

Burnout

What people leaders need to know



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Understanding burnout, how to spot it, and what to do about it is now an essential leadership skill.

People leaders are often under pressure to balance performance, change, customer demands, budgets and team wellbeing. At the same time, many employees are reporting higher levels of stress, uncertainty and fatigue.⁵ Understanding burnout, how to spot it, and what to do about it is now an essential leadership skill.

Burnout is not simply having a bad week at work or feeling tired after a busy period. It develops over time and can have serious consequences for individuals, teams and organisations if it is not recognised and addressed early.²

Jane Anderson, Clinical Lead, Raise

Raise is a New Zealand workplace mental health and employee assistance provider operated by Southern Cross Wellness Partners.

What is burnout?

The World Health Organization defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

Burnout is not classified as a medical condition or diagnosis. It is an occupational phenomenon, which means it refers specifically to the work context.¹ However, a person's wider wellbeing, health and personal circumstances can influence how workplace stress is experienced and managed.

Burnout is typically characterised by three key elements:¹

- Physical and emotional exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from work, or feelings of cynicism and negativity about work
- Reduced professional effectiveness and performance

Unlike everyday stress, burnout tends to develop gradually. A person may continue functioning for weeks or months while becoming increasingly drained, disengaged and overwhelmed. By the time burnout becomes obvious, it can be difficult for the individual to recognise what's happening and even harder to recover without support.

Burnout is specifically linked to work, and it can affect people in any role. Personal circumstances can also affect a person's capacity to cope, and burnout risk may increase when workplace pressures and personal concerns overlap. Burnout is influenced by workload, systems and organisational factors. It should not be framed as personal weakness, poor resilience or a lack of commitment.



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What causes burnout?

There is rarely a single cause. Burnout usually develops from a combination of factors that persist over time.

Research and guidance from occupational wellbeing experts consistently point to several common contributors:

Burnout can occur in any role where work demands remain high and recovery, support, control or clarity are insufficient. In caring, crisis, clinical or support roles, risk may also increase when people are regularly exposed to distress, trauma, grief or uncertainty, particularly where there is high emotional labour, limited recovery time between difficult interactions, limited debriefing, or pressure to “push through”.³

High workloads and sustained pressure

A key contributor to burnout is a workload that consistently exceeds a person’s capacity, particularly when there is little opportunity for rest, recovery or recharge.

Unclear roles and changing priorities

People cope better when they understand what success looks like. Unclear expectations, conflicting demands and constantly shifting priorities can create ongoing stress and frustration.

Lack of control

When employees feel they have little influence over decisions affecting their work, priorities, schedules or workload, they can become disengaged and overwhelmed.

Low support and poor workplace relationships

Supportive managers, trusted colleagues and positive workplace relationships help protect against burnout. The opposite can increase risk significantly.

Poorly managed change

Periods of organisational change, restructuring, uncertainty or disruption can increase pressure and create emotional strain if not managed well.

Workplace conflict, bullying or exclusion

People are more likely to experience burnout when they feel excluded, undervalued, unsafe, unsupported or exposed to ongoing conflict.

Lack of recovery

Burnout develops when stress is ongoing and recovery is insufficient. People need opportunities to switch off, recharge and replenish their physical, emotional and mental energy.

What are the warning signs?

Burnout rarely appears overnight. There are usually warning signs that emerge during the progression from manageable stress to chronic stress and eventually burnout.³

Use the signs below as a pattern checklist. One or two signs may not mean someone is experiencing burnout, but repeated or worsening changes across emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioural or performance areas should prompt an early check-in.

