



# Coping with stress and burnout: insights to boost wellbeing at work

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Soft skills

One effect of the pandemic has been greater work-related stress, anxiety and burnout, particularly among women. According to [a survey by LinkedIn](#) 74 per cent of women were “very or somewhat stressed for work-related reasons”.

The World Health Organisation describes burnout as “a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”.

Penelope Jones, founder of My So-Called Career, specialises in working with women who feel overwhelmed, helping them to build sustainable, positive work relationships.

Here she shares her advice on how to boost your wellbeing and avoid the triggers that can lead to burnout.

## How should I approach a conversation with my boss about feeling burnt out?

Start by recognising that companies are now much better at this, and that this conversation might be a bigger deal for you than it is for the person you speak to.

A lot of managers would rather help you now than find out later that you struggled in silence. They might be grateful that you put your trust in them and shared your vulnerability.

Before speaking to your manager, think what you want from the conversation. Is it enough to share how you feel and ask for support or are there tangible solutions?

For example, if work is overwhelming, perhaps they could reprioritise your load. Would third-party support such as coaching help? Many organisations offer confidential employee support services, including access to therapy.

Remember that a conversation with your manager does not need to be a formal process. It might not even need its own meeting: you could raise the issues in a regular one-to-one.

## Can a lack of interest/engagement in work be a sign of burnout?

One hundred per cent. It is one of the recognised signs of burnout as defined by the WHO. A lack of interest can be hard to accept, especially if work is part of our sense of identity. Other signs listed by the WHO include:

- energy depletion or exhaustion
- a sense of distance from work
- feelings of negativism or cynicism
- reduced efficiency

## Does working remotely help with stress or make it worse? I am working longer hours at home and sometimes cannot switch off

Both can be true. For some people, working from home has helped them to create a better balance. Others have struggled with the removal of the boundaries that used to contain work and its anxieties – an office or a commute, for example. For these people, the sense that work has invaded their personal domain has left them anxious, exhausted and powerless.

If you find that your hours have crept up and you cannot switch off, you could benefit from a boundary audit.

Ask these questions:

- how do you feel about your boundaries right now?
- which changes might you want to make?
- what positive effect would this have?
- might “scaffolding” keep you strong as you make this change?

[Research conducted last year by Stanford University](#) found that more than a third of Americans working from home did extra work in what used to be their commuting time. This is because the beginning or end of the working day were no longer evident. If this is familiar to you, think how you can differentiate between work and leisure time. Why not reclaim the idea of a commute as a buffer to work, perhaps with a walk?

An end-of-day routine is effective. Take 15 minutes to reflect, check your to-do list, tidy your workspace and put away your laptop. This will help your brain to shift from work to leisure. A bedtime routine is good too: limit the use of screens, eat earlier and carve out time to relax so your brain knows that work is over.

Another option is to sign up for a gym or a similar activity. Bringing other people into your plans can be effective and counter feelings of isolation and low self-worth. Such emotions are best challenged by connecting with others who make us feel good about ourselves and remind us of the world outside work.

During the pandemic when such activities were off limits, many of us found that work ballooned to fill the space. Now though, working longer hours seems to be the expectation. By going along with this, we mask unmanageable workloads and increase the risk of exhaustion.

## What is the difference between everyday work stress and something more serious?

The main red flag is that stress feels constant rather than situational. We can all experience stressful times: perhaps a big project, a promotion or a deadline. This may be tiring but it can also be motivating.

When the symptoms stay the same regardless of the situation, however, it is worth stepping back to ask yourself what else is going on.

## As a manager, what can I do to check on the wellbeing of my team?

Make space for your people. Show with actions and words that it is OK for them to take up that space in any way they need.

This could be as simple as always asking how people are at the start of your catch-ups and listening to the response, letting it take over the meeting if necessary. Follow up on actions, pay attention to changes in behaviour or work.

You are their role model so think about your behaviour. If you say it is OK to talk openly about wellbeing and that everyone should have healthy boundaries, but then your behaviour suggests differently, people will note what you do, not what you say.

Make the effort to know what is going on for individuals outside of work and be genuinely interested in them as a complete person.

