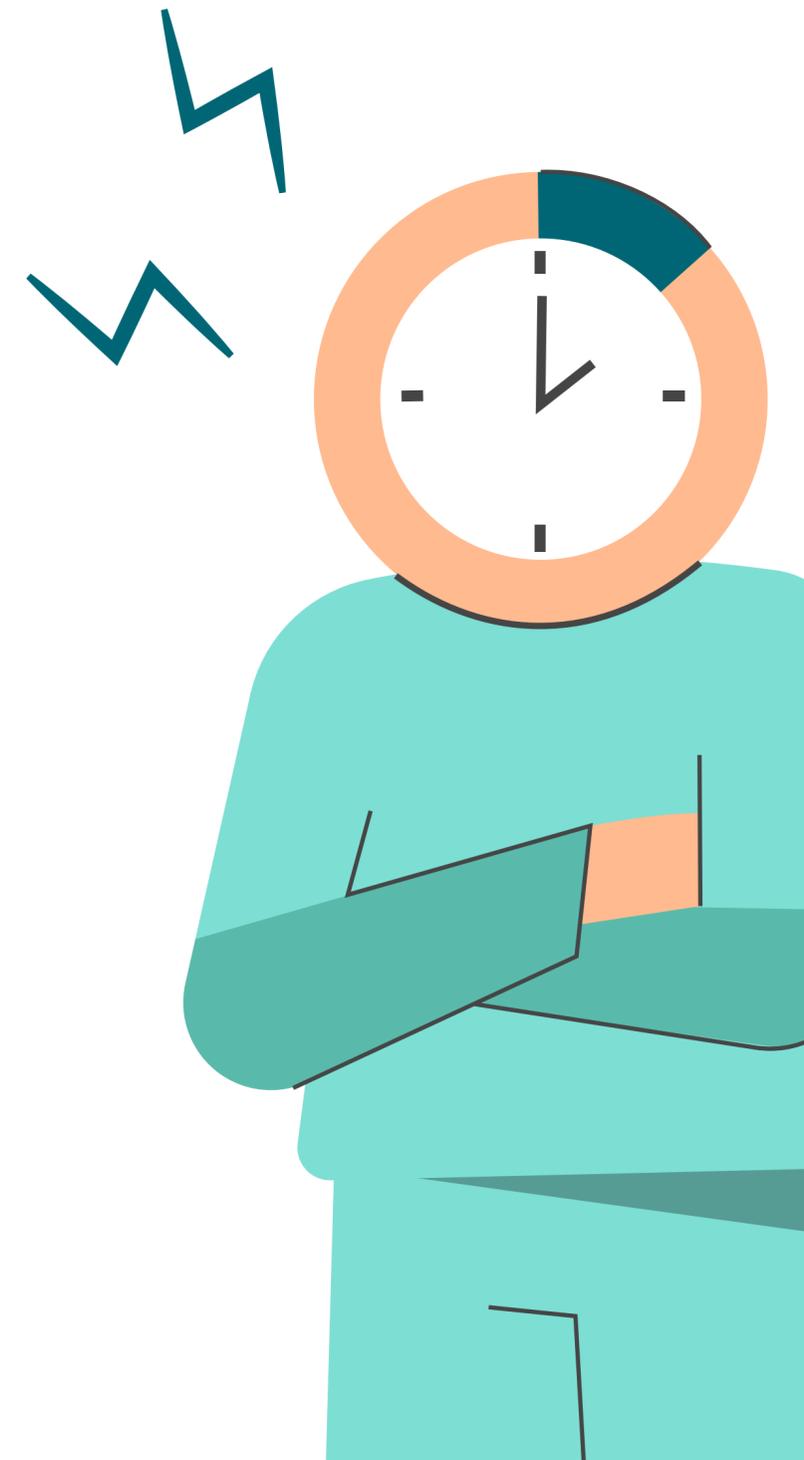




Project Manager:  
**How to avoid or manage  
burnout on your team**

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# INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that discussing mental health has been the milestone of this decade. In the last 2 years, society has gained significant knowledge about the conditions of the mind and how serious they can be. Following this movement, the world started to realize that mental health can be affected by several reasons and different areas of life.

