

BURNOUT

Helping Employees Avoid & Weather the Challenges of Working From Home

By Griffin White



The COVID-19 pandemic forced an estimated 42% of the U.S. labor force to work from home, many without warning or preparation (Bloom, 2020). Workers in a range of industries have learned to adapt to this new normal, attending meetings through videoconferencing, creating virtual workflows and exploring new software to replace physical processes.

However, many employees are experiencing a phenomenon that has been exacerbated by the complexity of working from home during a pandemic: burnout.

Burnout is what happens when employees are exposed to more stress than they have resources to cope with. According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), it is characterized by “feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy.” Signs of burnout include forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating, diminished pride in work, losing sight of goals, and frustration and irritability with coworkers. This can affect life at home as well. Workers suffering from burnout experience difficulty maintaining relationships, being present with loved ones, and enjoying hobbies and time with family. This inability to relax outside of work can result in health effects such as unexplained muscle tension, pain, fatigue and insomnia, as well as increased risk for serious health concerns, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, depression and suicide (Mayo Clinic, 2020; Menon et al., 2020).

Employees are feeling the effects of this occupational phenomenon more strongly due to the shift to working from home. According to a June 2020 survey, 69% of workers reported experiencing burnout symptoms while working from home during COVID-19, an increase over early May, when 51% reported burnout symptoms (Monster, 2020). A survey from Lloyd’s Register (2021) showed that 69% of respondents reported higher levels of work-related stress while working from home; this was attributed to increased workloads and changes to working patterns to meet demands. Are your coworkers making more mistakes than usual, using more negative language than before (“this is impossible”; “I’ll never get this done”), or seeming more irritable and less interested in work? They may be suffering from burnout.

There are many reasons why employees may be experiencing burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article explores a few ways that the pandemic has led to an increase in burnout, and some ways to combat these changes.

Uncertainty

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to live in a state of severe uncertainty. Navigating our changed world involves dealing with concerns about physical and mental health, healthcare access, financial issues, social isolation, schooling and everything in between.

Financial insecurity is at the forefront of these concerns for many. One-quarter of U.S. adults say that they or someone in their household has been laid off or has taken a pay cut (Parker et al., 2020). In light of the pandemic, 81% of workers are concerned about their job security and nearly 80% of employers are concerned about productivity and business success due to the pandemic (Monster, 2020). These concerns and insecurity are affecting the behaviors of workers. Many may feel fearful of future job loss, so workers may be taking on more work than before to prove their worth to the company. Many employees may be taking on extra work from coworkers who have been let go or are absent due to illness or caretaking responsibilities: 32% of employees say that reduced capacity has led to higher stress levels and workload (Lloyd’s Register, 2021). And high expectations from employers, whether perceived or real, can lead to employees getting involved in a perfectionist take on work, which has been shown to lead to burnout (Hill & Curran, 2016).

Employees’ devotion to the extra workload is resulting in long hours, fewer breaks and more stress than workers may have previously encountered. This is one of the signs of burnout: despite all of the extra work, chronic stress prevents workers from being as productive, which often results in incomplete projects and an ever-growing to-do list (Bourg Carter, 2013).

Surveys show that workers are less likely to take time off from work during the pandemic than they have been in the past. According to a May 2020 survey, the majority of workers (59%) find themselves taking less time off than they normally would due to the pandemic and 42% of workers who are still working from home due to the pandemic are not planning to take time off or vacation time (Monster, 2020). Whether because of added pressure at work or concern about infection during travel, workers are not taking time away from work to decompress and spend time with family members. This lack of work/life balance will likely create unsustainable stress in an employee’s life that can lead to burnout.

Kahlilah Guyah, CEO, founder and principal consultant at EHS Compliance Services, shares her insight into the added stress that employees feel as a result of the uncertainty of the pandemic.

“One symptom of burnout is the feeling of lack of accomplishment,” Guyah says. “For a lot of us, we’re home and we can’t focus as much as we might be able to in the office. Some of us who are extroverted (like me) miss the camaraderie and the engagement that happens at work. You miss that virtually,” she adds. “I think our routine is interrupted because we are juggling so many things, and we can feel like we didn’t get as much done as we used to be able to get done,” Guyah says.

