



BEAT THE BURN OUT

+ What it is,
why it happens,
and 6 ways
sales leaders
can avoid it.

BURNOUT 101

WHAT IS IT?

Burnout is often used as an umbrella term for generally feeling out of steam at work. Maybe you had a tough month of endless outreach with little reward. Or your creative juices aren't flowing like they used to.

But workers suffering from burnout aren't just burning the candle at both ends. They're suffering from "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed," as the World Health Organization defined it in 2019.

When someone is burned out, they feel:

- physically exhausted
- disengaged from their job
- cynical
- ineffective

Across industries, high burnout rates translate to more absenteeism, lower productivity, and higher turnover.

And it won't be fixed by time off or a spa day.

WHAT ISN'T IT?

"People assume that it is some sort of individual problem or mental illness, and you've got to see who catches it, like a disease, and then figure out, what do you do to help them," said [Christina Maslach, the foremost expert on burnout and Professor of Psychology, Emerita, at the University of Berkeley.](#)



WHAT CAUSES IT?

Pandemic working conditions certainly exacerbated burnout. Social isolation, the strain of toggling back and forth between professional and personal responsibilities, poor technology solutions, and the constant drumbeat of dire news all contributed to feelings of system overload. But most chronic work stressors have nothing to do with the pandemic.

Burnout can be caused by:

- lack of control over your work or schedule
- unrealistic expectations
- insufficient resources to do your job
- low pay and little encouragement
- a demanding boss and toxic work culture

"They're the pebbles in your shoe," Maslach said. "You deal with them all the time and they just begin to erode you and drag you down and make it difficult to the point that you say, 'to hell with it.'"

It's been a tough two years. Zoom exhaustion, late-night Slacking, kids infiltrating client calls, and an apocalyptic news feed have taken their toll on workers. Burnout—a state of vital exhaustion caused by chronic, unrelenting stress usually experienced at work—has become a widespread phenomenon.

Leaders used to look out for burnout as an outlying threat to individual productivity. Now, it's an existential threat to the workforce.

89% of workers who left their jobs in the Great Resignation last year said they felt burned out at work.

—The Cengage Group, 2021

Sales teams are particularly vulnerable. When burned-out reps no longer feel the thrill of the hunt, sales plummet. When leaders don't have energy, they can't fire up the team.

67% of sales reps surveyed in 2019 said they were close to or currently experiencing burnout.

—Uncrushed.com, 2019

But there's good news: burnout is neither permanent nor unavoidable. Sales leaders have the power to spot, mitigate, and avoid it.

Keep reading and we'll show you how to

BEAT THE BURNOUT

“THE RESEARCH SHOWS YOU DON'T JUST FIX THE PEOPLE. YOU FIX THE JOB.”





YOUR BRAIN ON BURNOUT

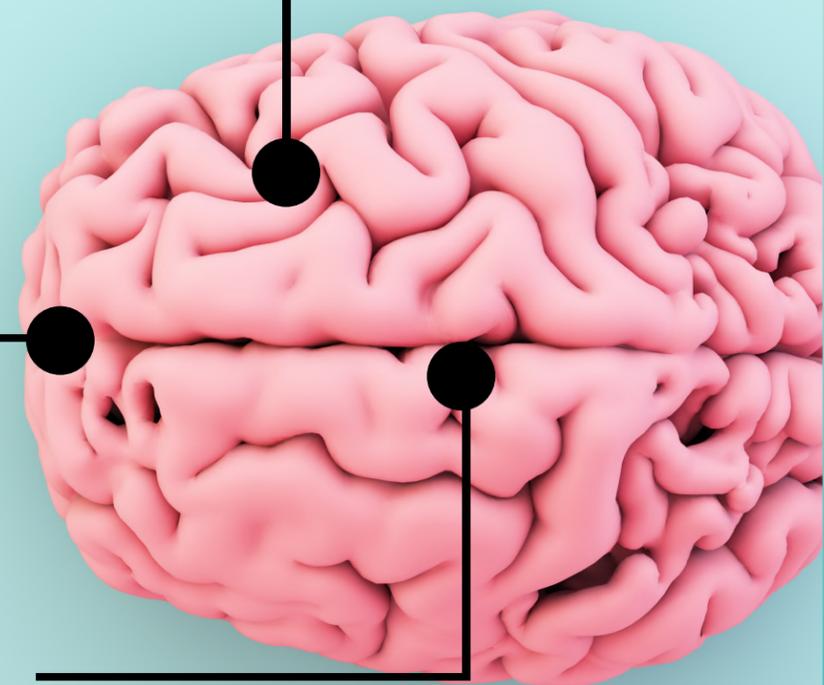
Common complaints from burned-out workers include poor working memory, mood swings, physical exhaustion, and difficulties solving problems, in addition to a generally negative outlook at work.

