

Conversation Guide: How to support an employee experiencing burnout

Employers are responsible for fostering mentally healthy workplaces that actively promote staff engagement, fulfilment, and wellbeing. Whilst employers can make systemic changes transforming workplace experiences, managers are on the front lines of burnout prevention.

This guide supports conversations with employees showing signs of burnout, whether observed or reported by the employee.

Addressing employee burnout requires understanding root causes, showing empathy, and taking targeted action.



Top tips for addressing burnout

Go beyond an 'open door' policy

Ask regularly about an employee's wellbeing, helping to reduce reluctance and fear of judgement or repercussions.

Early intervention

Spot the signs of burnout to provide timely support. This helps prevent issues such as employee turnover, absenteeism, or performance concerns.

Flag observations

If you spot a sign, gently raise concerns by saying, "I've noticed..." or "I'm wondering ...". This will help create a safe for employees to discuss their struggles.



Be clear about confidentiality

There are limits on workplace confidentiality. Promise to share information only with those who need to know in order to provide help.

Managerial support

Seek an impartial perspective, guidance on adjustments, and reassurance on your approach with your manager or Human Resources department.

Consult HR

Get expert advice and ensure legal compliance. They can provide guidance on adjustments, document contractual changes and connect employees with Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or Occupational Health Service (OHS).

Listen without judgement

Focus on understanding their perspective rather than justifying or defending any of your actions. It's more productive to listen and reflect.

Don't dismiss or minimise

Regardless of your interpretation, take time to understand. Avoid attributions of inexperience, lack of resilience, or exaggeration.

Don't leap to solutions

It can feel insincere and lacking empathy if you rush to solutions. Not interrupting and giving them time you will help you to tailor solutions.

Take notes

Keep records for reference to inform follow-ups or potential HR queries. Share notes with the employee to ensure accuracy.

Explore patterns

Establish a timeline of factors leading to burnout, including frequency, impact on work and others, and key triggers. How are they feeling physically and mentally and has their behaviour changed?

Clarification

Address any misunderstandings by clarifying expectations. Explore the employee's perception of their workload to uncover specific concerns or underlying beliefs. Supportively deconstruct or challenge interpretations if helpful.

Personal factors

Home life or issues outside of work may be adding stress, so whilst maintaining professional boundaries, enquire how everything is for them outside of work. Identifying how personal factors contribute to wellbeing is important.

Tailor solutions

One solution doesn't work for all. Understand the individual's needs to tailor solutions, ensuring they are credible and deliverable, with potential options should you meet with resistance.

Short and long-term solutions

A backlog of work may require a short-term fix, whilst reconfiguring responsibilities in the team would take time. Consider a combination.

Individual workload review

Explore which tasks can be redistributed, removed, or delayed.

Team workload review

Consider workloads in the team to see if others could support or whether there is a need for additional resources team-wide.

Budget

Explore options for outsourcing or temporary support. Consider alternatives like secondment opportunities or split roles with funding from different sources.

Possible adjustments

Discuss options which would support work-life balance, such as compressed hours, remote or agile working, no meeting day, etc.

Training and development

Offer opportunities to build confidence and competence in the role. Consider peer support, mentoring, or coaching to enhance skills and strengths.

Technology and tools

Explore technology solutions that support productivity or efficiencies, such as project management software or AI technologies. Employment policies and rights: Ensure the employee's rights are being met; speak to HR if you're unsure.

Leave

Discuss potential leave options, including annual leave, sickness leave, special leave, sabbaticals, etc. Some would have pay implications that should be explored.

Environment

Explore their requirements in the workplace such as a designated quiet area, lighting, etc.

Discuss constraints

Acknowledge immovable aspects honestly such as pay, staffing, etc. Provide clarity on why certain aspects are fixed if needs be.



Different perceptions

Handle differences respectfully. Instead of directly questioning their view, encourage reflection by exploring hypothetical scenarios.

