

# Harvard Business Review: The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It

by Jennifer Moss

## KEY POINTS TO THIS BOOK REVIEW:

1. Recent survey of Family Physicians (Larry Green Center) found that 71% report all-time high levels of burnout or mental exhaustion
2. Burnout is really an **organizational problem** resulting from **poor Corporate Hygiene** which requires improved leadership and an organizational solution
3. Leaders need to understand and counteract the Six Causes of Burnout, lead with empathy, and be good role models themselves for Healthy Behaviors

For the past decade, we have seen (and many of us have personally experienced) a significant rise in the rate of burnout at work, with many underlying factors. In the Military Healthcare System, we have faced the challenges of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, increasing documentation requirements in our Electronic Health Records, and rapidly increasing progress in medical research and knowledge. Healthcare has been one of the hardest hit professions in terms of burnout, with many of the traits that make excellent physicians also predisposing us to burnout and high rates of suicide.

The World Health Organization has defined Burnout as a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, with three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- Reduced professional efficacy

In response, many companies have resorted to providing employees with programs aimed at empowering **individuals** to improve their own "self-care," but as the author points out, these measures are a "tactic, not a strategy," and they ignore several important truths about the six causes of burnout. Critically, Ms. Moss argues that burnout is not "just" an employee problem, but an **organizational** problem that demands organizational solutions. As leaders, we need to create the conditions in our workplaces that lead to a healthy, happy and high-performing workforce—one that is flourishing, not just surviving.

Ms. Moss describes the Six Causes of Burnout:

1. Workload
2. Perceived Lack of Control
3. Lack of Reward and Recognition
4. Poor Relationships
5. Lack of Fairness
6. Values Mismatch Between the Employee and Organization

The major force behind these six causes is "Poor Corporate Hygiene," which does not really lie with the individual employee. These causes can be averted, if only Leadership starts its prevention strategies further upstream.

The author describes in detail how the six causes contribute to Burnout, and I would like to highlight just a few:

1. Workload: Physicians have inherently long work hours, between their medical education/residency training as well as the burden of frequent on-call duties. Even when physicians have a "40-hour work week" of outpatient clinical care, the additional challenge of following up test results, trying to provide robust primary care in 20-minute time slots, completing EHR documentation and responding to patient phone/email messages often requires over 50 hours per week. Other factors impacting a physician's overall workload include:
  - a. An increasing number of female physicians and dual working couples has increased the amount of family responsibilities that many physicians face
  - b. As military medical officers, we also need time to maintain our own physical fitness, provide leadership for our clinical teams, and model healthy behaviors
  - c. Physicians should stop being "always on":
    - i. We need real mid-day breaks, avoid "lunch meetings"
    - ii. Vacation: completely "off the grid"/no work email monitoring



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- iii. Limited on-call/24-7 availability
  - iv. No work on most weekends?
2. Perceived Lack of Control:
- d. No worker benefits from constant micromanagement
  - e. Physicians would feel more engaged if they have more control of what they work on and who they work with; previous studies have shown that when employees can do the work that they value most for at least 20% of their work, they have much lower rates of burnout
3. Reward and Recognition:
- f. Employees perform their best with consistent recognition, which should come from both their clinical supervisors as well as gratitude from their fellow healthcare team members, for superb patient care or peer support
  - g. One of the best ways that leaders can recognize their team members is by empathetic listening and then IMPLEMENTING their good ideas; Leaders need to do a better job of discovering and sharing Best Practices
4. Poor relationships:
- h. We spend 50% of our waking hours at work, so healthy relations are vital to our mental health. Do we have time to foster strong relationships or are we all too busy and stressed out to form healthy work bonds?
  - i. Having a “best friend at work” and having supportive co-workers are the factors most closely linked to good health

- j. Does the workplace foster collaborative efforts within/between various departments, or is there a competitive drive for scarce resources?

5. Lack of Fairness: A variety of conditions can foster a lack of organizational justice: bias, favoritism, mistreatment by coworker or supervisor, unfair/unequal compensation or corporate policies. These become more significant in workplaces that lack the safety for employees to give honest feedback to the leaders.
6. Values Mismatch between organization and employee: should be established PRIOR to hiring process or during initial interview

All of these factors can be improved or worsened depending on the first line leadership that we experience in our clinical areas. Poor/infrequent communication is a common factor in the six causes.

Ms. Moss offers several insights into strategies that can help and how to measure burnout, to see if we are making any progress. Most importantly, she discusses those leadership skills most needed to help improve our Corporate Hygiene/Culture and thus decrease employee burnout.

The remainder of the book focuses on what we can do as Leaders to decrease burnout in our workplaces. In addition to recognizing and addressing the Six Causes of Burnout, Leaders need to develop empathetic listening skills, learn to “Lead with Curiosity”, and model individual habits that help to decrease the risk of burnout: regular exercise, quality sleep, good personal relationships and the avoidance of excessive work.