

DECEMBER 2020

# Burnout Nation

How 2020 has reshaped  
employees' relationship to work



# INTRODUCTION

To call 2020 a tumultuous year is an understatement. The coronavirus pandemic—along with major political upheavals and natural disasters ranging from wildfires to hurricanes—has upended our lives as we know it. Many Americans have been suddenly laid off or furloughed by their employers. Those who have retained their jobs have had to make quick adjustments, whether working from home, adapting to a different workplace setting, or taking on unexpected new duties.

All this has led to skyrocketing rates of depression, anxiety, and stress for American workers, setting the stage for another crisis: **employee burnout**.

Burnout is an extremely costly phenomenon for organizations. [Harvard Business Review](#) estimates that the annual cost of healthcare spending due to workplace burnout comes to \$125 billion to \$190 billion.

In addition, burned-out employees are 13% less confident in their performance and 63% more likely to take a sick day, according to a [Gallup study](#). The same study also found that burned-out employees are 2.6 times more likely to actively seek a different job—driving up turnover rates at affected companies. Since employee turnover is estimated to cost organizations about [\\$15,000 per employee](#), it is essential to reduce employee burnout to improve retention.

## WHAT IS EMPLOYEE BURNOUT?

**Employee burnout** is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, often reached after an extended period of high stress. The three primary symptoms of work burnout include:

- **Exhaustion**
- **Feeling negative, cynical, or detached from work**
- **Reduced work performance**

As Spring Health's *Burnout Nation* report shows, American workers—defined as those employed full time, part time or self-employed—are experiencing high rates of burnout. Based on a recent survey commissioned by Spring Health and conducted online by The Harris Poll among 1,136 employed U.S. adults, this report shows that currently:

- A majority of U.S. workers (76%) are experiencing burnout symptoms—with a worrying percentage reporting complete burnout (9%). Worker burnout symptoms include exhaustion, reduced work performance, and feeling negative, cynical, or detached from work.
- Significant triggers for worker burnout can include conditions that have been created or exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis, including layoffs and downsizings, increased job responsibilities, lack of work-life boundaries, caretaking duties at home, and more.

Nearly one in four American workers (24%) believe that receiving better mental health related policies at work, such as mental health days, would help them avoid or reduce experiencing worker burnout.

76%

**OF EMPLOYED AMERICANS  
ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING  
WORKER BURNOUT**

This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Spring Health from November 9–11, 2020 among 1,136 employed U.S. adults ages 18 and older, among whom 890 are experiencing worker burnout. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated. For complete survey methodology, including weighting variables and subgroup sample sizes, please contact [marketing@springhealth.com](mailto:marketing@springhealth.com).

# WHO IS EXPERIENCING EMPLOYEE BURNOUT?



Exhaustion. Sudden flare-ups of anger. Difficulty concentrating. You or your team members are likely experiencing some of these symptoms today, because in late 2020, employee burnout is not the exception, but the norm.

In fact, more than three quarters (76%) of employed Americans report they are currently experiencing worker burnout—and roughly one in 10 (9%) report experiencing complete burnout.

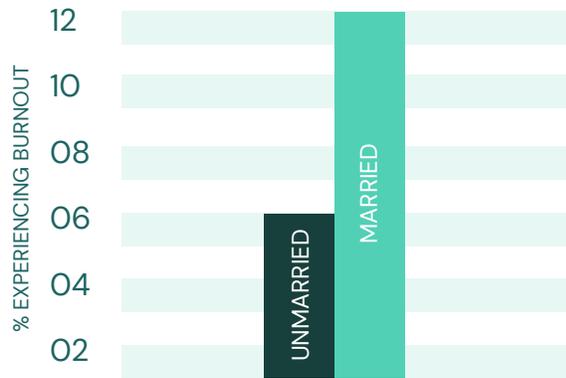
Symptoms of worker burnout include exhaustion, reduced work performance, and feeling negative, cynical, or detached from your work. Employee burnout can cover a wide range of mental states, with some American workers describing just a little effect and others reporting complete burnout, which can be debilitating and significantly affect work performance.

