Dealing with Burnout

BY DOLLY M. KNIGHT, MARIBEL NASH & SCOTT VANDERLIN

Between my boss, co-workers, committees, professional commitments, and my personal life, I’m starting to feel burned out in my job. What tips do you have for getting your work mojo back?

Dolly: Burnout feels like a hot topic in libraries right now. I used to visualize someone with burnout as a loose cannon, irritable and unpredictable, like Howard Beale from the film Network screaming “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” But burnout, I now know, doesn’t have to take the form of outbursts.

Over the past few years, the idea that burnout has specific causes and symptoms has gained recognition in professional circles, with “Burnout Syndrome” recently being designated by the World Health Organization as an official diagnosis. Experiencing stress for prolonged periods is not good for people. It can lead to anger and irritation, yes, but also depression, insomnia, and substance abuse, and it can manifest as physical symptoms such as heart attack and stroke. Being unhappy at work doesn’t just impact your mood; it can kill you.

So, with that in mind, I encourage anyone suffering from work burnout to take a step back and consider the causes. Are you feeling bored or unchallenged? Is your workload unsustainable? Are team members not pulling their weight, or is workplace drama distracting from the job? Naming a problem is the first step to solving it. You might then decide to ask for different assignments, adjust your workload, or mediate issues with your team. You can, in a healthy environment, find new ways to enjoy your work again by addressing the issues that are troubling you.

The attitude that burnout is solely the problem of the person experiencing it is still prevalent. Speaking up, asking for help, or taking time for yourself can be negatively received by toxic managers. Your first priority is always to yourself and your health. Utilize resources such as your
When you can. I force myself not to eat everyone to do it during work! If you have the authority, make time for or meditate, try to find time during work. Finding time outside of work to exercise is very well attended (because, it turns out, lots of people are looking for relief). If you are having trouble thinking back to that time when work was good and identifying the factors that seem to be different in your current circumstances can provide a useful road map back to that place of contentment.

We tend to associate “burnout” with work, but don’t. Cut back on alcohol and caffeine. Sleep more. Exercise more. Eat better. Consider dipping a toe into mindfulness meditation (or prayer, if that is more your speed). These can be difficult changes, but raising your overall level of mental and physical health will undeniably pay dividends in your life, both inside and outside of work, and you may find that while you were busy caring for yourself, the burnout you were experiencing faded away.

Maribel: Dolly provides some great advice on communicating with your team and rearranging your work and workflow. You might find yourself more motivated by simply mixing up your work (try alternating boring tasks with more exciting tasks, or difficult tasks with easier ones). You might also try to find ways to reward yourself when you’ve completed a task, and to appreciate yourself, rather than just moving on to the next thing. In addition to finding ways to make work more bearable, I suggest finding non-work ways to balance your work burnout.

Exercise can be an effective way to blow off some steam. I often start or end the day with a run, and often use that run to ramp myself up to a project that I have to work on, or to talk myself down from an email I just read or a negative interaction I might have had. The endorphins released also physically relieve stress. I end up solving (or at least working through) a lot of issues while I am out on my runs, and I find it much more effective than sitting and worrying or stewing. I also draft a lot of responses to messages in my head while I exercise, and somehow the language always ends up much more diplomatic at the end of a run.

If you’re not into running, yoga and meditation can also be quite calming. Heidi Kuehl, director at the Northern Illinois University College of Law Library, practices yoga and meditation to avoid burnout. In fact, she started a weekly “Yoga in the Library” group that is very well attended (because, it turns out, lots of people are looking for relief from burnout). If you are having trouble finding time outside of work to exercise or meditate, try to find time during work. If you have the authority, make time for everyone to do it during work!

During the day, step away from work when you can. I force myself not to eat lunch at my desk, and instead leave the building every day for some fresh air. I am a member of a nearby art museum and often go there during my lunch hour, for a small break from the daily grind.

If you are experiencing serious burnout, to the point where exercise, mindfulness breaks, and outside lunches are no help, I agree that you should put yourself first and reach out to your employer, EAP, or a mental health professional to avoid further stress and burnout. I wish you all the best.

Scott: I suggest the following exercise: Think back to a time when you felt like your work was more manageable, challenging, enjoyable, or simply devoid of the negative feelings you’re feeling now. What was different? Have your responsibilities changed? Did you have different co-workers? A different boss? Were your hours different? Or is it possible that, while your job hasn’t noticeably changed, there has been a change in the way you perceive your work?

The changes in our lives that tend to stick in our minds are the big, seismic kind that signify the beginnings and ends of life chapters. A big promotion. The birth of a child. In practice, however, it’s often the accumulation of incremental changes over time that can take you from a state of contentment to a place of unease. These are the changes that individually barely register in real time. You put your head down to do your work, content that you know who, why, and where you are, and then the next time you glance up your surroundings don’t look as familiar as they should, and things aren’t where you remember leaving them.

All this is to say that the exercise of thinking back to that time when work was good and identifying the factors like these, it is important to practice self-care.

Even if the particular brand of burnout that you are experiencing manifests most obviously from work-related stresses, remember that the choices you make outside of work play a giant roll in your overall mental and physical health. With that in mind, do the things that you know you should be doing already but don’t. Cut back on alcohol and caffeine. Sleep more. Exercise more. Eat better. Consider dipping a toe into mindfulness meditation (or prayer, if that is more your speed). These can be difficult changes, but raising your overall level of mental and physical health will undeniably pay dividends in your life, both inside and outside of work, and you may find that while you were busy caring for yourself, the burnout you were experiencing faded away.

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