This assertion aligns with the May 2020 survey, in which 42% of respondents reported feeling they had not been able to maintain the same level of productivity from home in comparison to the regular workplace setting (Monster, 2020). A Gallup survey (2020) showed that employees who say they often or always have enough time to do all their work are 70% less likely to experience high burnout; those who don’t feel they have enough time are more likely to experience burnout. Guyah notes that many may compare the work they were

able to complete before the pandemic to their current output and realize that they are getting less done than before due to that lack of face-to-face connection, access to necessary tools, and the clash of home life into the work routine.

Employers may encourage vacation time usage by implementing “use it or lose it” policies, where employees are unable to roll over unused days off to the next year. However, a manager can also gently encourage employees to use vacation time, especially if they notice a decrease in productivity, increased cynicism or a stressed worker. “Staycations,” where an employee does not travel but instead stays at home and enjoys time with family and hobbies, is an option to help people avoid infection risk.

Anxiety and stress are a default response to uncertainty. While workers grapple with the loss of normal life, they may feel they have no control over their work or personal lives. The feeling of loss of control, inadequacy and increasingly heavy workload are all burnout risk factors (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Employers must act to ensure that workers are not burning out. “We can’t just go to the workplace and focus on work; we have got to focus on home and work holistically,” says Guyah.

While employers might not be able to assuage fears about financial worries for employees, they can create a supportive environment that helps them to better manage a heavy workload. If employees are unable to finish their work during the workday, then it may be helpful to talk about ways the employer can help. “If there’s too much to do and not enough time, and you are feeling the weight and stress of that, then that might be a conversation that you need to have,” Guyah suggests to workers. She urges employers to be as innovative as employees have had to be to adjust to virtual work. “Maybe it’s not less work per se, maybe it’s just the times that an employee needs to work. To the point of somebody who’s a caretaker, maybe mornings are not great. Maybe they need to shift their hours to start at 10 a.m. versus the start at 8 a.m.” Employers or managers may consider spreading work out to others who have less on their plates, changing due dates to a time that the employee considers more reasonable, or implementing a new technology that might help lift the workload from the overworked employee.

With work being done virtually, employers may forget the small interactions

that help make workers feel connected to their work. Because employees are more likely to feel that their work is inadequate when comparing it to their prepandemic output, it is important for employers to remind employees that their work is appreciated. Guyah says that OSH professionals should train managers and workers about what causes burnout and help by coaching them to recognize and appreciate workers. She says this can be as simple as saying, “I really appreciate that you delivered this project on time, or that you went the extra mile and called this client,” and ‘thanks so much for being here.’ Maybe it’s a gift card so they can get lunch delivered on a day that they’re not working. There are all sorts of innovative things that we can do to show people we appreciate what they do for us,” Guyah says.

Location

Although removed from the risk of contracting COVID-19 from coworkers, working from home can be stressful for employees. Many workers are experiencing personal stressors, such as taking care of older family members and children, with no physical barrier between the workplace and the home. Employees may feel anxious about the ways that video meetings invite coworkers into the personal space of the home, sometimes with messy houses, pets and children, or financial markers visible in the background of calls.

Leslie Hammer, Ph.D., professor at Oregon Institute of Occupational Health Sciences and codirector of Oregon Healthy Workforce Center, points out that while working from home usually gives employees more control over their environments, implementation of a work from home policy during COVID-19 has introduced burnout into the lives of employees.

“Many factors are at play, including age and number of children who are at home needing support with schooling, the help of other adults in the household, and whether or not one has a separate and ergonomically safe place to work,” Hammer says. “Parents have been expected to continue working without missing a beat, which is not realistic and has the potential of leading to high levels of stress and burnout.”

While workers may still be adjusting to this integration of work and home space, employers may be able to help ease the stress felt due to these additional

stressors. The use of virtual backgrounds can allow workers to visually separate their virtual conference calls and the in-person spaces they are in, reducing the concern about children, family, pets and financial markers in the background of calls. Employers may offer flexibility to workers who are juggling e-learning for children during the workday or caretaking for sick members of the household.

Musculoskeletal Disorders

Musculoskeletal disorders affect more than one of every two people in the U.S. age 18 and older, with back and neck pain affecting one in three (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, 2016). Although musculoskeletal disorders are often attributed to repeated movements or bad posture, psychosocial factors have been recognized as risk factors for musculoskeletal pain at work (Macfarlane et al., 2009). One study found that increased levels of burnout over a period of 18 months are associated with an approximately two-fold increased risk of developing musculoskeletal pain (Armon et al., 2010). This connection between the emotional effects of burnout is significant, as many are experiencing mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021). Whether musculoskeletal pain is caused by home office setups or by psychosocial factors, one can exacerbate the other.

