

4. MINIMISING STAFF BURNOUT

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The concept of burnout originated in the writings of the psychologist Freudenberg. He first coined the term burnout to characterize a malady experienced by human service professionals who appear to wear out or reach a stage where they are no longer able to perform their tasks effectively and sometimes even to care about their clients.

Burnout is a physical mental and emotional response to constant levels of high stress; it produces a feeling of hopelessness, powerlessness cynicism resentment and failure—as well as stagnation and reduced productivity. These stress reactions can result in levels of depression or unhappiness that eventually threaten the job relationships and health of the staff.

Burnout is associated with situations in which a person feels

- Overworked
- Underappreciated
- Confused about expectations and priorities
- Concerned about job securities
- Over committed with responsibilities
- Resentful about duties that are not commensurate with pay

Under prolonged conditions of chronic stress the body begins the downward progression to burnout. When specific

psychological responses interact with body's natural physical response to stress, burnout occurs.

Some people experiencing burnout will feel as if their jobs are no longer interesting or enjoyable. They become indecisive their productivity drops and their work deteriorates.

They may not even be doing a good job but perform tasks by rote. These people feel bored and put upon they may dread going to work in the morning and they may feel envious of others who are happy with their work.

Others who see their jobs as intense highly demanding and stressful might try to push themselves even harder once they feel the effects of burnout. They will try to balance numerous roles multi-tasks and respond to a variety of changing and challenging situations often at the expense of their well being.

Since burnout is not an overnight occurrence, it is important to recognize its early signs and to act before the problem becomes revenue. In a chronic state of stress, the body will begin to show the following physical signs of stress overload.

- Psychosomatic illness
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- High Blood Pressure
- Heart attacks

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- Teeth grinding fatigue

Knowing the signs of unmanaged stress and burnout can help reduce the risk of burnout. Identifying the causes of stress, recognizing the limited control of any given situation and taking care of on self emotionally and physically one can to avoid burnout. Given below are some strategies aimed at reducing burnout

- a) Organizational strategies
- b) Strategies to improve personal coping mechanism.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

These are targeted towards the larger work environment the key point here is to increase real control and participation.

1. Using staff meetings more effectively to encourage participation and input. This will result in decision making, less role conflict, less emotional strain and greater job satisfaction.

2. Develop autonomous work groups:

This strategy can be attempted by shifting responsibility and control to work teams, and away from the supervisor.

3. Increasing the skill levels:

Healthy work is skillful work. It allows for the ongoing development of new skills and the opportunity to use them.

1. Use of career ladders to reward skill development.
2. Use of job rotation to expand skill development.
3. Use of job redesign to increase range of skills needed
4. Healthy uses of computers for skill development.

5. Increasing Levels of social support:

Key components to social support in the workplace are supervisory support and coworker support. Possible workplace strategies are:

1. Training in proactive supervision
2. Training in conflict resolution and team building
3. Appropriate use of staff retreats.
4. Changes that improve physical working conditions:

There is extensive evidence those poor physical working conditions contribute not only to physical hazards but stress levels as well. Possible workplace strategies are:

1. Improving indoor air quality
2. Reducing levels of physical hazards such as noise, toxins and chemicals.
3. Reducing repetitive work.
4. Healthy use of technology
- a) Healthy use of computers:

More and more of the working time is spent in front of computers. While they can be of a tremendous help, they can increase stress levels if the computer work is poorly designed. Cumulative trauma disorders can be a particular physical hazard of increased computer use.

- b) Staff involvement in choosing new equipment:

This is common sense strategy that is often overlooked. Allowing the end users to be able to make informed choices about the type of equipment to be purchased for their laboratory. This can have both job satisfaction and productivity.

7. Changes that provide for job security and

career development:

Possible workplace strategies are extension of career ladders and expansion of responsibilities and tasks.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PERSONAL COPING MECHANISM:

1. Improving the diet of the worker:

A nutritionist be called up in the institution at least once a month. The staff be encouraged to keep diet diaries every month. They should be offered nutrition foods in the institution at subsidized rate, and form a healthy snacks club.

