

All work and no play: Avoiding burnout

Presenter Pam Kerouack

Introduction

Hello. Thanks so much for taking sometime today to listen to All work and no play, Avoiding burnout. A really important topic I think for our time. So, this is Pam Kerouack. I'm happy to be here with you.

Objectives

We are going to cover a few things. We're going to talk about defining burnout. We're going to talk about the difference between stress and burnout. Because there is a difference, and I'm not sure we fully understand that. Maybe you do, but I think it's certainly worth exploring a little bit more detail. We're going to talk about the causes of burnout and the outcomes. And then last, we're really going to focus on tips for avoiding and recovering from burnout, which I think is the most important aspect of our training today.

What is burnout?

But let's start with fundamentals. What is burnout? Well, it happens when you feel overwhelmed, and you feel unable to meet constant demands. You can experience burnout as a worker, as a caregiver, as a homemaker, really almost any role. If the stress doesn't let up, you start to lose the interest and motivation you once had. So, it is a state of emotional, physical and a mental exhaustion, and it is caused by that prolonged stress where you don't see that there's going to be an ending here. We've all been there. We've had sometimes that were really highly stressful, but we could see that it's temporary, right? We're going to get through this, and all hands on deck until we do. But with burnout, there just seems like it's relentless, it's never going to end, and that can lead us to this experience of exhaustion.

Stress vs. burnout

Stress versus burnout. Let's talk about this. Too much stress is too much, right? Too many pressures that demand too much of you so that you're overdoing it. There's a sense of urgency. It makes you exhausted. And keep in mind, this is too much stress. Because there is that balance, right? When you have too little stress, that's not good for you, you have no life energy. When you have just the right amount of stress, that's motivating and exciting. It keeps us focused and it keeps us desirous of

learning more. But then there is that overload of stress when we are feeling the fatigue and anxiety that comes along with just feeling it's too much. Burnout is about feeling empty, like drowning, being like dried up. And when I said life energy, there isn't any anymore. Too much stress can kill you, absolutely, but burnout makes it feel like it's just not worth living. So, we become really blunted. We don't have... I like to think of life energy, that life energy keeps us engaged and motivated and desirous of moving on really. Whereas burnout, there's nothing. You feel helpless and hopeless, and it's primarily emotional in nature, whereas stress really impacts your body. Burnout really, we just attach and feel very disconnected.

Signposts on the road to burnout

There are signposts on the way to burnout. If you're feeling always exhausted, this isn't going away. It's not like you're having a bad day. This is a bad life. It feels like you're wasting a lot of energy you don't have in order to take care of work or home life. You spend your time on tasks that are boring or overwhelming and you really don't feel appreciated for those tasks. So, there's even less incentive to do what you're doing.

Handout

I want to pause for a minute because I want to point out to you that you have a handout that goes along with this program and really will talk about what is burnout, and then we'll go into self-care, which we're going to talk about in a little bit. But don't forget to check out the handout because it may help you understand and work through some of the feelings of burnout you may be experiencing.

Physical, emotional, behavioral symptoms

There are physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms to burnout, and I do want you to recognize these are very similar to stress-related symptoms. These symptoms tend, again, to be more emotional in nature, and they also tend to last. Again, we all have maybe a day or two, sometimes even a week when we're feeling disengaged and bored and disregarded. However, it's the lasting experience of those things that make a difference. So, when you are feeling tired and drained all the time and you're feeling hopeless and alone, and you don't feel like you're having any satisfaction or joy, maybe when you're using other things to help you cope, like food or drugs or alcohol, or you're taking your experiences out on others, you're skipping work, those are the types of things that when they're lasting, can really indicate burnout.

Outcomes of burnout

And there are outcomes. You do lose motivation both at work and at home. No matter where this started, you don't feel connected to your life anymore. So, you're not doing the things that you once did. Your productivity drops. You feel like you don't have anything to give to anyone anymore because you're trying to give from an empty cup. You may suffer more illnesses as your body reacts to that prolonged stress, and it spills over into all areas of your life so that your relationships suffer. You feel depressed, maybe cynical, resentful, angry. And so, these are outcomes of sustained burnout.

