

The new normal is still here... and burnout is setting in

By [Stephanie Barrett](#)

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Remember the cliché "the new normal" that was thrown around *ad nauseam* during the Covid-19 pandemic? Eventually, it lost its impact, and for the most part, many of us interpreted it to mean something along the lines of hybrid working, accelerated digital transformation and changed behaviour in crowds.



Image source: Andrea Flacquadro from [Pexels](#)

However, the real meaning of the new normal lies in how we have conditioned ourselves to deal with all of those perceived meanings. Let me explain.

During the pandemic, we were always on, glued to devices and blurring the lines between work and home. We put in extra hours and went over and beyond what was asked of us because of the risk of our jobs and livelihoods being irreparably damaged. It was a state of chaos and survival. The "new normal" is best described as the way we have conditioned ourselves to remain in a perpetual state of chaos and survival three years down the line.

Here we are today, in 2023, going about work in the absence of any lockdown or formal pandemic. Businesses are still playing catchup, even taking hybrid working arrangements into account. Things are simply not like they were before.

Increased sense of responsibility

To many of us, the idea of taking "me" time is just too risky. Many of us have convinced ourselves that we must take personal responsibility for keeping every possible ball aloft. Don't misinterpret this: In no way does this imply that it is fine to slack and not be accountable. Rather, it speaks to our shared inability to do what we love, to genuinely turn off on days off, and to unwind and recharge while on leave.

Instead, we use days that may have been set aside during the pandemic to be meeting-free to catch up on meetings. We use the evenings and weekends to catch up on admin. We log on during leave to make sure the team is doing exactly what we need it to be doing, despite the fact that we crossed every possible "t" leading up to the well-deserved break.



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We use free afternoons to deal with home admin or family issues or obligations. We forget what used to fill our cups. We have left our hobbies to the lurch and justify it by telling ourselves that we must perform. Colleagues almost implicitly expect responses at any time and we feel obliged to engage the second our phones light up at our child's sports game on a Saturday morning.

We do more and more of the same because even though there's no pandemic, there is a threat of a recession and socio-economic headwinds, and this puts more pressure on our shoulders to perform, perform, perform. Most businesses are not asking for this, most are not adding this pressure - we are doing it to ourselves. Habits breed beliefs and these beliefs enforce habits.

Silent burnout

This is the new normal, and as a registered counsellor I can tell you that without any shadow of a doubt, we are dealing with the effects of this state of chaos. People spoke openly about burnout during the pandemic, but it is silently happening now. It's as if we did not have the time, nor the foresight, to manage the transition back to a non-pandemic lifestyle. We are actively participating in our own post-traumatic stress.

At a time when boundaries should be stronger than before, they're at their weakest. And, as we manage the professional world knowing we must hold it together, it is those closest to us that pay the price: spouses, children and friends.

Burnout is not a cop-out for a free day off, it is a very real condition that not only threatens the health of men and women but also the performance and competitiveness of teams and businesses.



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Ask yourself, when did you genuinely decompress, or destress? It is becoming more difficult than ever before as adrenal fatigue, from a perpetual state of arousal, has changed who we are. It is crucial for businesses and people managers to look out for the signs of burnout.

Look for the signs

What are the main signs? A change in behaviour is the most obvious - has a quiet person suddenly become loud and obnoxious? Has a bubbly extrovert become withdrawn and quiet? Has someone withdrawn from participation - both at work and in their personal lives?

If we look inward, the signs of burnout will show up as being constantly tired, quitting hobbies or exercise, or doing the opposite and over-exercising to the point of causing self-harm. It may show up as recurring stomach ailments, flu and headaches. Weight fluctuations occur as a result of changing eating habits and hormonal changes caused by a perpetual state of anxiety and stress. Some people turn to alcohol, others to drugs, either prescription or illicit.

It is important to implement changes to prevent yourself from falling into total burnout. We have the tools at our disposal, and people managers, husbands, wives and friends would do well to encourage their staff and loved ones to make use of these tools.



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Saying 'no'

The most difficult step is learning to say no. This is not easy because part of the new normal is an increased tendency to want to please people. Take the time to learn how to do nothing again. If you have an afternoon off, learn to be content just being by yourself - there is no need to feel guilt.

Rediscover what fills your cup, what makes you happy. Do you enjoy horse riding, music, art or cycling? Start doing it again and start learning to appreciate the feeling of being present. Perhaps you'll find that meditation helps. Do what it takes to bring yourself back to your body, to be grounded in the moment. And that's not just okay, it is crucial.

Walk in the garden, feel the sun. Leave your desk to eat. Schedule an afternoon with no meetings. Breathe. And most importantly, appreciate what is in your control and what is not. Focus on what you can control, and do your best, and learn to let go of the rest.

People are our biggest assets - both at work and at home. The outcome of a healthy mental and emotional state could well be life changing. It will no doubt improve quality of life and personal relationships, and it will also make for happier teams and more engaged and productive staff.

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