

How to thrive at work





Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing world and are navigating an era of evolving ways of working. Hybrid models, technological advances, and shifting workplace expectations are transforming how we work and interact.

While these changes offer new opportunities, they also pose some challenges. Many people experience stress and burnout as a result of their work. It is important to understand what this looks like to prevent any long-term impact on our physical and mental health.

This booklet explores what burnout is and the impact it can have as well as providing tools to enhance wellbeing and enable you to thrive at work.

The impact of stress and burnout

Recognising the signs of stress and burnout from work is crucial for early intervention and prevention of serious mental and physical health issues. Stress and burnout have many things in common, but they are not the same.

Stress is often short-term and can impact energy, emotions, and sleep. Those experiencing stress are still able to engage in activities and work.

Burnout on the other hand is a chronic state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged work stress which impacts the ability to function.

Burnout is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an occupational phenomenon. While it is not a medical or mental health condition, it has been classified as a syndrome, meaning a collection of symptoms or signs associated with a specific health-related cause (The Burnout Report, 2025).

Burnout consists of a combination of physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms and these can look like:

Physical symptoms of burnout

- Feeling tired or exhausted most of the time
- Recurring insomnia and sleep disturbances
- Frequent headaches
- Muscle or joint pain
- Gastrointestinal problems, such as feeling sick or loss of appetite
- Frequent illness due to lowered immunity
- High blood pressure
- Breathing issues

Emotional symptoms of burnout

- Feeling helpless, trapped, and/or defeated
- Self-doubt – feeling like a failure or worthless
- Feeling detached and alone in the world
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling demotivated, having a cynical/negative outlook
- Lacking a sense of satisfaction and achievement
- Loss of interest and enjoyment
- Persistent feelings of dread, worry and anxiety.

Behavioural symptoms of burnout

- Procrastinating and taking longer to complete things
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decreased output and productivity
- Becoming isolated and withdrawing from people, responsibilities, etc.
- Reliant on food, drugs or alcohol to cope
- Irritable and short-tempered, likely to have outbursts and take frustrations out on others
- Increased tardiness and/or higher absenteeism.

Burnout consists of a combination of physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms

“

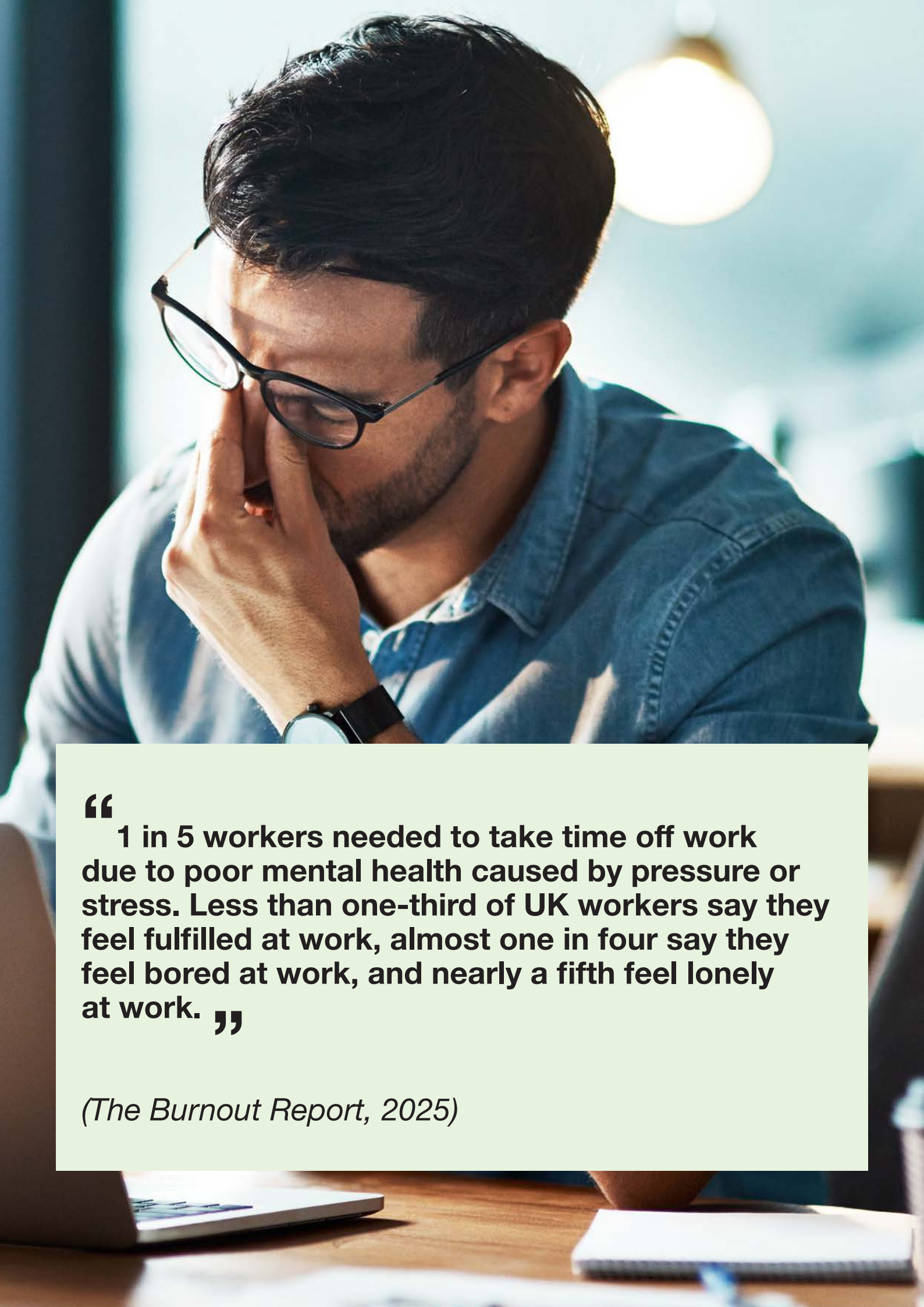
Burnout is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as an occupational phenomenon.