According to a U.K. survey, a significant increase in musculoskeletal complaints has occurred during the pandemic (Bevan et al., 2020). More than half of survey respondents reported new aches and pains, especially in the neck (58%), shoulder (56%) and back (55%), compared to their normal physical condition. Terry Ketchum, health, safety and environmental manager at Covestro, discusses the risks that go along with the change in work location.

“Working from home presents some safety challenges, particularly from an ergonomics perspective,” Ketchum says. “We are seeing nontraditional workspaces with a setup unlike in their workspace in the office. Many workers do not have a work chair and adjustable work surfaces, and may be working longer days at these nontraditional spaces.”

Rachel Michael, M.Sc., CPE, CHSP, director of consulting services at Exponent EHF, points out that many organizations were not prepared to fund the full-time-at-home-office. “Cost (which department

is paying), logistics, liability and tax considerations all play into the home office furniture considerations,” Michael says. “Dedicated workspaces, colocating with other activities (such as eating), and sharing workspaces with partners and children was not really considered in our earlier iterations of working from home.”

Michael recommends that organizations put policies in place so that roles and expectations are clearly communicated. “Following a standardized policy will ensure that employees have a consistent experience across the organization,” Michael says. She notes that available equipment may need to be adjusted from a pre-pandemic selection. “Employees who would not have otherwise chosen to incorporate a home office may need more flexibility in furniture options. Dedicating space for certain activities within work may be an option,” she says.

Michael suggests creative solutions that help incorporate home spaces into ergonomic solutions. For example, “If you are participating in a training course for an hour, can that be attended while you are standing at a kitchen bar? Using a television as a screen to participate in meetings may provide an alternative to looking at a laptop. Maybe researching a topic for an hour can be done from the couch but active typing would be a better fit from your home desk,” she suggests.

Workers must be flexible and sensitive to their own needs and feel safe voicing them. “Individuals really need to pay attention to what is and isn’t working for them and reach out for assistance and maybe think a little outside of the box to make things the best fit for their needs and home environment,” Michael says. She recommends that employees ask about available resources, equipment, training and access to ergonomics professionals. Employees may be able to safely remove equipment from the office or, if not, ask if corporate discounts are available through vendor relationships if paid for personally. Many organizations offer competitively priced bundles for employees who are working from home or offer to pass along discounts to individuals. “Prioritize your equipment needs,” Michael says. With these ergonomic interventions, employees can reduce pain caused by both uncomfortable setups and psychosocial factors.

Routine

Working from home has not only changed the way employees work, it has

also removed the daily routine that, despite perhaps being a bit boring, provided comfort and joy throughout the workday. Suddenly, the morning coffee break when workers have a few minutes to catch up and chat is no longer a part of the day. Commutes that, for some, involve walking to and from work or public transportation is replaced with a walk from one room to another. Employees may have replaced a lunch out with coworkers with eating lunch at a desk, removing an opportunity to be social, spend time away from a computer, and movement, possibly outside, during the day. Wake up and sleep times may have moved to account for changes in one’s commute or routines of household members. These changes in routine, while small, can lead to stress (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016).

With the removal of social moments throughout the day such as coffee and watercooler breaks, employees may feel that there is no opportunity to share about their personal lives. The act of talking about one’s problems helps relieve them (Dreher, 2019), and added stressors that might be easy to mention to a fellow coworker while selecting a donut in the shared kitchen are now not spoken about at all, which can lead to a culture of silence. Employees are twice as likely to share a mental health concern with a peer, versus a senior management or human resources (Lloyd’s Register, 2021). Due to the removal from the office, employees are less likely to share these personal struggles at all and staying silent can exacerbate the stress (Cousins, 2018). Those who live alone may feel especially isolated or depressed from a lack of social interaction and may miss the regular routine that involves small interactions throughout the day.

Employers should create opportunities for workers to have conversations that are not just about work. Short coffee break meetings can replace those that employees enjoyed in person. After work social hours, trivia games, stretching and meditation sessions, and other shared activities can add a feeling of connection to teams that are missing in-person interactions.