And for good reason: chronic stress has a documented effect on the brain.

One burned-out IT professional told the Wall Street Journal, "I could not, in my head, divide 50 by 25." Tom Larrow, a 45-year-old manager in Brunswick, Ohio, said, "I had to pull out a calculator and do that very, very basic math because my brain was so fried."

"What stress does is amp up your vigilance system, so there's a lot of cognitive demand on an individual," said [Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, Executive Director of the Wharton Neuroscience Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania](#). "Now, if you think about that being something that people are undergoing for long periods of time, that just puts the whole system out of whack."

In times of acute stress—the kind we experience during an emergency—the brain rewires itself for survival mode. But it can only operate that way for so long. Eventually, our nervous system burns out.



HPA axis:
Releases hormones like cortisol that provide the burst of energy that powers our fight or flight response.

On burnout:
High levels of these hormones over time inflame neurons, disrupt communication between different parts of the brain and trigger weight gain, high blood pressure, and stroke.

Prefrontal cortex:
Controls executive functions like working memory, problem-solving, and mood.

On burnout:
The prefrontal cortex thins, resulting in poor working memory, difficulties solving problems and making decisions, and an inability to control our emotions.

Striatum:
Controls motivation, mood, habit-forming, and reward-based learning

On burnout:
Reward response is blunted, hampering the ability to be motivated and build positive habits.

5 PROFILES OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Maslach's research suggests that only about 10-15% of workers meet all the markers for burnout. 30% qualified as engaged. The rest exist somewhere in between.

ENGAGED
Motivated and productive at work, feels connected to the team and supported by management. Happy to be here and making gains.

DISENGAGED
Increasingly cynical and hostile toward the job, the team, and the company at large. Wants to clock their time, get out, and get paid.

INEFFECTIVE
Working hard but feeling unable to adequately reach job goals and advance professionally. May feel unseen and unappreciated.

OVEREXTENDED
Unable to keep up with the volume of work required because of time or resource constraints. Likely putting in overtime, working weekends, and more.

BURNOUT
All of the above, plus the physical, mental, and emotional effects of prolonged stress, including poor decision making, decreased working memory, and mood swings.