During the pandemic, work has become transactional. If you are now back in the office for a few days a week use the time to connect with people: put goals and agendas to one side. If you are still fully remote, try your hardest to connect. Small, regular actions will be more meaningful than sweeping statements. They may make the difference between a culture where a team can share how it feels and one where it doesn't.

Your efforts can make a huge difference. Having an empathetic boss is second only to a manageable workload in heading off burnout.



Penelope Jones

## I am back in the office several days a week and find it hard to adapt. I am exhausted all the time and the commute is really stressful. Any advice?

Think how you can reduce the stress of the commute. Could you travel earlier or later to avoid the worst rush? Could you get off the train/bus/Tube earlier and walk to claim time for yourself? Would listening to a podcast or reading a book help?

Next, think about what you ask of yourself on the days when you commute. See if you can create space while you adjust. Do you dash out of the house without eating, or work through your lunch break? Do you then stay up late to have time for yourself? If so, think about the little changes you could introduce so that your days are more manageable, either at work or at home.

It is important to recognise that being back in a busy office with lots of people can be strange after two years at home. This is common as we adjust to the situation in our way and at our own pace.

## Since my promotion I have been stressed and anxious all the time. I feel out of my depth and I miss my old role. What can I do?

Promotions can be challenging. It is often the case that what got us promoted – our skills, behaviours and experience – are not necessarily the attributes we need to master the new role. We tell ourselves we should be an expert but we actually feel like a beginner, and vulnerable too.

Sometimes people are promoted into a role they never wanted because it felt like the only way ahead. If this is the case, think about what progression means to you and how else you can achieve what you want, inside or outside your organisation.

Your lack of clarity may put you at the mercy of other people, so take action on two fronts.

First, talk to your manager. You might be putting pressure on yourself that they don't see. Between you, identify the parts of the role that are most challenging and think how you can rise to these in your first year.

Structured training may be available or you could benefit from coaching or mentoring. Maybe you need time and support, perhaps working together to prioritise or clarify expectations.

Remember, your company has promoted you because it saw your potential to do the job well. That is not the same as expecting you to do it with your eyes shut after three weeks.

Second, think holistically about what can help you to adjust. I help clients to identify the “scaffolding” that will keep them steady while they grow. It is often a mixture of routine, ritual and connection.

Do you need to be kinder to yourself and dial back what you expect of yourself? Can you make space in other areas to allow for the extra pressure at work? Who can you go to for confidence and support?

Promotions can be hard because we suddenly find that our work friends are no longer our peers and cannot provide the support we are used to. Do you know others who have made this change who could share their experiences?

It can also help to be more specific. What is causing your anxiety? An audit of facts, feelings and physical environments can help you to pinpoint specific triggers. These are easier to respond to than a blanket feeling of low-level dread.

Similarly, what is it you miss about your old job? When do you miss it most? These answers can help you decide what you need so you can move forward positively.

## How do I stop feeling anxious every Sunday night?

This is a horrible feeling but there are tangible solutions. End the week with “future you” in mind. Before you shut down on Friday, plan for the week to come and make an achievable to-do list for the Monday. Focus on what went well this week and think about one thing to do to make next week even better.

Make plans for Sunday that keep your mind on the weekend and away from the week to come. A walk followed by a meal and a film at home for example, or some family time. Using Sunday evening for ritual can make it feel like something to protect and enjoy rather than fear.

Give yourself permission to enjoy your weekend. One source of Sunday night dread is the feeling that we have not done enough with our leisure time. Or we might struggle with the opposite: worrying that we have been too busy and haven't taken time to relax.

It is a battle you can't win, so why not stop trying? Ask yourself what you need to do, and what you want to do, then aim for a bit of both.

Counter your worries with positives. For each negative thought or fear about the week to come, bring to mind something you are excited about or look forward to.

If your anxiety persists, dedicate some time to explore it further. Set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes and write down all the things in your head. When the buzzer goes, put your sheet of paper in a sealed envelope, and then go about your evening.

Soon your brain will recognise that there is a time allotted to your worries. You can then step back from them outside of this dedicated time.

Lastly, if worrying about work persistently invades your leisure time, talk to someone. This could be your partner, your boss, a coach, a therapist or a friend. Often the worst place for our thoughts is inside our heads.