With these many changes in the ways workers usually interact, OSH professionals recommend increasing communication to team members to help prevent burnout. “Combating the pandemic and the nontraditional work environment requires a team effort to embrace and assess the challenges facing

employees and the business,” Ketchum says. “Organizations need written plans (i.e., business continuity, pandemic, business recovery) and employees trained on them, including drills. Employees need frequent communications from their employer, including two-way dialogue so employees can ask questions on matters relevant to them.”

Ketchum also talks about the importance of mental health support that employees can access themselves. “Employees need support services (e.g., employee assistance programs) to help them better manage the situation and uncertainties,” he says.

The ways that organizations communicate about mental health support are important. “Occupational safety and health professionals are encouraged to collaborate closely with human resources professionals in their companies to ensure communications are empathetic,” says Cal Beyer, CWP, vice president of Workforce Risk and Worker Well-being, Cobb Strecker Dunphy & Zimmermann Inc. “It is important for employers to share resources with employees to help maintain work/life balance, the employee assistance program, and to promote self-care practices for stress management,” Beyer says.

It is vital that workers pay attention to their needs at this time of heightened stress. Sharing information about resources and programs offered for mental health support may give employees relief from the building stress, care during the loss of a loved one, or aid during a crisis.

For many employees, the change to work from home and the lockdown measures in place have made opportunities to exercise rare. Guyah describes her frustration with her ability to exercise during the pandemic. “I used to go to the gym and now it is closed. So now what am I going to do? I didn’t have equipment at my house and by the time I decided that I needed equipment, it was all sold out,” she shares. “So my routine being interrupted added to that feeling of burnout.”

Physical activity is important to both physical and mental well-being. One study shows that the lack of physical activity brought on by restrictions has been found to lead to musculoskeletal pain, especially upper and lower backache (Joseph et al., 2020). Cardiovascular exercise has been found to reduce burnout by increasing mental well-being and decreasing psycho-



logical distress, perceived stress and emotional exhaustion in subjects. Resistance training has been found to be effective in increasing well-being and personal accomplishment and in reducing perceived stress (Bretland & Thorsteinsson, 2015). Mayo Clinic (2020) identifies exercise as a preventive option to reduce burnout risk. However, with the change in routine, many may find themselves taking fewer steps than usual, visiting the gym less, especially in accordance with shutdowns, and as a result, may be more susceptible to burnout risk.

Employers can use incentives to promote worker movement, even at home. As many employees may use exercise trackers or have phones that track steps, employers can create walking competitions, movement challenges or other wellness initiatives. Apps can make it easy to track steps and many offer group leaderboards so that employees can view their team's accomplishments. Employers may use rewards to encourage participation, such as gift cards to virtual fitness classes, homemade meal kits or meditation app subscriptions. Managers can host virtual meetings to lead stretching, breathing or meditation exercises. Employers can also simply encourage workers to take a break from the screen, take their lunch break away from the desk and use that time to have a nourishing meal, take a walk and spend time with family.

Conclusion

Employers can take action to help workers avoid burnout when working from home due to the pandemic. Employees are undertaking more work than before due to financial insecurity and perceived or real pressure of employer expectations. If employees seem overwhelmed or voice concern about completing goals, managers should discuss options to help them with their workloads. It is important to guide employees to seek support, whether through reaching out to coworkers, friends or loved ones, or through an employee assistance program. Explore options for workers to reduce musculoskeletal pain from home office setups and psychosocial stress. Employees have experienced major changes to routines that can disrupt other parts of their lives: sleep, social lives and exercise. To mitigate these upheavals, employers can encourage social hours, increase communications, start exercise challenges and mindfulness routines,

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and promote programs to support employee mental health such as employee assistance programs.

OSH professionals may have a hard time identifying physical safety issues when employees work virtually. However, by focusing on the well-being of employees, OSH professionals can help improve workers' lives from afar.

"A lot of times people focus so much on their career," Guyah says. "Everything is about their career and their job, but life is about so much more than just our careers, so even just shifting our perspective to look at the other areas of our life that we can pour into, whether that's spirituality or religion, our financial investments, our family life, other relationships, our fitness, or things that we enjoy that we can still do," she says. "When there is this feeling that maybe work is not as fulfilling or satisfying, that's only one part of our lives, even though it is a large part of our lives," Guyah says. "We can focus our efforts and our energies on the other parts of our lives that do bring us joy and fulfillment and happiness." **PSJ**

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