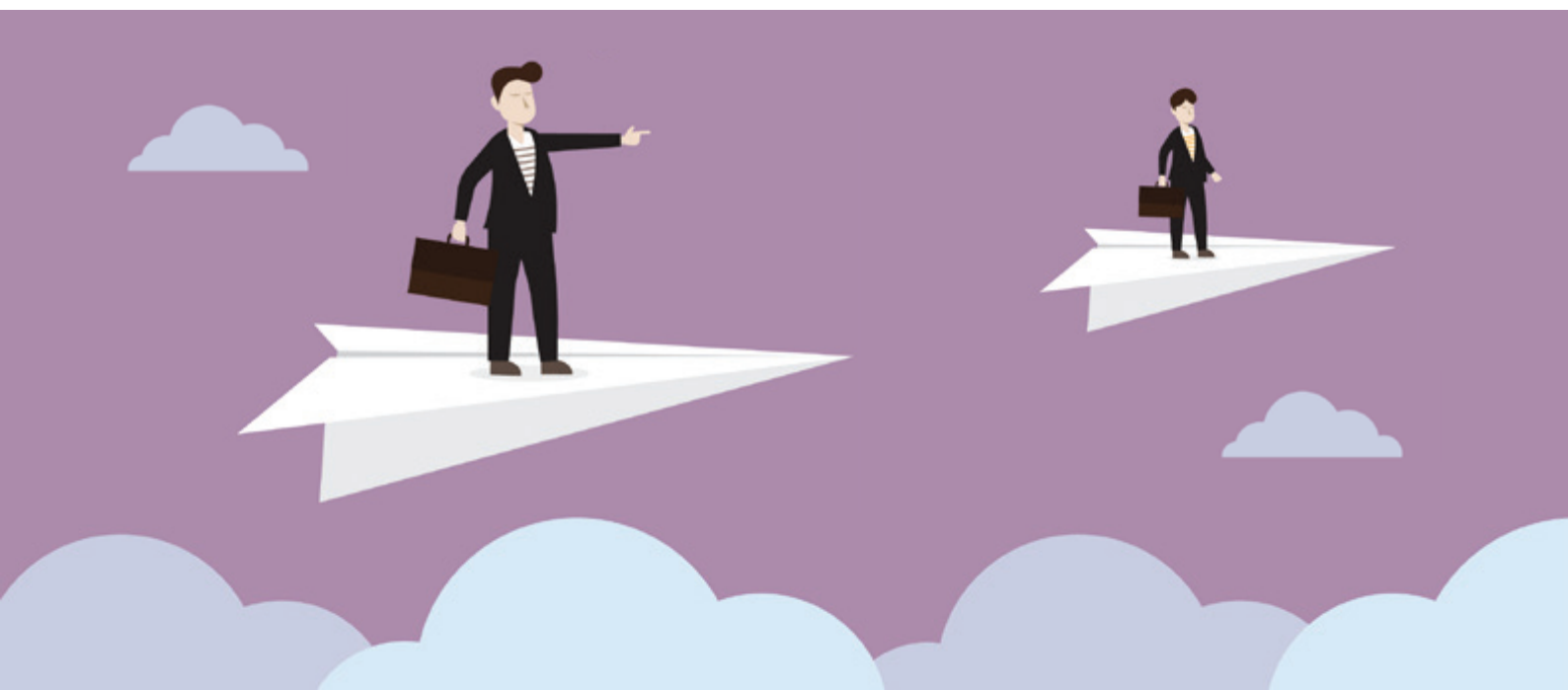
People leaders should watch for changes in both behaviour and performance.

Emotional and psychological signs

- Increased cynicism or negativity
- Loss of enthusiasm for work
- Hopelessness or pessimism
- Feeling that nothing is changing or improving
- Reduced motivation
- Increased irritability or frustration
- Feeling numb, detached, overwhelmed or less able to access empathy
- Withdrawal from colleagues or team activities

Physical signs

- Persistent fatigue
- Feeling exhausted even after sleep
- Headaches
- Stomach issues or digestive problems
- Changes in sleep patterns
- More frequent illness
- Low energy throughout the day



Behavioural signs

- Finding it difficult to start work
- Procrastination
- Increased use of alcohol or other coping behaviours
- Reduced engagement in meetings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty switching off, overworking, or avoiding particular calls, topics or tasks

Workplace performance signs

- Missed deadlines
- More mistakes than usual
- Reduced quality of work
- Poorer decision-making
- Difficulty prioritising
- Loss of confidence
- Reduced productivity

Importantly, leaders should focus on noticing changes from an individual's normal behaviour rather than looking for a single symptom. Often the pattern is more revealing than any one sign.