Team dynamics

A burnt-out employee may affect team morale and collaboration. Model supportive behaviour to foster compassion.

Workplace relationships

Understand workplace relationships and their impact. Identify potential peer support and address any negative influences like bullying.

Projecting ahead

Envision a positive future by discussing what a healthy workplace looks like for them. Reinvigorate energy and commitment to solutions.

Summarise actions

Recap agreed actions for both of you, timescales and review date.

Express gratitude

Thank the employee for sharing their feelings, this provides positive closure, affirms their value, and encourages continued communication.

Time out

Before returning to work, provide downtime to decompress after talking about such a sensitive topic. Allow space for both of you to process the conversation.



Evaluate and revisit

This stage is important to assess how effective the measures put in place have been for both the employee and the team.

- **Assess effectiveness** of implemented measures
- **Conduct return-to-work conversations** after absences
- **Hold regular check-ins** to address challenges
- **Consult HR/manager** for additional resources
- **Implement Wellbeing Action Plan (WAP)** to support discussions.

Important to remember

- **You can't solve everything:** Start by listening, without offering solutions. Some issues will require collaborative exploration
- **Be mindful of micromanagement:** It can erode trust, motivation, and increase stress. Find the right balance so the employee has responsibility and agency
- **Maintain professional boundaries:** Clarify your role as their manager whilst showing empathy for what is shared with you
- **Consider other approaches:** Further guidance and support could be provided via performance reviews, appraisals, wellbeing plans, return to work interviews, etc
- **Prioritise your self-care:** It's important to take time for yourself to ensure your own wellbeing and work-life balance are a priority too
- **Identify systemic issues:** Individual burnout could point to broader concerns. Consider staff wellbeing surveys or a company-wide Stress Risk Assessment (SRA) to understand wider preventative measures.

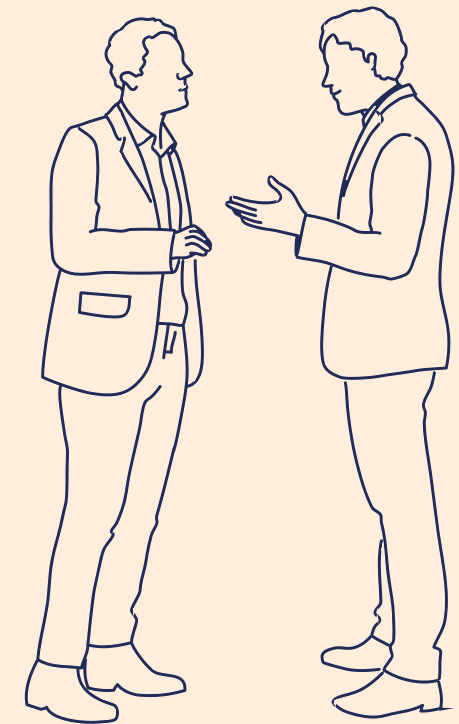
Example questions

Understanding the situation

- **Could you share with me** the symptoms you're experiencing?
- **Can we explore** aspects of work causing you to feel stressed/frustrated/unhappy?
- **To gain clarity** over how I can support you, could we explore your current workload?
- **Are there communication breakdowns** that regularly cause you stress?
- **Are there specific meetings, tasks, or interactions** that cause you stress?
- **Are there any resources, tools, or support** that would make your job more manageable?
- **Are there any expectations** that feel unsustainable, whether from yourself, colleagues, or leadership?
- **What changes would most improve** your work-life balance and wellbeing at work?
- **Is there anything happening outside work,** that you feel comfortable sharing, that's affecting your wellbeing here?
- **What specific steps can we take** to address any concerns you've shared?

Framing solutions

- **Have you considered...?** (expand)
- **Maybe you could try...** (expand)
- **Can you walk me through...?** (expand)
- **Listening to what you've said, I'm wondering whether...** (expand)
- **Have I understood it correctly...?** (expand)



Visit Mental Health UK's website for more info or scan the QR

[mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout)