

We need to talk about burnout

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DevSpace 2019
Huntsville, Ala.

About Me

- I'm a technical lead at DealNews.
 - We are hiring! dealnews.com/jobs
- I've been doing software development somewhat professionally for 20 years.
- In that time I have burned out twice, once in my mid 20s and again in my early 30s.

What is burnout?

- A syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.
- Three key components:
 - Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion.
 - Increased mental distance and cynicism towards your job.
 - Reduced output.

What is burnout?

- Often burnout will co-occur with other mental health issues, often:
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
- It can be difficult for psychiatrists and therapists to differentiate the two.

How Prevalent Is Burnout?

- According to a 2018 Gallup Survey of 7,500 adults...
 - 28% of 22-35 employees reported burnout.
 - 21% of 35+ employees reported burnout.
 - An additional 45% reported having burned out in the past.
- Suggesting that around **75% of employees** have had a burnout episode.

How Prevalent Is Burnout?

- Is it getting worse?
 - We're really not sure. It is being reported more, but this may be because people are willing to talk about it now.
 - Is our modern ultra-connected world making it worse? Can we every truly unplug from work and relax?

The Five Key Factors

- There are five key factors that are likely to lead to burnout:
 - Coworkers feeling that they are treated unfairly.
 - Unmanageable workload.
 - Lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities.
 - Lack of communication and support.
 - Unreasonable time pressure.

We work with machines
but we are not machines.

Content Warning

- This next part may have some potentially uncomfortable parts:
 - Alcohol abuse
 - Suicidal ideation

My Burnouts

What can we do?

As an individual

Stages of Burnout

1. The Compulsion to Prove Oneself
2. Working harder
3. Neglecting needs
4. Displacement of conflicts
5. Revision of values
6. Denial of problems
7. Withdrawal
8. Odd behavior changes
9. Depersonalization
10. Inner emptiness
11. Depression
12. Final burnout

Negative Behaviors

- Staying up late to “fix one more thing.”
- Working on your “vacation.”
- Not unplugging when you leave for the day.
- Compulsively checking email.
- Negatively coping with your stress.
- Putting off enjoyable activities to work.

Indicators of Burnout

- Problems with sleep and general health.
- Lack of enjoyment of your work and hobbies.
- Feelings of anxiety when checking your email or arriving at work.
- Feeling constantly “behind” no matter what you do.
- Feeling dread and resentful towards your work.

Taking Action

- Realize that you may need to seek professional help, and that is ok!
- Take a vacation where you *really* unplug. Leave your laptop at home.
 - Even if it just a day, I promise you, the world will not end if you take a day off.
- Schedule free time!

Taking Action

- At some point you are going to have to address the elephant in the room.
- Tell your manager what is happening.
 - Do you have a relationship with them that would allow you to be honest about this?
 - Is there a path out that doesn't involve you leaving?

As a leader

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What Can We Do?

- Avoid chaos. Create structure.
- Know your coworkers.
- Watch for “red flag” phrases in meetings.
- Watch metrics for unhealthy behavior.
- Help employees burning out to recover.

Leadership

- Developing a burnout-resistant culture starts with the leadership.
- Your goal is to reduce chaos, provide structure and allow people to do great work.
- If leaders are creating chaos, chaos creates burnout. Create structure.
- Structure is not meetings.

Leadership

- Even if you aren't expecting your coworkers to do the things you do, they follow your example:
 - Are you sending emails or messaging late at night?
 - Even if you say "don't reply until tomorrow" people will still feel the need to reply because you're the leader.
 - People don't see you. They see the title.
 - Lead by example.

Leadership

- Foster a culture of open communication and safety in your team
- If a coworker were to come to you and tell you they were feeling burned out, what would you do?
- Unless you have a good reason not to, be flexible to help a coworker.

Red Flag Phrases

- “I can get that done this weekend.”
- “I stayed up late last night to knock that out.”
- “I can’t take time off, there’s too much to do.”
- “I can’t take sick time, I’ll just work from home.”
- “I’m taking vacation, but I might be available if needed.”

Metrics

- Team health metrics should be first-class citizens in healthy companies.
- Metrics are a **tool**. Don't let them become a weapon.

Metrics

- How long does it take to resolve incidents (TTR)
- How often do incidents happen and what hours
- Quantities and times of emails/Slack messages
- Quality of work (number of bugs)
- Quantity, duration and schedule of meetings
- Soft signals, like sick time taken (or not taken)

Metrics

- Is someone making lots of code changes and commits at odd hours?
- Is one person doing vastly more work than others or than they have in the past?
- Has a team had a lot of turnover?
- Has cycle time on new work dramatically increased or decreased?

A Healthy Work Culture

- Having a healthy work culture is a good step in preventing burnout.
- A healthy work culture is a culture that respects coworkers as well as the business.
- It is a recognition that respect goes in both directions and that work is about more than just doing a job for a paycheck.
- Individual achievements are recognized, and mistakes are a chance for the team to learn.

A Healthy Work Culture

- Are postmortems conducted at all, and if they are, are they blameless?
 - Complex systems fail in unexpected ways.
 - Do coworkers feel they can honestly account for accidents?
 - Can teams learn from incidents without feeling blamed for it?
 - Do teams learn or are mistakes repeated?

A Healthy Work Culture

- Are responsibilities clearly communicated to employees? Do you have job descriptions?
- Are employees and teams recognized for their accomplishments?
- Ultimately, would you recommend your best friend join the company? Would you recommend they join your team?

Lines of Communication

- Coworkers should always know that they are doing meaningful work, and how what they are doing helps advance the company.
- People can get burned out when they start to lose identity with what they're doing.
- Teams should be working together. If you're injecting defects, but you're not accountable for resolving them, you're creating chaos.

Limits of Control

- You can do everything right and still have coworkers burn out. Coworkers can do it to themselves.
- You can't control for everything.
- But you **can** do your best to minimize the chances, and have an environment where coworkers feel safe to discuss it with you.

Final Thoughts

- We work with machines but we are not machines.
- Watch yourself for negative behaviors and warning signs of burnout. Know the stages of burnout.
- Create a healthy workplace that is safe for coworkers' mental health.
- Avoid chaos. Create structure.
- Communicate.
- It's okay to ask for help.



The End

Have a kitten!