Because these signs can also be associated with other physical or mental health concerns, leaders should avoid labelling burnout. Instead, notice changes, check in early, and encourage the person to seek appropriate appropriate medical or mental health support if symptoms are ongoing, worsening or affecting daily functioning.

Burnout symptoms can overlap with depression, anxiety, stress-related conditions or physical health concerns, so professional advice is important where symptoms are persistent, severe, unclear or affecting safety and functioning.



People leaders should watch for changes in both behaviour and performance.

What can leaders do to reduce burnout risk and support early action?

In some roles, burnout risk may be higher because of sustained workload, complexity, competing demands, emotional demands, limited control or insufficient recovery. Prevention may not always be fully possible, especially when work and personal pressures overlap, so leaders should focus on reducing avoidable risks, recognising early warning signs and helping people access support as soon as concerns emerge.³

As a leader, you cannot remove every source of work or life pressure that may affect a person's capacity. The goal is to make work as sustainable as possible by balancing demands with support, clarity, realistic workload planning, recovery and early intervention.

Create a culture of regular check-ins

Normalise conversations about wellbeing.

Regular one-to-ones should include more than task updates. Ask simple questions such as:

- How are you feeling about your workload?
- What's working well right now?
- What's creating pressure?
- What support would be helpful?

These conversations help identify issues before they become serious.

In higher-risk roles or periods of high personal or workplace pressure, check-ins should include explicit permission to talk about the impact of the work, not just workload volume. This can help normalise early support-seeking before a person reaches crisis point.

Helpful prompts include: "What is the impact of the work on you at the moment?", "What helps you reset after difficult interactions?", and "At what point would you know you need extra support?"

Provide clarity

People perform better when they understand:

- What is expected of them
- What success looks like
- Which priorities matter most
- Where to focus their energy

When workloads are high, help employees prioritise rather than simply adding more work.

Help people manage workload

Review whether workload is realistic and achievable.

Leaders should regularly ask:

- Are priorities clear?
- Is the workload sustainable?
- Does this person have the skills and resources they need?
- What can be delayed, delegated or stopped?

Create connection and belonging

Strong social connection acts as a protective factor against burnout.

Foster opportunities for people to connect, collaborate and support one another, particularly during periods of change or increased pressure.

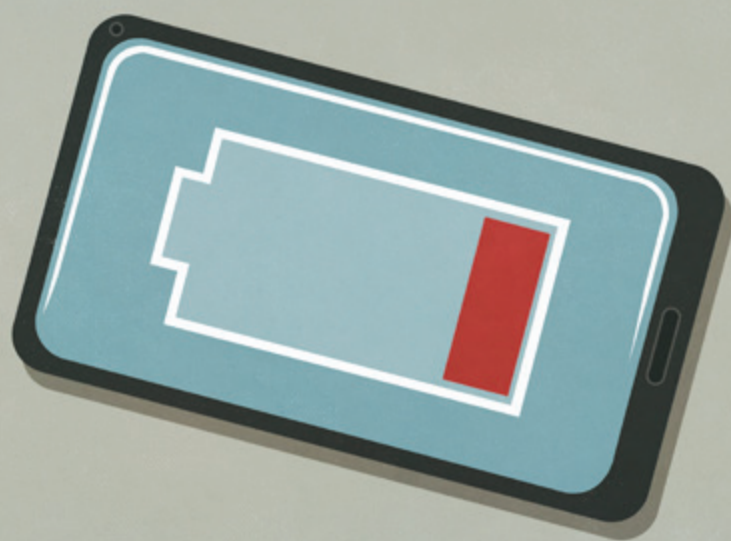
Model healthy behaviours

Leadership behaviour sends powerful signals.