Women report experiencing burnout more frequently (80% of women vs. 72% of men), and women in younger age brackets are especially likely to experience burnout.

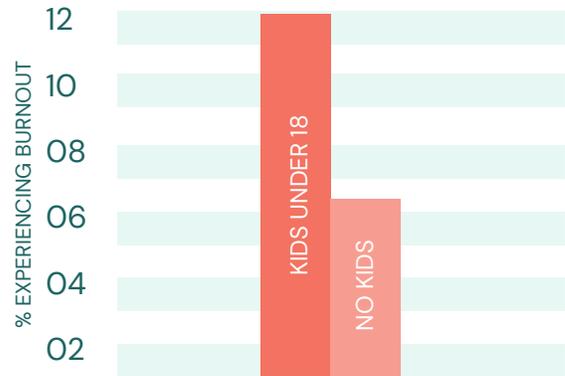
Employed women aged 35–44 are more likely than their younger and older counterparts to report they are currently experiencing complete burnout (19% vs. 8% age 18–34, 7% age 45–54, and 2% age 55–64). Among employed men, those aged 45–54 are three times as likely as those aged 18–34 to say they are experiencing complete burnout (15% vs. 5%).

## EMPLOYED WOMEN EXPERIENCING BURNOUT BY AGE GROUP





**HOW RELATIONSHIP STATUS AFFECTS BURNOUT**



**HOW PARENTHOOD STATUS AFFECTS BURNOUT**

Race, income and education don't seem to have a noticeable effect on today's burnout rates. However, marriage status and child-rearing do. While just 6% of unmarried American employees report they are currently experiencing complete burnout, 12% of their married counterparts report the same. Moreover, 12% of working parents with children under 18 report they are currently experiencing complete burnout, while only 7% of those who do not have children under 18 report the same.

### ADDRESS BURNOUT EARLY ON

Employee burnout can present on a spectrum. At its earliest stages, burnout can be mobilized more easily. Once an employee reaches the complete burnout stage, though, recovery can become a challenging and long-term process that significantly disrupts both the employee's life and the organization's efficacy.

My advice for employers would be this: Watch for early signs of burnout, and address them quickly. Simple things like encouraging work breaks and actively encouraging stronger work-life boundaries can make a huge difference for your team.

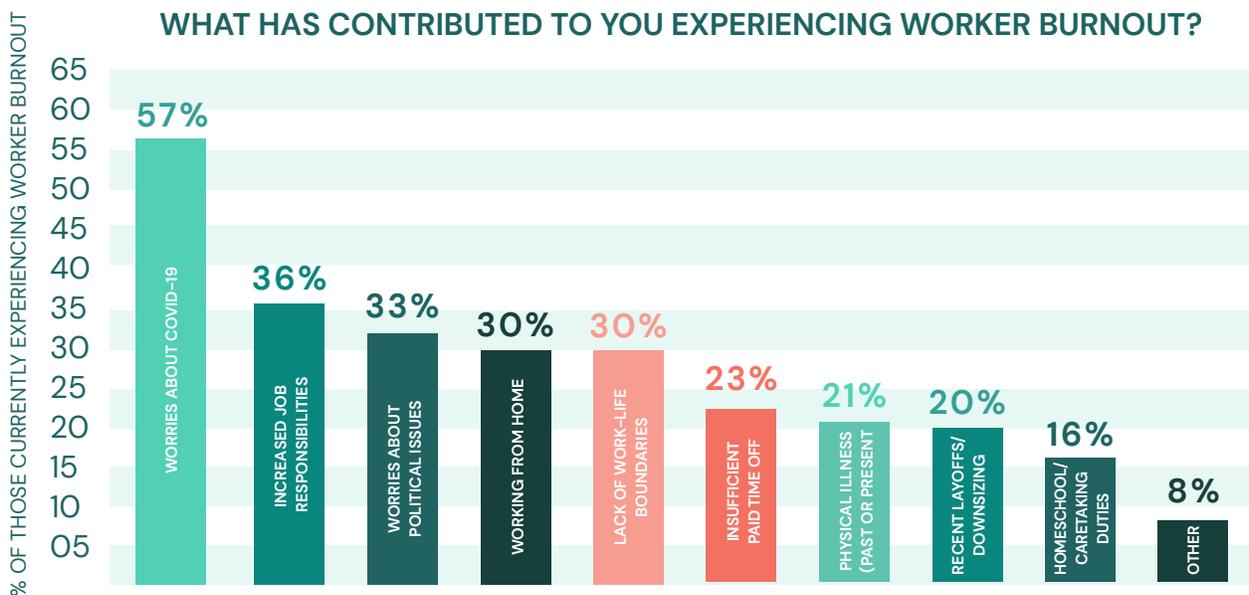
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# WHAT IS CAUSING HIGH BURNOUT RATES?