While it is not a medical or mental health condition, it has been classified as a syndrome, meaning a collection of symptoms or signs associated with a specific health-related cause. ”

“

Two-thirds of working UK adults said that high or extreme levels of pressure or stress impacted sleep (64%), while nearly half highlighted diet (45%) or self-confidence (44%). Relationships are also impacted, with 40% saying high levels of stress affect relationships with friends and family, and 34% saying they affect relationships with a partner. ”

(The Burnout Report, 2025).



“

1 in 5 workers needed to take time off work due to poor mental health caused by pressure or stress. Less than one-third of UK workers say they feel fulfilled at work, almost one in four say they feel bored at work, and nearly a fifth feel lonely at work. ”

(The Burnout Report, 2025)

Have you experienced any signs of stress or burnout?

Physical: _____

Emotional: _____

Behavioural: _____

The effects of burnout extend beyond the workplace, affecting a large portion of our lives and general wellbeing.

Burnout can also be experienced as a result of other life pressures and demands such as responsibilities as a caregiver, parent or living with a chronic illness or condition.

Intersecting identities such as race, gender, and disability further exacerbate stress and burnout, with ethnic minorities, women, and those in lower-paid sectors disproportionately affected. Creating inclusive and equitable workplace cultures is critical to addressing the compounded challenges faced by these groups.

What contributes to burnout?

- Money and financial concerns
- Working arrangements (e.g. office, at home, hybrid working)
- Uncertainty around job security
- Physical and mental health difficulties
- Isolation and loneliness at work

Burnout can occur when the job demands exceed the resources available (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) or when there is a mismatch between the person and the work environment (French *et al.*, 1982).

What factors do you believe contribute to your stress or burnout?

“ Burnout can occur when the job demands exceed the resources available. ”

French et al, 1982)

The Maslach Burnout Inventory Framework provides three key dimensions of burnout:

Dimension	Signs	Description
Emotional exhaustion	Feeling drained, overextended	No energy left to give to work or others
Depersonalisation / cynicism	Irritability, detachment, negativity	Loss of empathy or connection with coworkers/clients
Reduced personal accomplishment	Feelings of failure, ineffectiveness	Decline in work performance or self-esteem

Maslach and Jackson (1981)

At an organisational level signs of burnout might look like increased conflict among team members, a drop in employee engagement or morale, high staff turnover, increased errors or complaints, and a lack of innovation or initiative.