Work, for example, is one of the most relevant environments when it comes to someone's wellbeing. We spent the majority of our day working, so why shouldn't we take care of ourselves while doing it? And just as important, why don't we take care of each other while working?

When you're in a leadership position, your job isn't just making sure that people get things done, you're also there to certify that your team is in the right place and in the right shape, physically and mentally. This also applies to Project Managers, after all, they're routinely dealing with other people's frustrations, and expectations, whether they're work-related, or just personal.

So, if you're a PM, we're here to talk about project burnout and how it can affect your team. This e-book will show you how to contribute to reducing the chances of project burnout and, at the same time, manage the crisis if it happens. We hope it's a very enlightening reading.

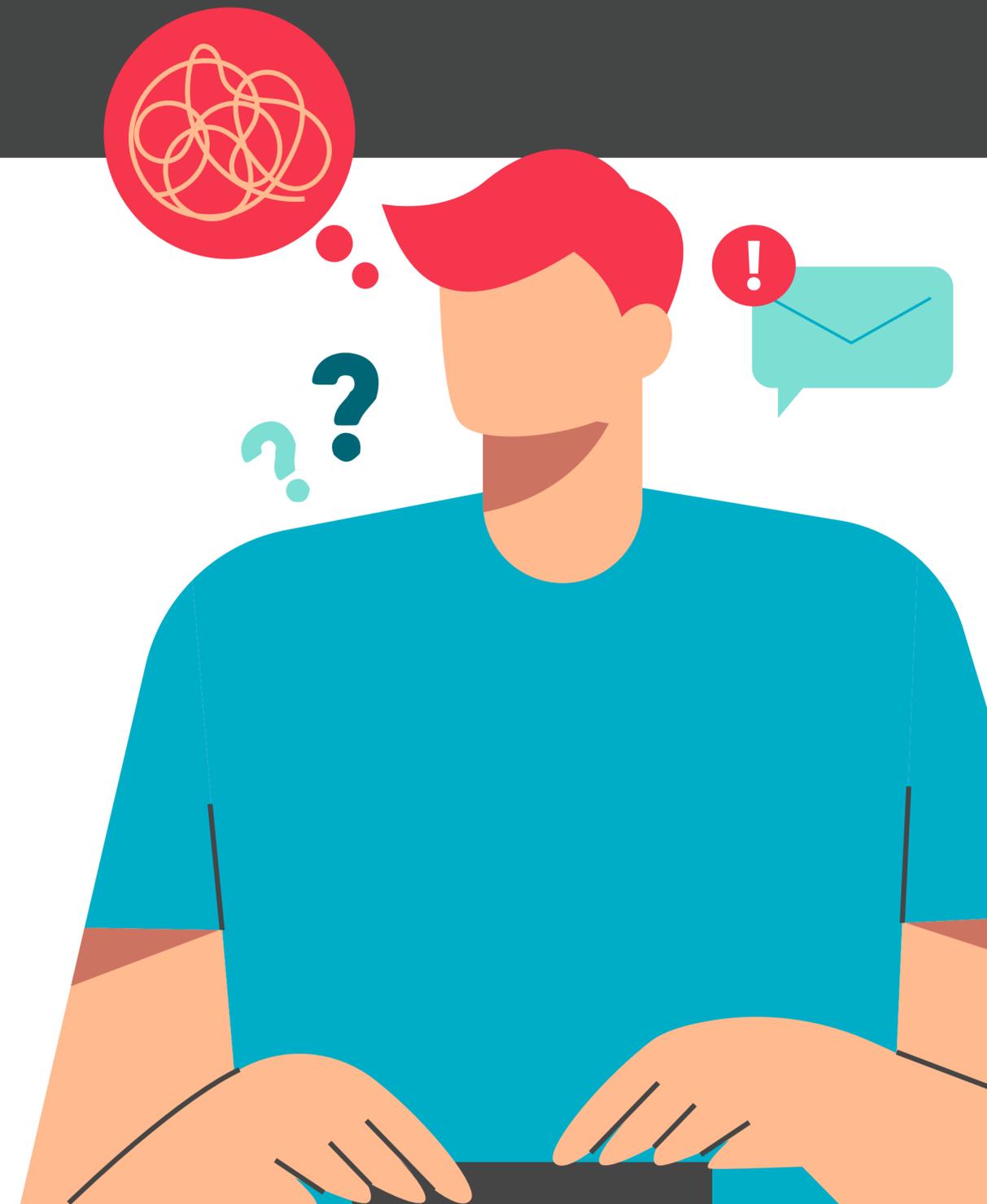
# UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT

Have you ever heard the tale of “the burnout employee”? The story usually goes something like this: a person sees that there’s a job opening in that company they’ve always dreamed of. They apply for the job, get hired, and start working. The days go by and the work gets harder and harder to do. There are impossible deadlines, a lot of pressure, extra hours at the office... It gets to a point where the person becomes extremely overwhelmed with the job and the only thing they can think about is how much they want a break. One day, they stop to notice that they just can’t take it anymore: they have burnout syndrome.

Everyone has days when they feel stressed out because of work. There isn’t such a thing as

the perfect job, at least, not all the time. Feeling overwhelmed and frustrated is okay when it’s not frequent! But, if the feeling persists, it can eventually lead to burnout.

If this is your first time hearing about it, burnout is defined as a state of physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion caused by chronic workplace stress (abusive work situations, massive competitiveness, or responsibility). There isn’t any specific occupation that is more susceptible to burnout, it can impact any worker who operates daily under pressure and with constant responsibilities, including remote workers.



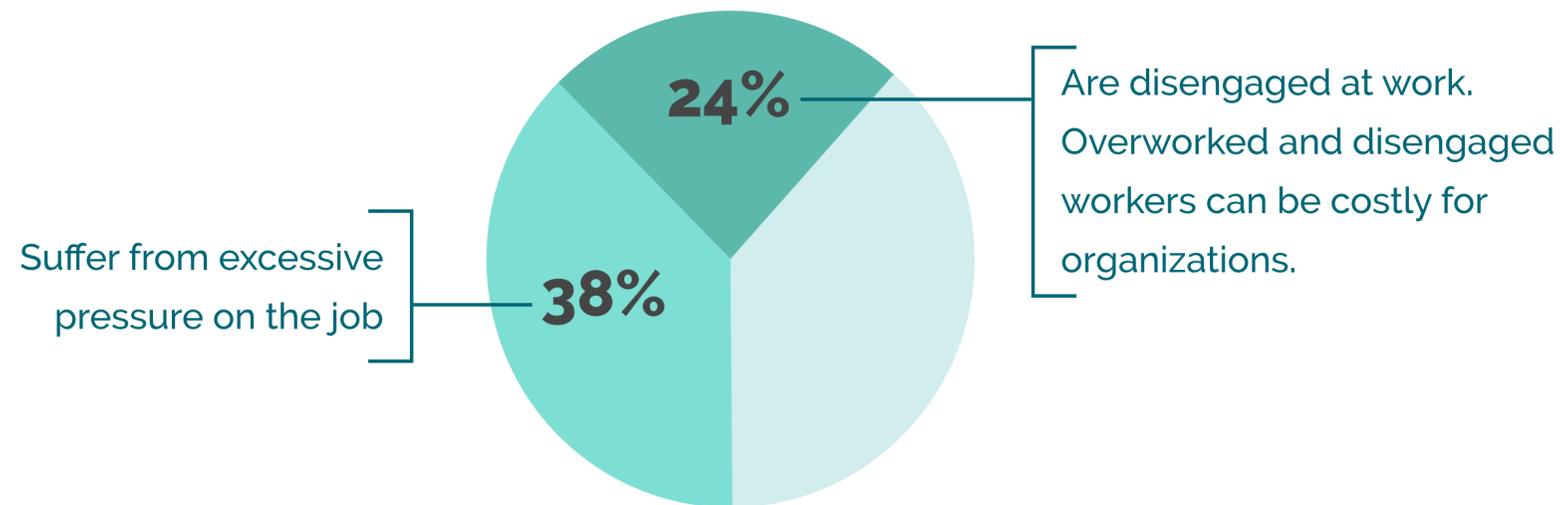
# THE NUMBERS DON'T LIE

Let's visualize this: according to research [done by Gallop](#), organizations are facing an employee burnout crisis. The study was conducted **in 2018** with **nearly 7,500** full-time employees and it revealed that **23% of them feel burned out at work** very often or always. In addition, **44%** reported feeling **burned out sometimes**. Long story short, two-thirds of full-time workers tend to experience burnout on the job.