**57%** OF THOSE EXPERIENCING WORKER BURNOUT SAY WORRIES ABOUT COVID-19 HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO BURNOUT

**33%** OF THOSE EXPERIENCING WORKER BURNOUT SAY WORRIES ABOUT POLITICAL ISSUES HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO BURNOUT

We asked those experiencing worker burnout what factors are contributing to their feelings of burnout. Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus crisis and political turmoil of 2020 play a major role. Worries about these concerns are top of mind for U.S. employees.



## ACCOMMODATING WORKER NEEDS

Whether it's offering more flexible work schedules for caretakers or rebalancing workloads that have been skewed by layoffs, employers have a lot of opportunities to support their team members without sacrificing larger organizational goals.

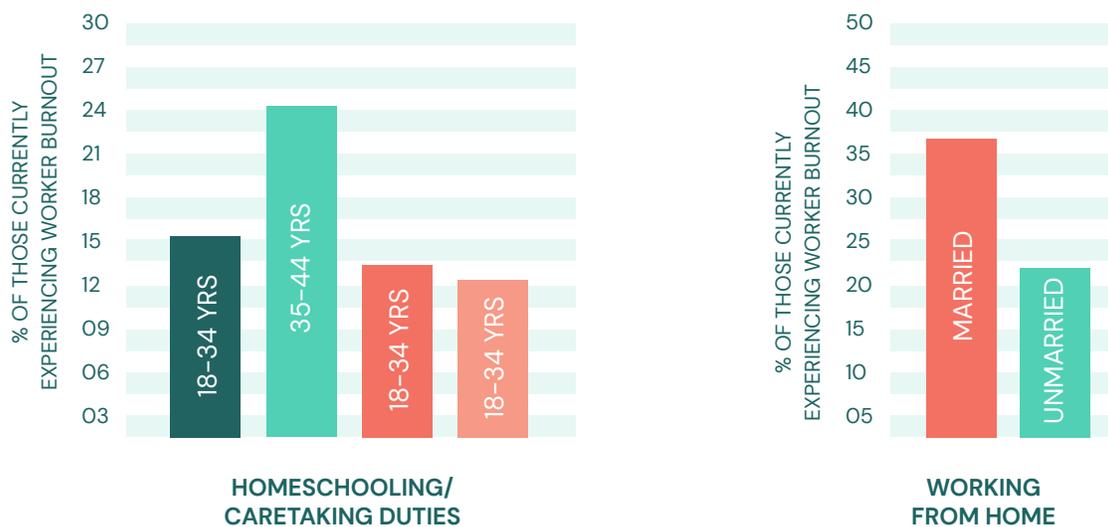
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Many of those experiencing worker burnout are also impacted by what could be considered broader effects of the coronavirus crisis, ranging from a sense of job insecurity, increased work responsibilities, and homeschooling or caregiving duties.

Nearly a quarter of those experiencing worker burnout (23%)—and a third of those aged 35–44 experiencing worker burnout (33%)—report insufficient paid time off as contributing to their experiencing worker burnout.

And those experiencing worker burnout with spouses are more likely than their unmarried counterparts to report working from home as a contributing factor to worker burnout (38% vs 24%).

### WHAT HAS CONTRIBUTED TO WORKER BURNOUT AMONG EMPLOYEES?



# WHAT EMPLOYEES SAY THEY NEED TO REDUCE BURNOUT

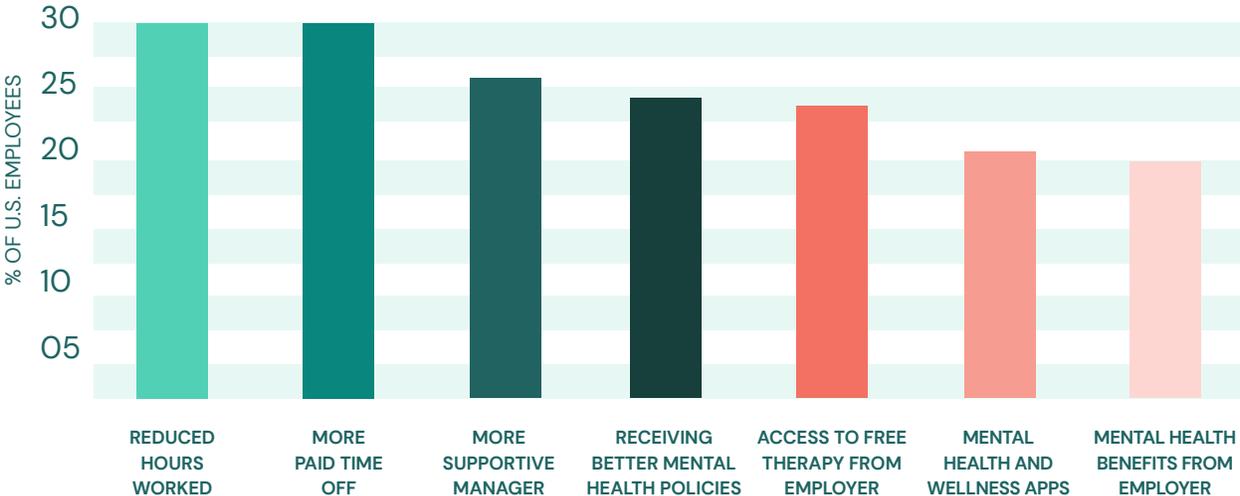
How can organizations prevent, manage, and reduce employee burnout? We asked American employees what they believed would help avoid or reduce their experience of worker burnout, and many pointed to work-related topics.

Reducing time spent working could help to avoid or reduce feelings of worker burnout today. Nearly a third of American employees (30%) say reducing the number of hours spent working would help avoid or reduce experiencing worker burnout. The same number also say receiving more paid time off from their employer would assist them in avoiding or reducing experiencing worker burnout. Empathy and support from managers would help curtail burnout, according to more than a quarter of American employees (26%) who say having a supportive and understanding manager at work would help them to reduce and avoid worker burnout.

Workplace policies and benefits, too, play a big role. Nearly a quarter of American employees say better mental health-related policies would help them combat burnout. Specific suggestions include access to mental health benefits, mental health or wellness apps, and employer-funded therapy sessions.

## WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD HELP YOU TO AVOID OR REDUCE EXPERIENCING WORKER BURNOUT?

Among work-related solutions, employed Americans said:



## EDUCATE EMPLOYEES ON BURNOUT-REDUCING HABITS

Too often, American employees forego sleep, rest, and adequate breaks in order to meet work deadlines and expectations, believing this is what will help them excel and achieve. The truth is, happier and healthy employees make for more productive and effective ones, too. Employers can play a big role in educating their team members about this connection and actively encouraging habits known to prevent burnout.

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Activities outside of work, however, are what American workers point to most as burnout reducers. More than half (51%) of American employees say self-care practices such as establishing a healthy sleep routine and following a healthy diet would help them avoid or reduce worker burnout.

### WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD HELP YOU TO AVOID OR REDUCE EXPERIENCING WORKER BURNOUT?

Among personal/non-work-related solutions, employed Americans said:

**51%**  
PRACTICING  
SELF-CARE

**40%**  
TALKING WITH FRIENDS  
AND LOVED ONES

**27%**  
LIMITING EXPOSURE TO  
SOCIAL MEDIA OR NEWS

Worryingly, nearly one in 10 American employees (9%) say that nothing would help them avoid or reduce experiencing worker burnout. This response points to a sense of helplessness characteristic of employees experiencing complete burnout as well as a possible lack of knowledge about the behaviors or supports that help mitigate employee burnout. Those with a household income of less than \$50,000 a year are more likely than those with an annual household income of \$100k or more to say nothing would help them avoid or reduce experiencing worker burnout (12% vs. 7%). Those with a high school diploma or less are more likely than those with a college degree or more to say nothing would help them avoid or reduce experiencing worker burnout (13% vs. 7%).

# HELPING YOUR TEAM PREVENT AND MANAGE BURNOUT

Employee burnout is usually not just an individual problem but an organizational one. This means that managers, leaders, and HR professionals can significantly reduce employee burnout by working to shape the work environment and culture.

## KEEP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN

Employees experiencing stress sometimes keep their concerns to themselves—leading to additional overwork and, eventually, work burnout. Make sure your team members feel supported and comfortable so they can bring up issues of concern in the workplace.

Consider training managers on techniques for encouraging open communication. In addition, provide additional channels for raising employee concerns, whether that's through an HR department with an open-door policy, a method of gathering and answering anonymous suggestions or questions, or another creative solution that best fits your organization.

## ASSESS WORKLOADS

Too often, organizations recognize high-performing employees by giving them more duties and responsibilities than other team members in the same role. This not only creates unfair work imbalances but also can encourage the burnout of your most productive employees.

Make sure your high-performing employees aren't "rewarded" by being given more and more to do. In addition, clearly define roles and duties, and give each employee adequate time and resources to complete their work well without undue time pressures.

## PROMOTE HEALTHY WORK HABITS

Work cultures that explicitly or implicitly encourage employees to stay at the workplace late and put in a lot of overtime—or discourage them from taking breaks or days off—can quickly lead to employee burnout. To truly support your workforce, discourage overwork, and encourage team members to draw boundaries between work and home life.



Part of this effort may require you to revisit your organization’s work policies in general. Do your team members receive adequate vacation time to recharge? Are they given the opportunity to take mental health days should they be experiencing the beginning symptoms of burnout or other mental health concerns? Do you allow employees to take advantage of flexible work options such as telecommuting or nontraditional work hours?

Asking these questions will help you determine if you need to update your policies to allow for a more supportive work culture.

## AIM FOR FAIRNESS

Burnout is often fueled by perceived inequities in the workplace. These inequities may be due to individual concerns—such as a manager’s favoritism of one employee over another—as well as organizational ones—such as a company’s general hiring and promotion practices.

To forestall employee burnout, ensure everything from your compensation policies to diversity and equity initiatives supports all employees. This is especially important to prevent the burnout of employees from traditionally marginalized or underrepresented populations.

## OFFER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Give employees easy-to-access options to help them manage work-related stress. Unfortunately, traditional health care programs often require employees to spend a lot of time jumping through hoops to get the care they need. An employee already exhausted due to burnout is not in the best position to investigate what mental healthcare services are covered by their health insurance and which care providers in their area accept their insurance.

In addition, traditional health care programs often require employees to wait for weeks for a first appointment with a therapist or psychiatrist. During this time, the team member’s condition may worsen, further lowering their productivity and lowering their sense of work competence and satisfaction.

Free, or low-cost, mental health care benefits can help your team members prevent or manage burnout with professional help. A mental health benefit that allows members to immediately get screened for burnout or other mental health concerns through a clinically-evaluated online diagnostic—then matches them up with the exact type and level of care they need—will help your team members manage burnout faster—or avoid burnout altogether.

## ABOUT SPRING HEALTH

At Spring Health, we help employers modernize their behavioral health benefits with the most comprehensive solution for employee mental well-being. Spring Health provides a single front door to any type of care—from digital exercises to ancillary employee assistance program (EAP) services, to coaching, therapy, or medication—leading to faster outcomes, higher engagement, and healthier, happier employees.

[Request a demo](#)