What does wellbeing look like to you?

The PERMA model

The PERMA model is a framework developed by psychologist Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology. It outlines five core elements of psychological wellbeing and happiness. The model is especially useful in personal development, mental health, leadership, and organisational performance. PERMA stands for:

Positive emotion

Experiencing joy, gratitude, and hope. Not just happiness, but a broader range of positive feelings.

Engagement

Deep involvement in work—"flow" state. Time passes quickly because you are immersed.

Relationships

Having strong, healthy social connections.

Meaning

Belonging to something bigger than oneself—purpose.

Accomplishment

Pursuing and achieving goals for its own sake.

Positive emotions

Positive emotions include hope, interest, joy, love, compassion, pride, amusement, and gratitude. Positive emotions are a prime indicator of thriving, and they can be cultivated or learned to improve wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2001). When individuals can explore, savour, and integrate positive emotions into daily life it improves habitual thinking and acting. Positive emotions can undo the harmful effects of negative emotions and promote resilience (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Flow

Flow includes the loss of self-consciousness and complete absorption in an activity. In other words, it is living in the present moment and focusing entirely on the task at hand. People are more likely to experience flow when they use their top character strengths. Research on engagement has found that individuals who try to use their strengths in new ways each day for a week also experience increased levels of happiness (Seligman *et al.*, 2005).

Relationships

Relationships encompass all the various interactions individuals have with partners, friends, family members, colleagues, bosses/mentors/supervisors, and their community at large. Relationships in the PERMA model refer to feeling supported, loved, and valued by others. Relationships are included in the model based on the idea that humans are inherently social creatures (Seligman, 2012). Research has demonstrated that sharing good news or celebrating success fosters strong bonds and better relationships (Siedlecki *et al.*, 2014).

“

Being fully engaged in a task, or in a state of flow, occurs when the perfect combination of challenge and skill/strength is found.

”

(Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989)

Having meaning

Having meaning or purpose in life is different for everyone. Meaning may be pursued through a profession, a social or political cause, a creative endeavour, or a religious/ spiritual belief. It may be found in a career or through extracurricular, volunteer, or community activities. Seligman (2012) discussed meaning as belonging and/or serving something greater than ourselves. Having a purpose in life helps individuals focus on what is really important in the face of significant challenge or adversity.

A sense of accomplishment

A sense of accomplishment is a result of working towards and reaching goals, mastering an endeavour, and having self-motivation to finish what you set out to do. This contributes to wellbeing because individuals can look at their lives with a sense of pride (Seligman, 2012). Accomplishment includes the concepts of perseverance and having a passion to attain goals. But flourishing and wellbeing come when accomplishment is tied to striving towards things with an internal motivation or working towards something just for the sake of the pursuit and improvement (Quinn, 2018).

Using PERMA at work

Positive emotion

Foster a positive work environment with appreciation, humour, and team celebrations. Encourage gratitude exercises, positive feedback, or start meetings with “what went well.”

Engagement

Offer job crafting opportunities, autonomy, or training to match interests. Match tasks with strengths; reduce distractions and enable deep work.

Relationships

Promote collaboration, peer support, mentoring, and social events. Create buddy systems, celebrate team wins, support open communication.

Meaning

Connect daily tasks to company values, mission, or greater impact. Share stories of how the work impacts customers or communities.

Accomplishment

Use SMART goals, give recognition, celebrate progress, and support career development.

Embed PERMA in the Work Culture

- Train managers in the PERMA framework.
- Align leadership behaviours and HR practices with PERMA principles.
- Include PERMA-related KPIs in employee wellbeing strategies.
- Regularly survey or check-in with employees.
- Adjust initiatives based on feedback and outcomes.

Organisations using PERMA report better morale, retention, and employee satisfaction and PERMA-based interventions can lead to lasting improvement in wellbeing.

Wellbeing and thriving at work



Research demonstrates that wellbeing is not only valuable because it feels good, but also because it has beneficial real-world consequences.