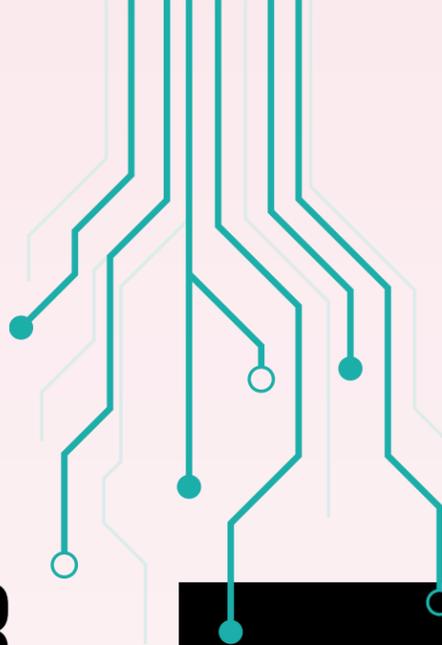


BURNOUT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A DEAL-BREAKER

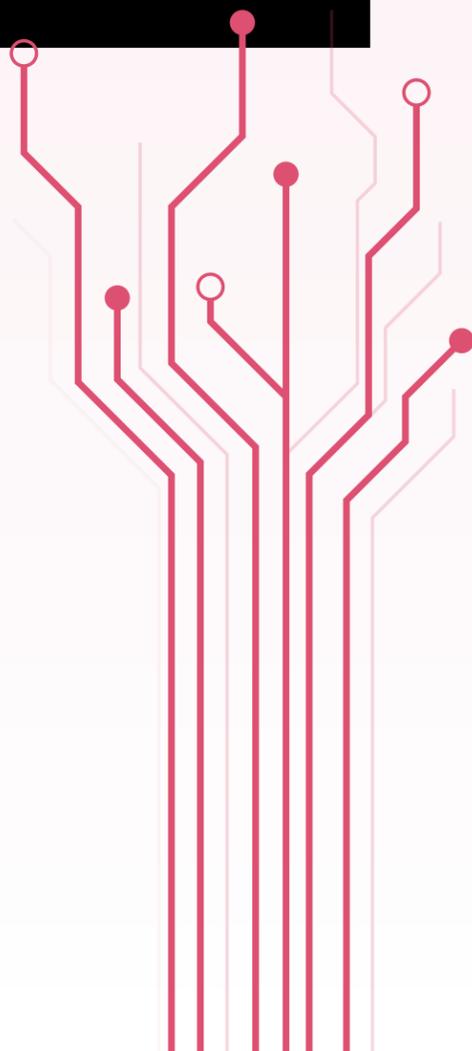
Sales teams run on stress—the good kind. Positive stress, called eustress, is the stress we feel when we're excited, motivated, and tackling matters we feel are within our capabilities.

But even in the best of times, sales teams can fall into the hustle culture trap—excessive hours, performative achievement, and a show-no-weakness approach to team relationships.

In a competitive labor market, sales managers who don't develop sustainable environments for their reps are going to continue to suffer. "A great salesperson right now has unbelievable opportunities laid out at their feet. And if they are in an environment that feels toxic, "that's a dealbreaker," said Sarah Sheehan, President of Bravely, an executive coaching service.



When a sales team is running on positive stress, that energy passes from member to member like each is a component of an electrified circuit.



Here are six ways sales managers can create a sustainable workplace for their teams.

1 Go beyond empathy, practice vulnerability

Expert managers have always emphasized the importance of leading with empathy. Having lived through the past two years, they're going a step further, with vulnerability.

When Sarah Sheehan, President of executive coaching service Bravely, became a new mom, she felt obliged to "wear the mask and show up every day," despite the sleepless nights and chaotic mornings involved in being a new parent.

The pandemic changed that. Under strain and sharing space with our loved ones, many leaders found themselves exposed—and their teams benefitted.

"When I finally took the mask off and ...had to hold my baby on every call, I had to just be very open about how challenging this moment was for me. And in doing that, it allowed everyone else on my team to share similarly back with me."

By acknowledging your own needs, you give your team permission to ask for what they need too.



Sarah Sheehan
President, Bravely



Elaine Mershon
VP of Sales, Adweek

2 Motivate the individual, not just the team

It's all well and good to give your team the inspirational halftime speech at the all-hands meeting, but getting your players to perform requires a more personal touch.

"Bad managers go out with a message to everybody and don't realize - to be a good manager, you have to know what makes each person on the sales team tick," said Elaine Mershon, VP of Sales at Adweek Magazine."

Sheehan agreed. "One person cares about money; the other person cares about recognition. That's the real skill that comes with leadership. The most effective leaders are the ones who look at people as individuals."

Check-ins are about more than checking stats. Take time to get to know each team member by asking about their families, their interests, and in doing so, learn what motivates each one. Build trust by developing a personal relationship and showing that you understand what they value.

3 Don't just advocate self-care, model it

Managers who suggest burned-out employees should cope with self-care are "treating a bullet wound with a band-aid," said Owl Labs CRO Josh Allen. If managers want employees to truly take care of themselves, they have to do so as well.

What does that look like? Don't Slack or send emails out after hours. Take your own vacation time and talk about downtime with your staff. "Many of us have learned where the pendulum settles in the middle and have permission to keep the pendulum in the middle," Allen said.

CrossFit, coaching his daughters' teams and taking them to dance class are all part of his new work/life balance. His employees expect the same.

"If you're a company that doesn't offer that middle ground or the opportunity for somebody to properly integrate their working life, then they're just gonna go somewhere else."

4 Set meaningful and attainable goals



Josh Allen,
CRO, Owl Labs

Burnout doesn't come just from working long hours. When a worker's success is hampered by limited time, resources, or a fundamental misunderstanding of KPIs, it can lead to frustration and discouragement.