Contributing factors to burnout

And there are things that contribute to it. One is lifestyle factors. When you work so much with no balance, and I think that's really important, no balance. You haven't really taken care of other aspects of your life because you are just so focused on managing one aspect. You lose social life, family time. You don't take time for yourself, and that's a big contributor to burnout. When you're saying yes to everyone else and you're consistently saying no to yourself, that can really lead you to burnout. Because you're doing so much for everyone else, but you're not... And I like the image of filling a cup. Actually, do me a favor, will you? Pick up if you have a cup in front of you, I have a glass of water, but pick up a cup or a bottled water or a glass of water, whatever you have in front of you, and hold it straight out in front of you. You can't be leaning on anything. Just hold that straight out in front of you. I'll tell you when to put it down. Okay? Hang on to it straight out in front of you for the time being. The burnout also contributes to lack of sleep. And then lack of sleep then continues to contribute to our feelings. If we don't have supportive relationships because we're not spending time in those relationships. Relationships really take energy and time and attention, and if we're not giving it, they suffer. How about work circumstances? When we feel like we have little or no control over our own work, that can lead to burnout. If there's lack of recognition or there are expectations that are really unclear, we don't know what's expected of us, or it changes all the time. If it's monotonous or boring work, we don't feel challenged at all. It's just, oh my gosh, it's the same thing day in and day out. That monotony can be problematic. And personality-wise, if you tend to be a perfectionist or you're pessimistic, if you need to be in control all the time, if you're a type A, if you're a high achiever and you're not forgiving yourself or others, that can lead to burnout. Let me ask you something. Are you a little tired of holding that cup in front of you or that mug or bottled water? Is your arm a little tired? That's what happens when we're feeling burned out. We try to sustain things that really, we cannot sustain for the long term. We're saying yes to everyone else and we're saying no to ourselves. We can't keep doing that. So, I invite you, if you haven't already, to put that cup down, to put that mug down, to really take a moment to take care of yourself. Maybe massage your muscles that feel a little tense and tight from holding that cup. Maybe shrug your shoulders a little bit so you can release

some of the tension. That's self-care. It's saying that we know enough to put down our burdens, to put down whatever it is that we're trying to sustain in order to take care of ourselves.

Prevent burnout

And that's where we're going to next. How do we prevent? Well, we need to understand the warning signs. When you were holding up that cup and you were starting to get really uncomfortable and sore, that's a warning sign, right? It's saying, "Hey, put this down. Take care of yourself." What are the warning signs in your life that you may be leading towards burnout? Are you giving up on the things that you find joyful? Are you giving up on your hobbies and your exercise? What are you doing that is really telling you this is not working? And then let's take some steps to prevent a full-blown collapse or breakdown. Because burnout worsens if it's left unattended.

Nurture yourself

Self-care isn't selfish, it's self-preservation. Take time for yourself. Recognize, again, when you need to put down your burdens and take time for yourself. Maybe you need to talk to somebody about what's happening for you, so you have a place to just share and talk about whatever is going on for you. So, counseling can actually help. You have an impartial person that you can speak with about whatever's going on and really come up with a plan of action to help reduce the stressors that you're experiencing. So, ask for help. And it could be even in your home. If you're feeling burned out because you're the only one that's taking over everything, ask for help. Stop doing that and really be honest with the people that live in your home. "I can't do this anymore. I'm exhausted and I need some help." In the workplace, talk with your manager. "This is what's happening for me. This is why I'm feeling disconnected. This is what I need at this point in the workplace." Whatever it is that you are asking, and you need to feel better. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Do things that recharge your battery. I'll tell you, have a morning ritual. Start the day off right. Rather than jumping out of bed or reaching for your cell phone and scrolling through social media, stop, open your eyes, stretch. Just feel everything elongating and stretching and opening for the day. Maybe use a mantra. Today, I'm going to take care of myself as well as meet my obligations. Today I'm going to take care of myself as well as meet my obligations. Say a mantra that helps you to start the day off. Do something that makes you feel like this is a day I can open to. And find ways throughout the day to incorporate things you like to do that are personally meaningful to you.

Take care of your body

And there are some essentials. One is sleeping well. And if that's been problematic for you, maybe do some investigation as to why. Big culprit is screen time. Being on televisions and on Kindles and on

computers right before bed can really mess with your sleep pattern at night. So, one of the first things you can do is turn off all electronics about half an hour to an hour before bed and set up a sleep routine. Take a warm shower, maybe put some lavender lotion on, which is very calming by the way. Have a cup of chamomile tea or warm milk. Yup, it works. Dark cherries. Dark cherries have melatonin in it, and that can help you to have a better night's sleep. So have a light snack. So, anything that you can do to really encourage a good night's rest. And eat well. When we have a lot of high fat, bad fats like fried foods, and high sugar foods, high salt foods, that's not good for our body. And in fact, it stresses our body. So maybe look at your diet. Is that contributing to your stress level? Is that contributing to burnout? When our minds are being fed crappy food, we can't do the work that we need to do to have a successful life. So, let's look at our food, see what you're eating. Include fresh fruits and vegetables and protein and whole grains. Limit how much sugar and alcohol and salt that you have in your diet. Makes a difference. And thus, move as much as you can with joy. Do things that you really like doing. I find if I'm exercising, I'm going to do things I like doing, that I find fun. So first off, usually, if I'm exercising indoors, it always has to be to music. Otherwise, I don't enjoy it as much. Or if I'm outdoors, it's always in nature. I hike in the woods so I can be in nature. What do you like doing? Make sure that you are including that. It's one great way of managing your stress levels, your disconnection. Because when we're exercising, think about that, when we're exercising, we're reconnecting to our physical self. So, moving can really help you.

Take down the intensity down a notch

Take down the intensity, say no more often. Years ago, my doctor said I had the right-hand syndrome. I'm like, "What? What is the right-hand syndrome?" She said, "Every time somebody asked for a volunteer, your right hand automatically goes up." And she says, "You really need to stop doing that." And it was a really great moment of awareness. Because I did have to do so many things and I had to really consider what was important to me. So, I could say yes to myself, as well as saying yes to the activities, the volunteer opportunities, the work that really meant something in my life. So, think about that for yourself. Say some nos without excuses. Set boundaries with others. That's really important. Really setting boundaries about what people expect of you and what you're willing to do. Take your time off. Have you planned a vacation soon? If not, perhaps you can. Even if it's an afternoon off, it gives you a chance just to do something for yourself. Maybe a morning, an afternoon, a long weekend, or a full vacation. Use your time. I hope we're getting away from the badge of honor that I have so many vacation days left over at the end of the year. Let's not. Let's actually use those vacation days and stop considering that to be a positive thing. Take your time. It actually re-energizes you, refreshes you. It allows you to work better when you come back to the workplace. Know your limits. Don't overextend yourself. And we'll tell you, take a real lunch break every single day. Learn to say no and mean it. Turn your techno gadgets off for, again, a half hour to an hour every single day before you go to bed. It's time to really consider how do I do healthy things for myself?

Spend time with loved ones

The next one is huge. Spend time with loved ones. Nurture your support systems, family, friends, coworkers. Having good social relationships is really a winning strategy in life. It's tied to greater psychological and physical wellbeing. It's not surprising that social relationships also matter when it comes to resiliency, in part because they help us feel less stress when we're suffering. Large scale population studies have shown that positive relationships at one period of life predict depression later on or not. So having positive social relationships actually lessen your chance of depression, actually contributes to a longer, healthier life. And social relationships for adults are particularly helpful. So good social relationships seem to help us tamp down stress reactions. Even just by recalling the relationship, it lowers stress reaction. In one study, wives who felt strongly in sync with their spouses felt less anticipatory reactivity towards a mild electric shock. I don't know who volunteered for that research project, but it was an interesting outcome. Just by being in sync with a partner, you have less pain reactivity. And caring touch from a healthcare worker reduced pain in accident victims up to six months later, supporting that there is an importance to empathic behaviors in patient care, but also in our lives. Reach out when you need to talk through things. Nurture those relationships so they're going to be there when you need some support, but also when you just want to play. Have fun with the relationships that you have in your life. Be with those people. And lift them up because by lifting them up, you're lifting yourself up.

Have a hobby

Have a hobby. Hobbies can not only make you happier, but they can also help you to be more productive at work, truly. Creative pursuits are great antidotes for burnout. So, choose some new activity that has nothing to do with work. And get back into them if you've stopped doing them. Quick story. There was a CEO who was at the place of burnout. And what she ended up doing is joining... This was outside of her wheelhouse. She joined a comedy group. It was an improv group. They met weekly, and they would put on shows every so often. And by having that much fun in her personal life, in her hobby, if you will, she was able to bring that positive energy into her work life. There's lots of choices, by the way.

Handout

I'm going to go back to your handout because it gives you a lot of great ideas. So on for body and movement, there's some really great ideas. I love this. Startup game nights with friends and play board games and card games. This is something I do consistently. I have one group of friends that I play Scrabble with another group that I play cribbage with. In fact, tonight's my Scrabble night with a new group of friends. So do things that you can stay connected. We have treats, we'll have something

fun to eat, and we'll play board games, and we'll laugh a lot. And that energy comes back into my life in very positive ways. There's also all kinds of imaginative and pretend play that you can be part of. I love the idea of a scavenger hunt. They actually have a scavenger hunt program that you can buy. Basically, a scavenger hunt in a different city so you can explore the city. You can color, you can collect coins, you can take up cooking. My new skill is going to be Mediterranean cooking. I am really focused on that. So, there's lots of things. This handout is going to give you a lot of ideas, which is why I'm suggesting that you look at the handout afterwards. Okay? But those are some hobbies that you can take on.

Manage stress

And manage stress. And you can manage stress by many of the things I just said to you. Learn stress management techniques like deep breathing, listening to relaxation tapes, walking, especially in nature, it's very calming. Maybe listen to music or books on tape. And worry less about things you can't change. You can't change them. Why spend energy on it? Instead, bring yourself back to the current moment, perhaps learning mindfulness. Bringing yourself back to the current moment where you can think about what is it that I can do rather than trying to change things you can't. What are the possibilities? What do I need to do to move forward? And do one task at a time? There's nothing real about multitasking. All it does is stress us out. And we really don't do our best work when we try to do too many things at one time. Choose one thing at a time. You might decide I'm only going to spend 15 minutes on it. Okay, spend 15 minutes and then move to the next task instead of trying to do too many things at once. And breathe between those tasks. Make yourself a priority. And unplugging. Have you heard a theme here about unplugging? Really unplugging and finding your joy in other ways. Plugging in oftentimes just has this disconnect in ways that are not healthy for us, and it makes us disconnected from our own life. So, unplug for a while.

Already burnout?

Are you already burned out? If you are, take it seriously. Someone mentions something about, "Hey, you seem burned out." Take heed. Keep in mind, recovery is a combination of prevention and following some of the steps that we just talked about. Don't try to push through it. Focus on reconnecting with yourself, reconnecting with your present day and the things that bring you joy, such as relationships.

Recovering from burnout

But it takes you to slow down. Burnout is saying something in your life is not working. And so, take time to think about it. Are you neglecting something important, or someone like you? Are you taking

care of what really matters to you? Do you need to make an adjustment in your life course? Slowing down, acknowledging how you feel, really looking at what are my goals and priorities, and have I drifted away from those things? How can I bring myself back aligned with my goals and my priorities? It's almost natural to pull in, to conserve energy and isolate ourselves when we're feeling burned out. But really this is a time where friends and family can really help and be supportive. So, turn to others for support. Communicate what's going on with you. Just sharing your feelings with someone can relieve some of the burden. And also, consider professional help. Back on the recording page, if you click "learn more about your benefits here," there's a link to explore your specific employee assistance program benefits and login information. So, if you go there, you may find that you have free counseling, that you have access to our online library of all kinds of information that can help with burnout, that you might have mindfulness and meditation podcasts. So go onto the website, check it out.

Quote

We're going to end with a quote. "Burnout is what happens when you try to avoid being human for too long." This is from the book, *The Crowd, the Critic, and the Muse: A Book for Creators*. Think about what does this quote mean to you? Are you robotic? Are you trying to meet everyone else's needs and going through life like you can keep up and you're trying to run to keep up and it's not working? Take a moment. Remember what we said, to stop, breathe, really consider what's happening, what's contributing to this experience. And then take some action on things you can do to reduce your sense of burnout, including, by the way, taking the handout and taking a peek at all the opportunities we have to be creative, to have social play. Take time to appreciate the beauty in the world, practicing mindfulness. Make time for those small moments in life that really help you to keep perspective. It's really important. So again, maybe take time to download this handout and take a peek at it.

Thank you for attending

Well, I have come to the end of my time with you here today. Thank you so much for listening. I appreciate that. And again, just a reminder, on the recording page, there's a link to learn more about your benefits. Go ahead and check that out. You can see what's available to help support you. Also, if you wouldn't mind taking a moment to complete our training satisfaction survey, I would appreciate that as well. Feedback is always helpful, as you know. As we just talked about, one of the challenges with burnout is really not getting that feedback, that support. So, if you wouldn't mind, take a moment, let me know how you considered this program. All right? So, thank you. This is Pam Kerouack. I'm happy that you spent some time with me today. I'm hoping that I gave you some ideas. If nothing else, take away from this program how heavy the burden is, even when we're holding a

cup, when we don't put it down and refresh ourselves and do positive things for ourselves. So, take some time, put your burdens down, and take some time to recover. Take care, everyone.

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