The benefits of wellbeing

Compared to people with low wellbeing, individuals with higher levels of wellbeing:

- Perform better at work
- Have more satisfying relationships
- Are more cooperative
- Have stronger immune systems
- Have better physical health
- Live longer
- Have reduced cardiovascular mortality
- Have fewer sleep problems
- Have lower levels of burnout
- Have greater self-control
- Have better self-regulation and coping abilities
- Are more prosocial

Research has identified optimism as one of the key contributors to wellbeing. Studies show that optimism brings many benefits compared to pessimism, including:

- Less depression and anxiety
- Better performance at school, sports, and work
- Reduced risk of dropping out of school
- Better physical health outcomes, including fewer reported illnesses, less coronary heart disease, lower mortality risk, and faster recovery from surgery.

Optimism is one of the key contributors to wellbeing.

Tools for thriving

PERMA (as mentioned above) offers a framework to enhance wellbeing, and here are a few specific tools and techniques which can prevent burnout and help with thriving at work.

Grounding techniques

Grounding techniques are coping strategies that help bring you back to the present moment, especially when you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, dissociated, or stressed. They help reduce the intensity of negative thoughts or emotions by redirecting your focus to the here and now.

1. Physical grounding

This technique uses the body or senses to connect with the physical world.

- Use the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. Name: five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste.
- Hold a cold object (e.g. ice cube, cold water bottle) and focus on its texture and temperature.
- Touch different textures (carpet, wall, cloth) and describe them aloud or to yourself.
- Stretching or walking: Engage your body to bring awareness back to the present.

2. Mental/cognitive grounding

This technique uses mental exercises to distract or anchor the mind.

- Categories game: Name as many animals, countries, or films as you can.
- Count backwards from 100 by sevens or threes.
- Use maths or spelling: Spell your full name backwards or solve a simple maths problem.
- Name facts about your environment, for example, "I am in my room. It's Tuesday. The window is open."

3. Soothing/self-compassion grounding

This technique helps calm the mind and body through positive and reassuring self-talk.

- **Affirmations:** "This feeling will pass." "I am safe right now."
- **Visualisation:** Imagine a safe place in detail (a beach, forest, favourite memory).
- **Self-soothing phrases:** Talk to yourself as you would to a friend: "You're doing the best you can.", "It's okay to feel this way."



Key benefits of grounding

It disrupts rumination and overwhelming thoughts.

It engages the parasympathetic system (calms the body).

It promotes mindfulness and presence.

It reduces the symptoms of panic, anxiety, and dissociation.



One way to practise gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal and write 3–5 things you're grateful for each day or week. Focus on specifics (e.g. "I'm grateful for the coffee my friend made this morning").

Practising gratitude

Gratitude techniques help individuals focus on what is going well, what they appreciate, and the positive aspects of life. They are proven to boost wellbeing, increase optimism, and improve relationships.

- **Gratitude journal:** (see above)
- **Three good things:** At the end of the day, write down three positive things that happened and why they happened.
- **Gratitude jar:** Every day or week, write one thing you're grateful for on a small piece of paper and put it in a jar. Review them monthly or during difficult times.

Identifying strengths

Strength-based techniques help people recognise and use their core strengths, such as kindness, creativity, perseverance, or leadership. These build confidence, motivation, and resilience.

Best possible self exercise

Visualise yourself in the future, having used your strengths to overcome challenges and reach meaningful goals. Write about it in detail. This can increase optimism and self-efficacy.

Strength spotting

Notice and reflect on when you or others are using strengths. Ask "What strength did I use today?" "What strength did my friend/colleague use in that situation?" This encourages positive feedback and builds morale.

Identify signature strengths

There are multiple online tools to help identify core strengths and values. Such as VIA Character Strengths Survey (viacharacter.org).

Strength-based goal setting

When setting goals, align them with your key strengths. For example, if your strength is 'creativity' think of unique solutions.

Mindful movement

Mindful movement involves engaging in gentle physical activity (like stretching, walking, or yoga) while paying full attention to bodily sensations, breath, and movement, without judgment. It brings awareness to how the body feels in the present moment, helping ground and calm the nervous system.

Mindful walking

- Walk slowly in a quiet place.
- Focus on sensations in your feet, legs, and posture.
- Notice the feeling of contact with the ground.
- Let your arms swing naturally or rest by your sides.
- Use phrases like “lifting, moving, placing” to track each step.