That's a large group of people, right?

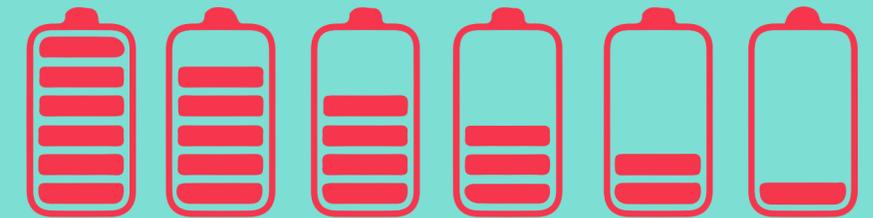
## Workplace well-being is a serious issue

AMONG THE WORLD'S 3.2 BILLION WORKERS:



**US\$300 billion - Annual cost of work-related stress in the U.S.**

**US\$550 billion - Annual cost of disengagement at work in the U.S.**



This puts organizational leaders who care about their employees in a tough situation: they have to avoid burnout, but they also need to inspire higher productivity and performance. The thing is that this dichotomy isn't the real problem. The main factors that cause employee burnout have less to do with expectations for hard work and high performance - and more to do with how someone is managed. That's when a [project manager](#) comes into the picture: they must be able to recognize the early signs of project burnout and help the team address them at the onset.

## CHAPTER 2

# PROJECT BURNOUT

This specific condition is a state of physical and mental exhaustion when the work consistently exceeds the amount of energy someone has on a daily basis. When this occurs, the team's productivity drastically declines and there is a lack of motivation among the members.

The catch is: project burnout can easily spread through the entire team if it is not recognized in the early stages, it's almost contagious. Team members tend to have conversations with each other to talk about their complaints, problems, and dissatisfactions. With that in mind, project managers need to be especially careful since other members might quickly follow the feeling.



# And what are the main causes of project burnout specifically?

Considering that the project management universe is present in a lot of different business segments, numerous reasons or scenarios can cause burnout. With that being said, the Project Manager must identify if their employees or team is dealing with burnout. To help, they should keep an eye up for any of the following situations:

- **Unfair treatment at work**  
An employee that often feels unfairly treated is more likely to experience a high level of burnout. This scenario can include everything from bias, favoritism, mistreatment by a coworker, unfair compensation, and/or corporate policies. A project manager has to equally distribute conversations, tasks, feedback, recognition, rewards, and provide similar working conditions.
- **Unmanageable workload**  
When facing a chaotic and demanding workload, high-performing employees tend to shift from optimistic to hopeless workers, leading up to poor performance and lack of confidence. That's when they look up to their managers to be their advocates for what it's possible to execute and also for finding others to help them.
- **Lack of work clarity**  
In a report by the [State of the American Workplace](#), it was found that only 60% of workers can affirm that they know what is expected of them at work. The other 40% probably deals with inconsistency, becoming exhausted from trying to figure out their role and what's expected of them.
- **Lack of communication and support**  
Employees rely on the comfort of knowing that even if something goes wrong, their manager has their back. When that's not the case, a negligent manager can leave employees feeling uninformed, alone, and defensive.
- **Tight deadlines**  
An employer who has enough time to execute their work is less likely to experience high burnout. When time constraints are constantly imposed on people, work quality, and customer service tend to suffer. For example: when employees miss a big deadline, they fall behind on the next thing they are scheduled to do.
- **Micromanaging everything**  
There's a false assumption that micromanagement helps with stability and clarity, but, in reality, it is neither effective nor productive in the long run. It also makes the team members feel like their managers don't trust them enough, which eventually can lead to decreased performance.



## CHAPTER 3

# HOW TO IDENTIFY WHEN SOMEONE IS DEALING WITH BURNOUT?



### **A drop in performance:**

When a member is completing projects late, turning in lower quality work, or misunderstanding requirements more frequently.



### **Having a hard time focusing and rationalizing:**

Burnout workers often have trouble remembering details and with critical thinking. As a PM, watch for signs of distraction in situations that require quick thinking or hard decisions.



### **Struggling to catch up:**

Notice if someone's having a hard time keeping up with tasks or with the rest of the team. They can seem very lost about the development of the project, always asking "obvious" questions, holding the team's performance back, etc.

## CHAPTER 3



### **Exhaustion or sleep deprivation:**

Tiredness, lack of sleep and consequent irritability and drowsiness are frequent signs. Notice if someone is wandering off in a meeting, for example.



### **Isolation and alienation:**

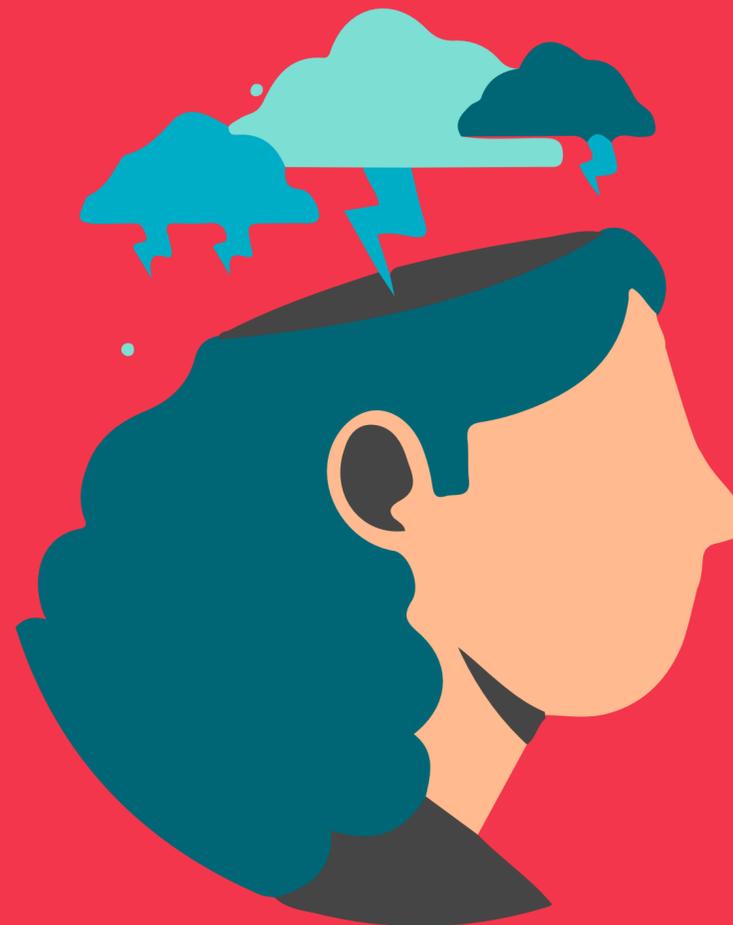
Notice if an employee is acting strange or having trouble controlling their mood. See the interactions between employees: strained relationships, rudeness, irritability, and increasing isolation, these are all warning signs.



### **Always available:**

It happens when an employee isn't able to find time for anything but their job obligations. They no longer go out, interact with people socially, chat about non-work-related topics, in other words, they are working 24/7.

EMPLOYEES WHO SAY  
THEY VERY OFTEN OR  
ALWAYS EXPERIENCE  
BURNOUT AT WORK ARE:



**63%** more likely to take a sick day

**23%** more likely to visit the emergency room

**2.6** times as likely to leave their current employer

**13%** less confident in their performance

# One of your employees has burnout. What should you do now?

Now that you understand how burnout can be identified and, especially, how it can affect your team and the whole business, it is time to execute workplace policies in place to ease it. Let's start with simple and practical steps.