If leaders regularly work excessive hours, respond to emails late at night or never take leave, employees may feel pressure to do the same.

Model healthy boundaries, recovery and sustainable ways of working.

Resilience does not mean coping alone or being tough. Healthy resilience includes recognising the impact of the work, using support early, staying connected to purpose and values, and allowing genuine rest and recovery.



The goal is to make work as sustainable as possible by balancing demands with support, clarity, realistic workload planning, recovery and early intervention.



What should you do if someone is already burnt out?

If you believe a team member may be experiencing burnout, early intervention is important.

Start with a supportive, confidential conversation. Focus on understanding rather than solving.

Listen carefully and avoid making assumptions about what is causing the problem.

Together, explore questions such as:

- What aspects of work are contributing to the pressure?
- What support would make the biggest difference?
- Are expectations clear?
- Is workload manageable?
- Are there opportunities to adjust priorities, responsibilities or timelines?

Depending on the situation, practical support might include:

- Temporary workload adjustments
- Additional support or resources
- Flexible working arrangements
- Leave to recover and recharge
- Professional wellbeing or mental health support
- Role modifications or development opportunities

Recovery from burnout can take time. Leaders should avoid treating burnout as an individual resilience issue or expecting a quick fix. Sustainable recovery often requires changes to both the person's work environment and the way work is being managed.⁴

Encourage early support-seeking even when a person is unsure whether they are experiencing burnout. It is better to seek support while symptoms are emerging than to wait until exhaustion, disengagement or reduced functioning becomes severe.

A simple response can be: pause and name what has changed, acknowledge that both work and personal pressures can affect wellbeing, use grounding or recovery strategies, reduce load where possible, and seek support early rather than waiting until things feel unmanageable.

Start with a supportive, confidential conversation. Focus on understanding rather than solving.

Where can people get support?

No one should feel they have to manage burnout alone.

If someone is in immediate danger, feels unsafe, or there is an urgent risk to their safety or someone else's safety, call 111 or support the individual to go to the nearest emergency department. For urgent mental health concerns, contact local crisis support services or seek medical advice promptly.

Encourage the individual to seek extra support if distress persists for more than two to three weeks or worsens, or if sleep, focus or daily functioning is affected, or if the person feels overwhelmed or depleted, if others have expressed concern, or the person is unsure how to reset.

Free support options available in New Zealand include:

- **1737 – free call or text support from a trained counsellor**
- **Lifeline: 0800 543 354 or text 4357**
- **Samaritans: 0800 726 666**

Many workplaces also provide access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), offering confidential counselling and wellbeing support for employees and, in some cases, their family members.

For Southern Cross Health Insurance members, additional support is available through Raise.

Mental health support with Raise

Your mental wellbeing matters. Southern Cross members can access up to three free online mental health sessions each claims year through Raise*.

These sessions can be used for:

- Individual counselling
- Couples counselling
- Wellbeing coaching

Whether you're dealing with personal challenges, workplace pressures or concerns about burnout, Raise provides practical and confidential support.

Urgent support: 0800 735 343 or Book online

Have your Southern Cross policy number ready.
You can find it on your member card or in the MySouthernCross app.

*Subject to change. Terms and conditions apply.



***Burnout is not a sign of weakness,
lack of commitment or poor performance.***

It is a signal that workplace demands and recovery have fallen out of balance.

For people leaders, the challenge is not simply supporting individuals once burnout occurs. It is creating work environments where people feel valued, supported, connected and able to perform sustainably over the long term.

When leaders pay attention to workload, role clarity, connection, support and recovery, they not only reduce burnout risk but also build healthier, more productive and more resilient teams.

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