Before you set individual goals, make sure each seller has the time, skills, and resources to meet those goals. That may require upgrading technology, providing additional training and coaching, or making sure internal systems are running smoothly.

Second, when tracking performance, make sure the KPIs you're measuring are the right ones. "There's this constant expansion of what a meaningful KPI is," said Allen. Managers who overfocus on how many calls a rep makes each day without diving into what's working or not may be missing the big picture.

The goal is to help them close sales, not hit arbitrary numbers.

5 Set vacations up for success

Motivated salespeople want to sell, so the pressure to be "always-on" may come from within. "Salespeople have a hard time saying 'I'm off,'" said Mershon. "A salesperson will always answer an inbound inquiry."

Good leaders know that they need to set their teams up for sales success, but to ensure sellers are getting enough downtime, they'll need to do more than just approve PTO. Owl Labs, like many companies, have an unlimited PTO policy, but Allen admits salespeople are still reluctant to take time off.

"You almost feel worried about what somebody else is going to think of you if you take them," said Allen. Since the company doesn't roll back quarterly goals to account for time off, it's up to the managers to help them set a game plan.

"What are the things you can do leading up to it? How much pipeline do you need to build before you feel comfortable taking a week off?" Allen said. "It's helping people formulate the plan for how to do it in a way where you don't feel guilty."

6 Foster Community

"I think about my time at Drift and at CarGurus," said Allen. "Those sales floors on any given day were pleasant. There was music playing. There were people on the phone all the time. So if you were having a down day, you had this socialization aspect that could pick you up."

Building community remotely or even on a hybrid basis will be difficult but crucial. "If the community is working well, there's support for each other; there's trust," Maslach said. Coworkers who can come together to solve problems are demonstrating community at work.

To foster community, leaders should encourage positive team dialogue, encouragement between coworkers, and a willingness to help others meet their goals. Cross-functional teams work well in building community because it allows for bridge-building between departments, Allen said.



In Uncrushed's 2019 survey of sales representatives:

74% said they felt pressured to be on call 24/7 for customers or risk damaging the relationship.

55% said their offices were highly politically charged, with 43% using the word "toxic."

58% said there was a stigma around discussing mental health in the office.



SIX DIMENSIONS OF A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

Workload:

Your reps feel challenged by their work and have the skills and resources to do it well. They can finish the job in time to recharge with family, friends, and self-care.

Autonomy:

Your reps have the independence they need to complete tasks, solve problems, and put their own stamp on their work without feeling they are "not doing it right."

Reward:

Your reps are paid fairly, recognized by their leaders and peers for their effort and accomplishments, and congratulated for exceptional work.

Community:

Teammates feel comfortable with each other. They can be themselves at work, communicate freely, and work together on big projects or problem solve.

Fairness:

The rules and policies in a workplace are applied equally across the board without discrimination or favoritism.

Purpose:

The company mission is in line with team members' personal values and they feel fulfilled by the work they do.



"The mantra has been for years now, the job is what it is, and if you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen," Maslach said. But the past two years have shown that to be untrue.

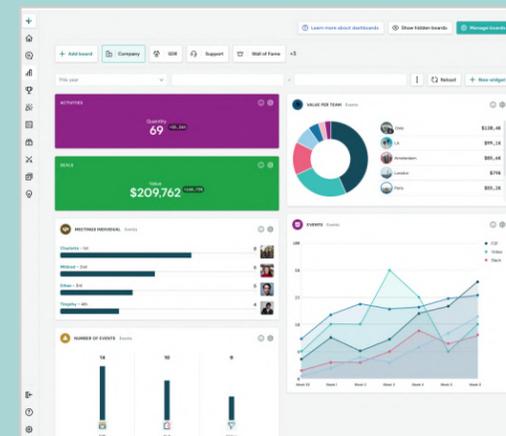
Sales leaders have the power to give their team great flexibility, better rewards, a more manageable workload, and more.



And it's in their best interest to do so: salespeople, like all people, want to excel. They just need the right environment to do it.

"Work can be done in many ways. It could be done in different places," Maslach said. People have realized, "you could redesign things. I could have a better life."

ABOUT SALESSCREEN



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