Mindful stretching

- Perform gentle stretches (e.g. reaching arms overhead, neck rolls, forward bends).
- Stay connected to your breath and sensations.
- Pause between movements and notice the effects.

Movement with breath

- Match your movements to your breathing (e.g. inhale as you raise your arms, exhale as you lower them).
- Move slowly and intentionally.

Time management and planning

Here is an overview of techniques that can be helpful with time management and priority planning.

Time blocking

- Divide your day into blocks of time dedicated to specific tasks.
- Schedule focused work, meetings, breaks, and admin time.
- Use tools like work calendar, Google calendar, Outlook, Notion

Pomodoro technique

See top right

SMART goals

Set yourself goals that are:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**elevant
- **T**ime-bound

ABC method

A tasks = Must do today (high impact/consequence)

B tasks = Should do soon (medium importance)

C tasks = Nice to do (low impact)

Prioritise A tasks, then move down the list.



The Pomodoro technique involves working for 25 minutes then taking a five minute break. After four cycles, a longer break (15-30 minutes) is suggested.

This way of working helps maintain focus and reduce fatigue.

Benefits of boundaries

It is important to set boundaries in order to preserve your wellbeing, time, and energy.

This might include allocating specific times for specific tasks, such as checking emails and letting people know when they may receive a response (e.g. “I check my email twice a day — morning and afternoon — and will get back to you then.”). Time boundaries, e.g. turning off work notifications at the end of your working day, can help protect your work/life balance.

It is also important to say “no” to tasks beyond your role or capacity, and to delegate when appropriate.



Work culture and connection

Work culture encompasses the values, beliefs and attitudes that guide an organisation. It sets expectations for how employees should behave and interact with one another as they perform their day-to-day responsibilities and contribute to the company's overall mission.

Work culture can have a profound impact on several significant aspects of the employee experience, like individual and team morale, workplace engagement, and job satisfaction.

Several factors impact work culture:

- Feeling respected
- Having supportive leadership
- Whether leaders' actions align with core values
- Managers who foster a toxic work environment
- Witnessing unethical behaviour
- Benefits
- Perks and amenities
- Opportunities for learning and professional development
- Job security
- Frequency and quality of reorganisations

Fostering environments where mental health is prioritised and diverse voices are heard is essential to reducing burnout, enhancing wellbeing and productivity.



Guidance for remote workers

Remote and hybrid work can pose unique challenges like isolation and blurred boundaries. To prevent burnout:

Set boundaries

Create a dedicated workspace and log off from systems outside working hours.

Build connections

Schedule virtual chats with colleagues and check in regularly with your manager.

Take proactive breaks

Take regular short breaks and incorporate energising activities like stretching or short walks.

What is your work environment like? What do you enjoy? Is there anything that should change?



Essentials for creating a positive and inclusive work environment*

- **Create holistic wellbeing strategies** that acknowledge and address the interconnected factors outside of work that affect employees' mental health. Such as providing financial support through training and alternative pay schemes to help manage finances.
- **Enforce zero-tolerance policies.** Address bullying and harassment with robust, well communicated procedures.
- **Build inclusive employee networks and mission boards** to allow representation and insight from all demographics, bridging cultural gaps and building understanding of managing mental health and reducing stigma around mental health self-care and taking time off.
- **Ensure that workloads are reasonable and achievable.** High workloads are a leading cause of stress.
- **Promote a cultural shift in the perception around taking time off** when sick or utilising annual leave. Recognise and promote that when employees are not well, they will underperform. Encourage a culture where taking time off for health reasons is supported.
- **Offer a physical health programme that complements mental health and wellbeing initiatives,** giving employees the chance to include exercise and various physical activities in their daily routine.

Asking about and talking about wellbeing regularly enables managers to be pro-active in supporting colleagues.

- **Collaborate with diverse voices.** Involve young workers, ethnic minorities, and marginalised groups in creating wellbeing policies together.
- **Collaborate between line managers and HR** to ensure a clear understanding of what reasonable adjustments are available, when to offer them, and how to implement them.
- **Regularly check in about workload and challenges** as well as the tasks and projects themselves to help stay ahead of any issues and plan accordingly.
- **Wellbeing check-ins should feature in 1:1s and team meetings.** Ask about and talk about wellbeing regularly so that managers and colleagues can support proactively.



