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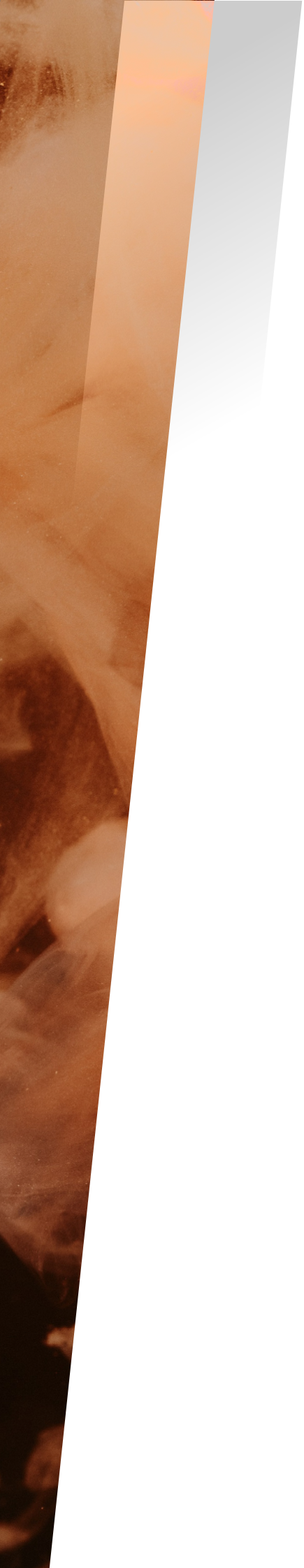
The rise of the "Great Burnout"

How a neuroscience approach can help organizations fight back against post-pandemic exhaustion



Throughout the pandemic, many people held onto the idea of a post-COVID world and the promise of going back to normal.

What people—and organizations—may not have expected was a new normal that brought just as many obstacles as the COVID-19 outbreak itself. Rapid pandemic-era changes in our social and physical worlds have created an increased demand for a more flexible workplace, with many organizations shifting to a remote-first workplace model. This gave most employees the flexibility to work from anywhere, at any time, leading many to pack up and leave expensive cities for smaller towns.

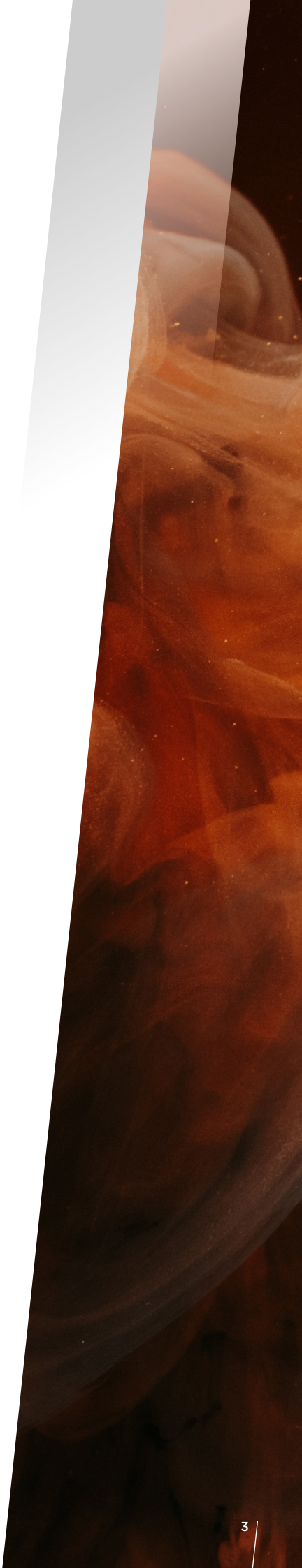
Remote work gives employees time back. The hours spent commuting can now be used to take care of personal matters. Flexible schedules often mean no longer putting off important appointments. But despite its several benefits, remote work—and its many hybrid variations—pose challenges to business. Days spent off-site can mean increased social and professional isolation. Lack of face time can elevate interpersonal tension among teams. Discomfort with learning new technologies creates difficulties for everybody.

These challenges, though, do not exist in a vacuum. Societal tensions, public crises, economic downturns, and war all influence how people show up at work, whether it's remote, on-site, or somewhere in between. This has led to the post-pandemic workplace becoming a hotbed of **burnout**—now ranked among the leading causes of the Great Resignation, according to research. Over the last year, companies across the globe have seen a mass exodus of employees, many of whom felt excessive stress on the job without the tools to cope. And though tapering off, workers continue to quit in high numbers for this very reason.

