

EDITOR'S PICKS, HOW TO JULY 18, 2017

HOW TO PREVENT BURNOUT BEFORE IT STRIKES

BY BRYNA HOWES

Can't quite keep your head up?



Whether it's because of our attachment to smartphones, a lack of quality sleep, or just the general stress that comes from living in a 24/7 world, the threat of burnout is becoming increasingly real for many of us. Even worse, most of us believe there isn't a fix in sight. But it doesn't have to be that way, and it shouldn't. The six small tweaks ahead can help you promote balance and prevent burnout.

1. Improve your sleep hygiene

A study undertaken by the University of Surrey in 2012 found getting fewer than six hours of sleep a night for just a single week resulted in changes to more than 700 genes. Following these findings, Colin Smith, PhD, a professor at the university, told the BBC: "Clearly sleep is critical to rebuilding the body and maintaining a functional state." So, how can *you* improve your sleep hygiene and therefore maintain an operational state? We all know we should be getting 7-8 hours' sleep per night. To do this, go to bed and wake up at roughly the same time each day; avoid food and stimulants for at least four hours before bedtime; shut off electronic devices one hour before bed; and make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark and cool.

2. Empathise with other people

When you're stressed or worn out, it's easy to take on a "woe is me" attitude. Surprisingly, though, adopting a different stance – empathising with other people's needs and points of view – may help you when the going gets tough. Research undertaken by Annie McKee and Kandi Wiens at the University of Pennsylvania discovered that not only does expressing empathy help you stop fixating on yourself, but it also has a physiological effect. Engaging your compassionate side awakens the (good) parasympathetic nervous system, while reversing the consequences of the stress response brought on by the (bad) sympathetic nervous system. It's a win-win for everyone, essentially. You get to do some good while also feeling good.

3. Nourish your creativity

One of the more common signs of burnout is a lack of motivation and zeal. You may start to notice it is harder to focus on work the way you once could. Fear not. There's an answer, and a fun one at that. Sam Clarke, PhD, a clinical psychologist, recommends giving time and attention to areas of your life that are important to you, such as your hobbies. You could pick up an old hobby, one that you have let fall by the wayside. Or you could try something entirely new such as photography or learning to code. "Block out some time in [your] week for these aspects of your life," says Clarke, "[Hobbies] can be hugely restorative and help us come back to work fresh."

4. Employ stress-management techniques

Being told to "take a deep breath" when you're feeling stressed can be irritating. But it turns out there's more to the saying than meets the eye. In fact, a team of researchers at Stanford University, led by Mark Krasnow, have discovered that employing deep breathing can calm our minds, and thus the state of our minds. In the long term, you may want to take up yoga or meditation. In the short term, practising deep breathing – that is, breathing in through the nose, then slowly out through the mouth – even for just a few minutes each day, can have a meaningful impact on your stress and anxiety levels, according to Krasnow.

5. Catch up with friends

Strong social relationships can have a positive impact on your mental and physical health, according to research compiled and studied by Debra Umberson and Jennifer Karas Montez at the University of Texas in 2009. That probably comes as no surprise. The problem is that for many of us, social interaction is one of the first things we sacrifice when we're tired or busy. If you want to stay on track, health-wise, it's time to put a stop to that. Not only can social support reduce the impact of stress, but it can also help foster a sense of purpose in your life. In summary, even if it feels as though you don't have a minute to spare, you should try to find the time to head out to brunch with your friends.

6. Forgo perfectionism

Calling all perfectionists: It might be time to apply the "work smarter, not harder" rule to your life. While it might be in your nature to hone every detail, you're not doing yourself any favours. A study conducted in 2015 by Andrew P. Hill (of York St John University) and Thomas Curran (of the University of Bath) found that perfectionism is closely associated with burnout. Scarier still, the findings discovered the relationship between perfectionism and burnout is particularly strong in employment settings. If you find yourself struggling with this problem, Dr. Hill suggests "setting realistic goals [and] accepting failure as a learning opportunity."