Final thoughts

Our work can provide purpose, meaning, connection, and community. However, there are many reasons why work might also lead to stress and burnout which can have long-term effects on our physical and mental health.

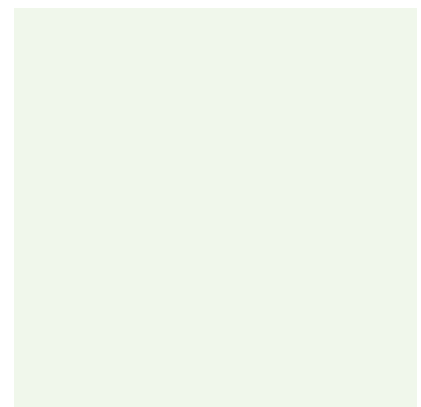
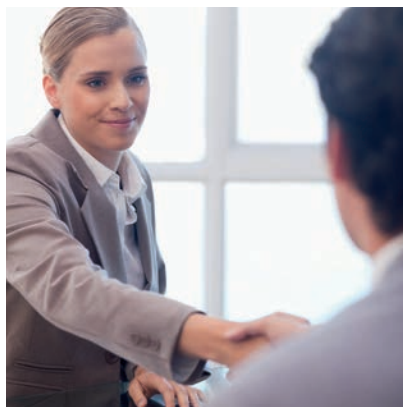
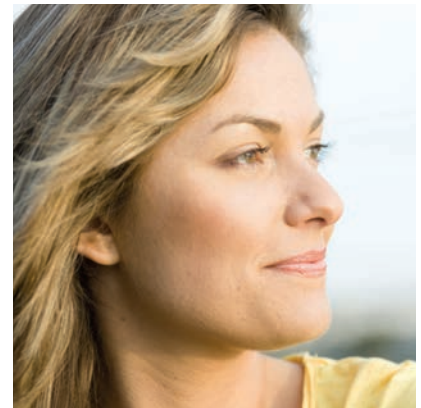
Recognising the signs of burnout early on can help prevent long-lasting impact. Introducing boundaries around work/life balance with time management and priority planning can help reduce stress and anxiety. Habits and routines before work, during lunch, or after work which focus on reflecting on strengths, gratitude, and grounding can also help enhance wellbeing and positive experiences. It is important to acknowledge how work culture, connection, and leadership impact our engagement with work. In order to thrive at work we have to continue to reflect on what works well and what might need to change. For ourselves, for our colleagues, and for the work culture.

“ Recognising the signs of burnout early can help prevent long-lasting impact. ”

* *The Burnout Report, 2025*

Further reading

- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & LeFevre, J. (1989) Optimal experience in work and leisure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56(5), 815–822.
- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 499–512.
- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 499–512.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226.
- French, J. R. P., Caplan, R. D., & Harrison, R. V. (1982). The mechanisms of job stress and strain. Wiley.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of organizational behavior*, 2(2), 99–113.
- Mental Health UK. (2025). Burnout. <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout/>
- Mental Health UK. (2025). The Burnout Report. <https://mhukcdn.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/16142505/Mental-Health-UK-The-Burnout-Report-2025.pdf>
- Quinn, A. (2018, February 3). Theory of well-being: Elements and interventions. GoodTherapy Blog.
- Seligman, M. (2012). Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing. Atria books.
- Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–421.
- Siedlecki, K. L., Salthouse, T. A., Oishi, S., & Jeswani, S. (2014). The relationship between social support and subjective wellbeing across age. *Social Indicators Research*, 117(2), 561–576.
- Tugade, M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320–333.



First Psychology Assistance offers:

Mental health and wellbeing services to businesses and organisations to support employees fulfill their potential.

Employee counselling, CBT & psychological therapies | wellbeing and personal performance coaching for employers | webinars, workshops, employee events and consultation.

Aberdeen | Borders | Dundee | Edinburgh | Glasgow | Inverness
Newcastle | Perth | Online

Tel: 03330 344115

Email: info@firstpsychology-assistance.co.uk

Web: www.firstpsychology-assistance.co.uk

© First Psychology Ltd