

Could you spot the signs and symptoms of burn-out?

The pandemic has heightened the pressure facing school leaders and teachers, making burn-out an even more clear and present danger. Wellbeing trainer and author **Ross McWilliam** offers some advice

Burn-out is included in the International Classification of Diseases from the World Health Organisation as an occupational phenomenon and is defined thus: “Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by 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.”

If we have burn-out in the workplace, we may be lacking energy, be exhausted, possess negativity to the workplace (even towards people), and have a reduced ability to perform and achieve results.

So, how do we either avoid burn-out, or respond to it when it appears? It can be difficult, if not impossible, to avoid burn-out if we are not aware we are actually experiencing it. Herein lies perhaps the biggest challenge – being aware when we are approaching and remaining within our burn-out parameters.

Too much “awareness” and we may start to avoid situations (this could result in “rust-out”, sometimes seen in some people who retire), too little and we may start to enter burn-out.

There may be many other reasons why we are unaware, including cultural upbringing: we may see burn-out as something to be fought and beaten – as a weakness, with “resilience” the hero of the day.

Let’s make no mistake: resilience can be a great quality in over-coming challenges, but there is a nefarious caveat to it. We can be “over-resilient” individually, but also collectively within organisations.

So, given that burn-out is probably more likely as a result of the pandemic, and our possible lack of awareness, what can be done proactively and reactively?

“Giving someone the ability to just talk through the problems – without feeling the pressure to ‘fix something’ – is a great safe first step that allows the individual the opportunity to express their feelings without judgement”

Aware of the signs

Being aware of the signs of distress that may lead to burn-out is crucial, both in ourselves and in colleagues. There are many signs that you may or may not be aware of, but the key word is change. For example, changes in eating, sleeping, anger, concentration, memory, irritability, optimism, catastrophising, exercising, avoidance, crying...

All of the above could give us an early “heads-up” that something is not quite right.

If we go back to our original definition of burn-out (disliking of tasks/people and efficacy), burn-out can be manifested in presenteeism – the person being present at work, but not being really “present” on the task.

Once we have noticed the signs, what can we do? Initially, this can be just talking with and (more importantly) listening to a colleague, affording them the time and space to talk through how they are actually feeling. Giving someone the ability to just talk through the problems – without feeling the pressure to “fix something” – is a great safe first step that allows the individual the opportunity to express their feelings without judgement.

Involving your line manager is often the next step and accessing an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

Another step might be to seek out counselling and talking therapies. Education Support also offers telephone counselling and a range of online support. Taking this further you may consider breathing, visualisation and meditative practices – these could have an immediate impact in terms of day-to-day wellbeing. Simply getting outdoors every day, especially in woodland/forests, coupled with a little exercise, is very beneficial to our mental psyche too.

Other simple steps might be to undertake regular burn-out audits. This could be a series of simple questions that give you a temperature gauge of how you are feeling.

Some simple stress hacks from the work of Alia Crum at Stanford University include

- Accept that sometimes you are going to feel sad, angry and upset when dealing with a difficult situation. Link this thought to hope and recovery optimism – i.e. seeing it resolved in the future.
- Stop viewing stress as bad by going to default “freak-out” – focus instead on using your knowledge and experience to solve the challenge directly without avoidance, patiently and calmly.

On a more philosophical note, emotions and circumstances are constantly changing. With change often comes hope. We should always try and generate hope in ourselves and hope in others, as this can often be the catalyst for positive change.

World suicide prevention advocate Kevin Hines jumped from the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge and survived. When asked what would have stopped him jumping that day, his reply was simple: “If someone would have smiled at me that morning.”

My final words revolve around resilience, personal expectations and self-reward. Resilience has a caveat. We should work more to support ourselves and our colleagues rather than extolling the virtues of being super resilient.

And in terms of expectations and rewards it may well serve you well, especially as you transition through work and life, to actually reduce your expectations slightly while at the same time rewarding yourself a little more.

This may seem “wrong” but it is a sure way to keep you on the right side of burn-out. **hu**

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