- **Schedule regular informal and relaxing meetings**  
Meetings can also be a moment of chatting about news, hobbies, or a simple catching up on life. Employees should be able to talk about anything, not just their jobs. As a PM, schedule wellbeing meetings, and if you see an open window, talk about mental and physical health and try to get a glimpse of how people are feeling lately or if they're happy with their workload or not.
- **Consider giving your employee some time off**  
As a manager, you can help your employee get their mental health a break by offering a wellness program or, if someone's dealing with severe burnout, you can give them some time off. This method can be a controversial topic for some but, when employees have the time to rest, you'll be "losing" one workday, but securing many [more productive and effective days](#).

- **Review and revise the team's goals**  
If someone comes to you to discuss excessive workload, you must be prepared to be open and to take some action, like reassigning some responsibilities to other teams temporarily, adjusting and resetting expectations, or revisiting goals that might not be a priority. Don't forget to reaffirm their contribution to the team and explain that reassigning work won't reflect negatively on them.
- **Set some boundaries**  
Some employees think that working non-stop, overtime, or pushing their vacation time is what the business expects of them. As a PM you should discourage or forbid these habits when the situation is more serious.

## CHAPTER 3

### ● **Take the initiative to talk about it**

In the professional world, Burnout Syndrome is a relatively new topic. Despite the fact that this condition has been around for a long time, it was never taken seriously. This “oblivious” behavior persists to this day, and it is still common to see people who have never even heard of it. To summarise, as a project manager, you might encounter an employee who is suffering from burnout but is unaware of their own condition.

### **You can raise awareness on this topic by:**



*Researching the signs and educating your employees on them;*

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*Encouraging an environment of open communication;*

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*Establishing a culture where it's not taboo to prioritize one's health and personal life;*

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*Creating the conditions for your employees to practice self-care*



### CHAPTER 3

According to the [Project Management Institute](#), what project managers around the world are saying about how they care for their team members:

*“As a project manager, your role is to fully support the team when times are tough. That sometimes means taking on out-of-job-description activities typically performed by others so each team member can focus on their other tasks and so there’s no slowdown in work progress [...] If it can directly impact our ability to deliver as a team, I will usually not hesitate to change my priorities as required.[...]” — Alexis Pilotelle, PMP, project manager, Cavotec, New Zealand.*

*“ [...] When assigning work to project team members, I explain that I’m available to help complete the task—just ask me. I also pay attention to the individuals: Are they working late? Seemingly frustrated? Bored? You need to be in tune—each individual is unique and performs at different levels. — Leonard Byrd, owner, construction consultant, K2E, Connecticut, USA*

*“The best thing we did to manage this risk was to employ a slow-down-to-speed-up strategy. We reorganized the schedule to leverage resource strengths and reduced the administrative responsibilities of the technical team lead so he could focus on what they did best—technical problem-solving. — Sara Gallagher, PMP, The Persimmon Group, Oklahoma, USA.*

# BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PROJECT MANAGERS THEMSELVES?

We've discussed burnout in your team, but it's also extremely important to avoid and take care of your own burnout. After all, if the person who's supposed to be motivating and stimulating the development of the project is not feeling up to the job, there's a huge chance that the team will be affected by this situation.

Dealing with the daily complex tasks and endeavors can leave a project manager feeling over in so many aspects: overwhelmed, overworked, overstressed, the list goes on... [A Gallup analytics showed that 32%](#) of managers report feeling burned out at work very often or always, compared with 27% of individual contributors.



If you're a PM and you think you might be facing this condition, try to notice if you identify with any of the following signs:



### **Feeling physically and mentally drained**

Constant fatigue is one of the most common signs of burnout. You can be feeling as if both your physical body and mind are resisting to function (or not functioning at all). If you're feeling this prolonged tiredness it should be addressed at the earliest.

### **Performing less than usual**

When you're burned out, you tend to notice your ability to work with efficiency fall significantly. Even the simplest of tasks can start to become complex and unattainable, which will lead to the feeling of not making progress.

### **Facing health issues**

It can be a lot of things: headaches, digestive problems, sleep problems, hair loss, etc. These symptoms are all highly common when project managers undergo serious stress.

### **Having constant mood changes**

In a short period, you can experience a lot of feelings: sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger, and lack of motivation. These mood swings can indicate emotional problems and prevent project managers from performing efficiently. One thing is for sure, most of the moods are bad because burned-out project managers usually have negative thinking patterns.

