workplace. If the expectation is ongoing remote work, how do you continue to care for employees’ mental health and prevent feelings of isolation when you can’t gather around the water cooler or lunch table?

“While some people welcome not having forced socialization, others are missing it,” he says. “Even if you’re fully remote, think about how you can bring people together

for teambuilding to prevent burnout and boost creativity and innovation. Expecting no physical contact is harmful to a number of employees. The socialization piece is important.”

**Help people shine:** Continuing to focus on workers’ safety is really important and includes drilling down on mental health benefits, Shapiro says.

“Tending to both our mental and physical health is fundamental to our professional and personal achievement and being the best accountants we can be,” Hackard says. “As CPAs, we are held in such high regard. Executing our professional standards and prioritizing people as part of that can have a ripple effect in the communities and for the clients we serve.”

Hackard says she envisions a world where we can talk just as easily about our mental health as our physical health. “We’re good learners, but we need to practice. I like to say that if we build up our vocabulary, courage, and confidence on this topic, we’ll be just as well-positioned to talk about mental health as we are about tax codes and accounting standards.” ▲