

# **Is Remote Work Fueling Your Burnout? Check the Signs and Symptoms**

By Diane Lennard, Ph.D.

*"Burnout is a syndrome that results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."*

This is how burnout is described in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases. While burnout can occur in any work environment, you'll reach it more quickly if you work remotely.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Work burnout refers to a combination of three telltale symptoms: exhaustion, detachment, and inefficacy.

### **1. Exhaustion**

Exhaustion, or depleted energy, is caused by prolonged and excessive stress. In remote work environments, trying to stay focused and searching for missing or distorted communication cues can be physically and mentally exhausting. To boot, the lack of group support and social connection when people aren't physically around each other can be exhausting.

### **2. Detachment**

Feeling detached and disengaged from your job or feeling negatively (or cynically) about it is a way of coping with chronic stress. This stress could be caused by an unmanageable workload, unfair treatment, unreasonable time pressures, a lack of clarity about your role, poor communication, or insufficient support from teammates, managers, or leaders.

Rather than confront these issues, people often find it safer and easier to distance themselves from work and take on a negative outlook about others, themselves, or their jobs.

### **3. Inefficacy**

Feeling like you're lacking productivity or competence is the result of overwhelming work demands that cause changes in the way you evaluate your job performance. Despite being qualified and competent, you may feel

a sense of inadequacy and a lack of accomplishment. These feelings can snowball and lead to low motivation and morale.

### **How can you identify burnout in yourself and others?**

Each one of these three burnout symptoms describes a uniquely personal experience. To recognize the signs of burnout, engage in self-reflection and ask:

- *Are you exhausted?* Do you feel tired when you wake up and have to face another workday? Do you have little emotional energy left at the end of your workday?
- *Are you feeling detached?* Have you lost some of your passion for your work? Do you find yourself caring less about outcomes at work?
- *Do you feel less efficient or productive?* Are you disappointed in yourself and your work output? Do you experience self-doubt and a sense of failure?

If these questions resonate with you, it's time to extinguish your burnout.

### **How can you stop and prevent remote burnout?**

Dr. Amy Mednick and I have gathered information on strategies for preventing burnout that are supported by scientific research. Here are a few that we explain in more detail in our book *Humanizing the Remote Experience through Leadership and Coaching*.

#### ***Create an end-of-workday ritual***

An effective way to prevent profound exhaustion is to have a deliberate and consistent transition out of your work activities at the end of each day. Creating an end-of-workday ritual—performing the same set of actions at the same time and place, if possible—sends a signal to your brain to mentally disengage from work and begin to re-energize. Over time, your brain will automatically respond to the cues provided by this ritual and will more easily switch out of “work mode” into “rest mode.”

You can choose any set of actions for this ritual, but make sure you perform them at the end of each workday. These actions can be as simple as writing a to-do list, closing all of your browser tabs, or cleaning out your inbox.

#### ***Practice small acts of kindness***

Research suggests that small acts of kindness toward others can decrease feelings of disengagement and prevent detachment. When working remotely, there's a tendency to turn inward and focus on yourself, especially when you feel isolated or alienated. By turning outward and focusing on others in small but meaningful ways, you can regain feelings of connectedness.

You can practice small acts of kindness by acknowledging another person and letting them know you appreciate them, or by complimenting team members on successfully completing a project. Complimenting, praising, or recognizing others increases your feelings of optimism, self-worth, and engagement.

### ***Learn new skills and work with your hands***

Learning new skills during your time off from work is one way to prevent feelings of inefficacy. Using time away from work to take on a new challenge can give you a sense of personal accomplishment and renewed feelings of efficacy. When you bring your attention back to work, you'll feel re-energized and ready to tackle the next challenge.

Any type of manual task or actively working with your hands can also produce these same results. Simply being hands-on provides a sense of accomplishment from achieving a goal and counteracts feelings of failure.

These three science-based strategies for preventing exhaustion, detachment, and feelings of inefficacy can benefit everyone, especially if you're part of a remote team.

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