2. Encouraging the staff to exercise:

A walking club for staff members be started at lunch time and to look for group discount in local health club. A fitness room for staff with exercise equipments be provided in every organization

A behavioral counselor to be provided in every organization and there should be weekly interactions. Such sessions will encourage the staff members to give up smoking, improve their diet and increase their exercise level.

3. Stress management consultant:

Every organization should hire a stress management consultant and arrange workshop at least twice a year. The consultant will train the staff on how to relax their major muscle groups. This strategy will cut out the stress cycle short. The consultant can even intensively train a small group of staff who would then become the in house trainer. These techniques can be performed in just a few minutes on the job or during free period.

4. Employee assistance program:

An employee assistance program should be included in the calendar and a competent cognitive psychologist be called in for giving one day training to all the staff at least once

in a year. He should use the strategy called thought-stopping. It is known that negative thoughts can increase anxiety and stress, psychologists have learned to train individuals to literally stop these thoughts before they become too repetitive. This technique can be very useful for people who have serious problem with anxiety of depression.

5. Organization of discussion group on healthy stress reducers;

The idea is to get staff to share effective strategies with each other. It does not need any external resource. A meeting can be called where people share the stress reducers that work for them. A handout can be prepared ahead of time that reviews examples of healthy coping mechanisms. This will help to structure the discussion and provide an opportunity for some additional training. An added benefit of this approach is that it also provides a mechanism for giving social support to the staff.

6. Transition time:

Many staff leave their jobs to return to stressful conditions at home. They may have families to take care of meals to cook or older parents to look after. It can take a good 20 to 30 minutes for the body to return to baseline after experiencing a stressor. If the staff member walks into his door stressed out and then has to deal with a difficult situation at home, his chances of having long term health consequences decrease. However the work place is not responsible for solving the domestic problems of staff. But it is in the interest of an organization to have the healthiest possible staff. Transition time can be useful technique in short circuiting the stress response at home. The basic idea is to train staff to find a way to relax for 20 to 30 minutes before assuming family responsibilities; this will allow the body's autonomic responses like heart-rate, blood pressure to return to baseline.

7. Training in substance abuse awareness:

Individuals who are under a great deal of stress begin to self medicate themselves in order to feel better. They may drink more, take more prescription medication. Every organization has individuals who may already have serious problems in this regard. Such staff members need professional help. Substance abuse awareness can be best used as preventive measure.

There are many resources available in the community for substance abuse awareness training. There are many human service agencies available who are willing to do this kind of outreach free of cost. Every organization should have well qualified counselors who could be an important resource to the staff or can establish his own employee assistance program.

8. Training on family dynamics and parenting skills:

It is found that as stress increases so do family problems. It is very easy for angry and frustrated employee to take stress out on their families, even healthy supportive families can go through some rough time. The services of any human service agency can be used to provide the staff with training on family dynamics dealing with ageing parents and parenting skills. It is surprising easy to initiate an intervention strategy that results in a deterioration of the quality of working life. One common problem is spending considerable effort in identifying stressors on the job and that not addressing them in a serious way. Or designing an intervention of insufficient intensity or duration. Or making changes that have the net effect of making employees feel more overwhelmed and confused than before. Or implementing changes that undermine the

existing collective bargaining process. Change for the sake of change is not the goal of stress reduction program.

One of the effective ways to avoid these negative outcomes is to design an assessment mechanism eg, a survey, medical record reviews etc, that will accurately measure key aspects of the work environments and stress symptoms before, during and after the efforts of the organizer. If these assessments tell that levels of support are increasing, that is an excellent indication that the training program is having the desired effect. If on the other hand, levels perceived start to decline one might want to reevaluate the structure of a work organization change.

Since this approach focuses on reducing occupational stress and strain, any assessment will include the following:

- Has the social support increased?
- Have job demands decreased?
- Have the staffs sense of autonomy and control increased?
- Have job satisfaction increased?
- Have skill levels and use of skills increased?
- Have the physical or psychological stress symptoms decreased?

A positively charged finding on any of these measures is an encouraging affirmation of healthy organizational change.

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