What's more, the burnout-fueled Great Resignation is now, in turn, driving even more burnout among employees still in the trenches. With colleagues gone and employers holding vacant roles open, employees are dealing with mounting workloads and other workplace pressures, which is causing fears of a "Great Burnout."

And employee burnout has grave impacts on workplace outcomes. It can negatively affect employee health, increase absenteeism, and create interpersonal conflict, reducing both quality of work and productivity—thus, posing a serious threat to organizations. In the United States alone, effects of workplace stress account for about 8%—or up to $190 billion—of our national spending on healthcare, according to a 2015 analysis. A more recent study estimates this number might be closer to $300 billion, when combining health costs and lost revenue due to absenteeism and poor performance.

Understanding the structural, personal, managerial, and social factors that contribute to stress and burnout is essential for organizations, leaders and people. When we build social and emotional skills that increase connectedness, we can optimize performance and wellbeing. This enables people and organizations alike to address the root causes of workplace stress and burnout directly.



What is burnout, *really?*

Burnout isn't just feeling tired, or bored, or unmotivated. It isn't laziness or even apathy. Burnout, instead, is a syndrome resulting from an excess of stress, combined with insufficient or ineffective coping resources to manage that stress, causing negative physical and psychological outcomes.

Burnout is a multifaceted experience consisting of three dimensions:

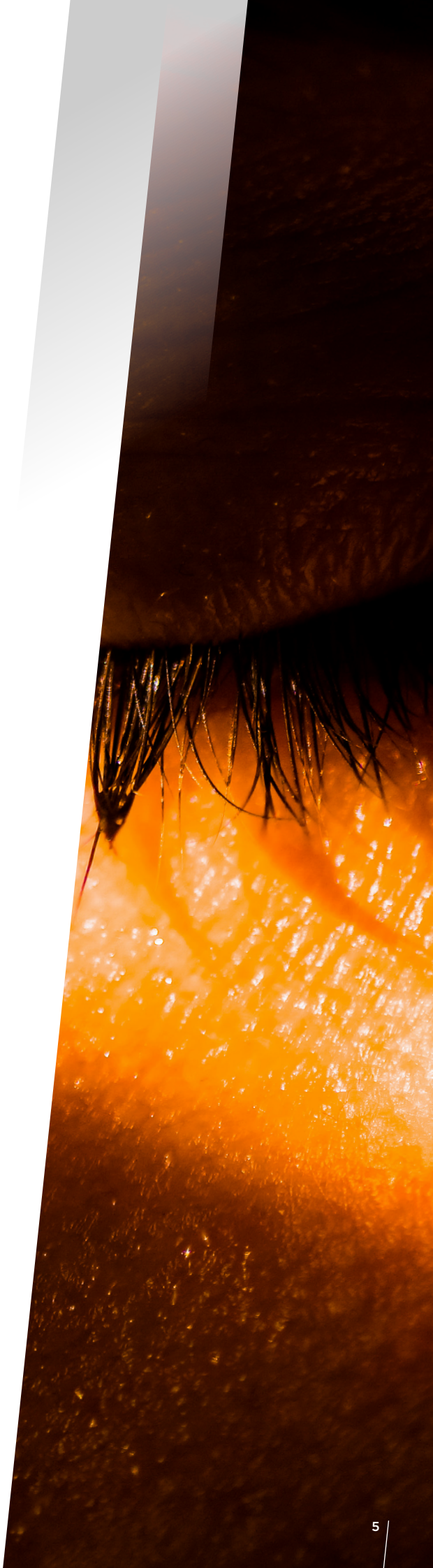
1. ***Emotional exhaustion**: feelings of being depleted of one's emotional and physical resources.*
2. ***Depersonalization/ cynicism**: negative or excessively detached response to job demands.*
3. ***Inefficacy**: a reduced sense of efficacy and accomplishments.*

Many people misunderstand burnout as the problem—and the responsibility—of an individual. And while certain individual factors are at play, such a characterization grossly misrepresents the larger picture. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) put out an urgent memo clarifying that burnout is an occupational phenomenon and not a medical condition. This means that burnout cannot be solved solely with an inside-out approach. Equipping people with better skills to handle stress at work is just a first step.

In order to meaningfully address the ramifications of this occupational phenomenon, the approach must also be outside-in. Organizations need to take a hard look at how the workplace contributes to employee burnout and be part of that solution.

5 factors that contribute to employee burnout

Burnout stems from the cumulative effects of many stressors, including structural factors that inform where and how people work, individual factors that influence how people experience the workplace and the world, and interpersonal factors that impact how we relate to and communicate with other people. Here are five key issues, identified by previous research, known to contribute most heavily to employee burnout.



Changing workplaces and the rise of remote work.
While the COVID-19 outbreak hastened the ongoing transition to remote work, remote work itself is not a new concept. Many technology-focused firms and global organizations have already been using remote work models to bring together geographically-dispersed talent. Remote work, however, has been heavily scrutinized by researchers and organizations alike, as they try to parse out the relative advantages and disadvantages of this newly widespread approach. As the global pandemic forced many organizations to speed up their digital transformations, employees of all levels faced unprecedented circumstances that created a new category of stressors on top of standard workplace stress. This is one example of a structural factor that resulted in an increased mental load, decreased social connection, and for some, triggered all three facets of burnout.

Social and professional isolation.
Despite the several benefits of remote work, multiple studies have pointed out the damaging effect remote work can have on social connectedness and relationships. Research has found that working from home increases levels of worry in managers and instills in them a lack of trust because they were unable to see their direct reports. This increasingly popular set-up doesn't support more traditional command and control models of management, meaning managers will have to embrace the flexibility and autonomy of remote and hybrid work models.
In addition to managerial stressors, remote work can also cause feelings of isolation and disconnect among employees due to lack of regular, immediate contact often experienced in an office setting. Erosion of trust and connectedness diminishes productivity and heightens tensions within work teams. For example, one group of researchers found that an increased feeling of isolation was associated with lower performance and higher turnover intention. Similarly, another group of researchers found that the more employees are physically isolated, the less they personally identify with their organizations.

Managers and interpersonal relationships.
In the workplace, employees and leaders face challenges together. A position of power affords leaders a unique ability to reduce the costs of workplace anxiety. Leaders are, in a way, energy managers. In one study, 59% of respondents identified the leader as the primary influencer of their energy at work. Results from a 2020 Gallup poll echo the important role managers play in employee well-being, with a specific focus on the role of managerial communication. Remote employees who've received meaningful feedback from their managers demonstrated higher levels of engagement. Further, Gallup survey results indicated that for employees who work more regularly from home, a higher frequency of feedback from the manager fosters higher levels of engagement. Gallup goes so far as to say that the Great Resignation could be mitigated by having more competent, communicative, and engaged managers.

Individual emotions, feelings, and coping strategies.
Individual factors, such as emotions, feelings, and coping strategies, also play a role in the startling increase in burnout across employee populations—in and out of the workplace. These factors contribute to both the excess of stress and the decrease in adequate coping resources. To illuminate the patterns that contributed to this phenomenon, Gallup explored shifts in feelings and their relationship to workplace trends. The survey results showed that two types of negative feelings were heightened for remote workers during the pandemic: worry and stress. Worry and stress related to COVID-19 has been shown to lead to emotional and social problems, such as reduced engagement and increased physiological distress. The Gallup study highlights the risk of negative emotions (like anxiety) in predicting emotion suppression, a potentially maladaptive coping strategy. One way to counter these poor coping strategies is to teach people adaptive emotion regulation tactics like emotion recognition or reappraisal.

Social tensions, war, and violence.

Stress is a cumulative force, collecting tensions from different areas of our lives and contributing to overall allostatic load. Allostatic load refers to the physical and psychological wear and tear that builds up as a person is exposed to chronic or repeated stress. Research on allostatic load helps explain the way stress experienced at work and from social, political, and environmental sources compound, and the way our bodies bear those burdens. Over time, our baseline response to that stress increases. Our brains and bodies become so accustomed to a state of activation that eventually, even when a stressor goes away, we do not return to our baseline levels. The effects of the pandemic and the associated allostatic load have been disproportionately shouldered by underrepresented populations. These same populations are also disproportionately affected by police brutality and rising hate crimes. The summer of 2020, immediately after the onset of the pandemic, saw a sudden increase in protests and racial unrest due to the many surfacing examples of police brutality against Black people. Amidst a global pandemic, racial tensions heightened, causing turmoil and stress (as well as heightened awareness of racial issues and inequalities) that carried over into the workplace. In the past few months, the war in Ukraine has become another example of the global sociopolitical circumstances that are making our mortality increasingly pronounced. While many of these stressors are not within the realm of organizational or managerial responsibility, recognizing their compounding nature can underscore the importance of reducing the stresses that we can, including those that come from the workplace.

Using neuroscience to combat employee burnout

The trials and tribulations of the pandemic created a context in which many people experienced increases in all three facets of burnout. Neuroscience research offers a new opportunity to understand and mitigate burnout by identifying solutions that target these fundamental causes. The three dimensions of burnout can be countered with three broad, neurologically based capacities: **emotion regulation**, **empathy,** and **metacognition**.

Emotion regulation can combat emotional exhaustion.

Positive relationships, connectedness, and trust in the workplace, as well as motivation for work, are underlined by complex brain mechanisms that use naturally occurring hormones like serotonin (for satisfaction, optimism, and happiness), dopamine (for reward processing and motivation), and oxytocin (for social bonding and communicating with each other). Released when the brain regions responsible for emotion processing and regulation (like the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala) are activated, these hormones can counter the adverse effects of the hormone cortisol (or vice versa), produced by chronic exposure to stress and the associated emotional exhaustion component of burnout.

Research suggests that emotion regulation strategies can fall under at least two categories. Some are explicit, consciously engaged processes that are effortful and deliberative, executed mostly by the prefrontal cortex of our brains. Others are more incidental, taking place largely outside of conscious awareness, under the guidance of subcortical brain regions like the amygdala. Acceptance, reappraisal, disengagement, and labeling are all approaches, both explicit and incidental, that can help us process our emotional experiences in ways that do not overload our mental and emotional capacities. These strategies strengthen the connectivity between our amygdala and our prefrontal cortex, reducing the likelihood of emotional hijacking—when our emotional processes take over our normal rational processing.

Empathy may be the cure to cynicism.

Depersonalization or detachment from the workplace and a person's team is a core dimension of employee burnout. Feeling negative, cynical, and disengaged all indicate reduced levels of empathy. By contrast, when people perceive their environments as safe and receive support from others, their oxytocin levels increase, in turn lowering stress. Research shows that feelings of empathy toward others are related to increased levels of oxytocin and activation in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and other brain regions corresponding to social emotions. And it goes both ways: receiving empathy also decreases stress and cynicism.

Studies conducted with high burnout occupations, such as medicine or hospitality, show that empathy may prevent or reduce burnout and increase compassion satisfaction. In fact, one study found that high levels of empathy and low levels of burnout among physicians and nurses related to not only better work performance, but also to better blood pressure control among their patients. Increasing oxytocin through creating empathetic and supportive relationships is an effective way to combat depersonalization and cynicism in the workplace.

Metacognition can counteract inefficacy.

Metacognition is most commonly thought of as “thinking about thinking,” and describes the capacity to understand and regulate your own thought patterns. Metacognition is a higher-order cognitive capacity that involves monitoring our mental processes during decision-making and adjusting behavior by using learning strategies to reach desirable outcomes. Metacognitive skills like monitoring and evaluating information, planning, and focusing on a task are related to self-efficacy and learning outcomes.

Research shows that our brains are highly motivated by rewards, including social rewards, such as praise from a manager or receiving a promotion at work. Rewards increase dopamine levels, which not only predicts immediate work motivation, but also willingness to allocate time and effort into future activities that are not immediately rewarded. Another important role of dopamine in our brains is self-motivated or conscious learning. For example, dopamine can improve self-awareness of the accuracy of judgments. This self-evaluation and awareness capacity (awareness of the accuracy of a person’s own thoughts) is referred to as metacognition and may be the key to combat the feelings of inefficacy involved in employee burnout.

New norms for a “new normal.”

Talent management during the post-COVID era deals with special challenges created by the changing work environment, business pressures, and heightened levels of anxiety and worry caused by pandemic-related concerns. As we move out of the height of the pandemic and adjust to our new normal, leaders must reject the notion that a burned-out employee population is an acceptable norm. Now, more than ever, organizations have an urgent need to address employee burnout.

Neuroscience studies have offered a new window into mechanisms of social behavior, feelings, and thoughts. By digging deeper into the literature on emotions, coping with conflict, and resilience, we identified three strategies that can help mitigate the three negative dimensions of burnout: emotion regulation, empathy, and metacognition. There is abundant research that

demonstrates that emotion regulation strategies like emotion recognition or reappraisal, empathy, and perspective-taking, as well as self-awareness and metacognition interventions help people reduce their negative thought and emotion patterns and realize their full potential.

Our bodies and brains often respond in fast and automatic ways to stressors, as well as adopt new ways to counter the chronic loads of life's burdens. Neuroscience research can help uncover these implicit ways our bodies experience and cope with stress and can teach us how to train our brains to counter burnout. Identifying these neurological capacities and strategies can help counter—or avoid completely—the burnout caused by workplace stressors. And this, in turn, can have a deep impact on improving workplace relations, management skills, and reducing negative emotions and stress in the workplace.

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