# How can a Project Manager manage their own burnout crisis?

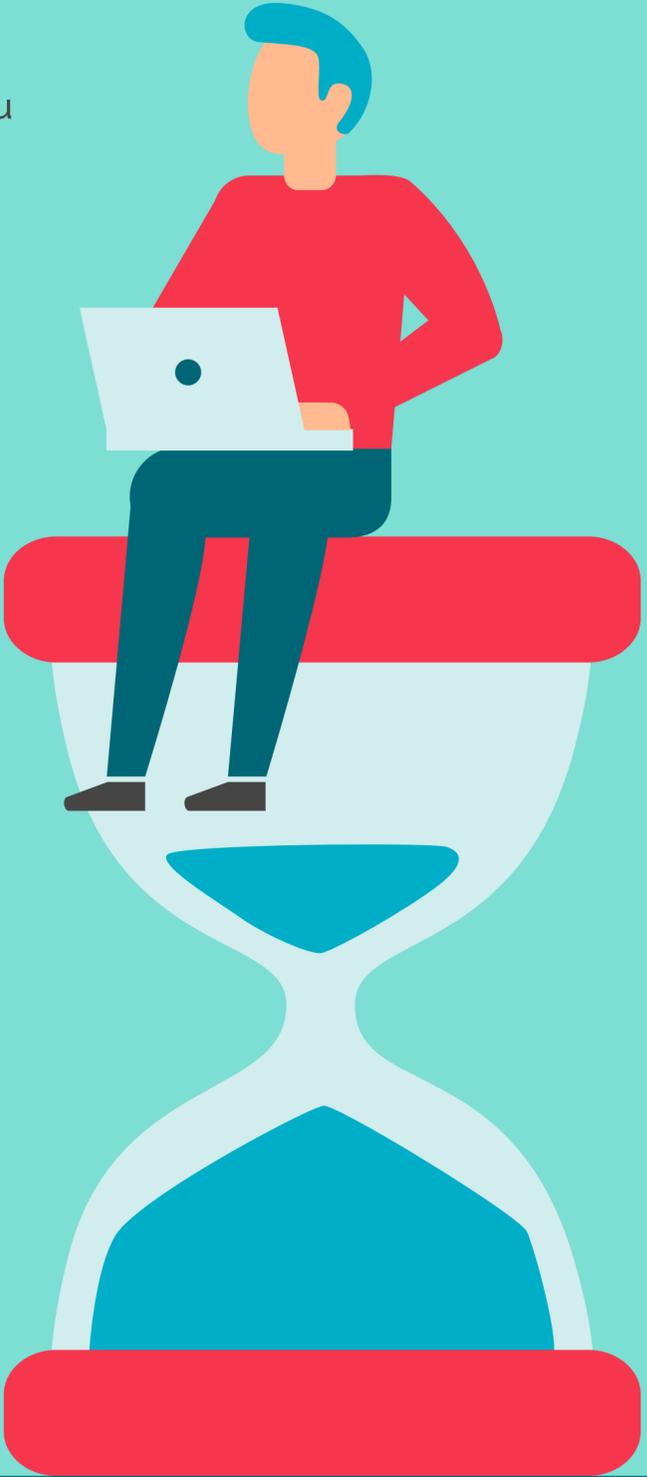
**DON'T PANIC**

- **Value the importance of building strong teamwork**  
If you contribute to the job selection process, make sure to always look for competent individuals who can handle smaller issues, this means less time micromanaging them. If that's not your case, try to identify each member's strengths and use them strategically. This way, you'll build a versatile workforce with [teamwork](#) as their main practice. They'll handle different tasks and, this way, the weight won't be entirely on your shoulders.
- **Be smart while managing your time**  
When you're facing a tight (and apparently impossible) deadline, be creative in [organizing your priorities](#) and managing your time in the smartest way possible. There are several methods to organize, define and remember everything work-related. These methods can help you keep track of the time you spend on each task, assign deadlines, categorize things on a scale of importance, give you stability and keep you aware of your obligations.
- **Be realistic with your work**  
We know that your job is to plan and delegate, but it's completely normal to have things get out of control sometimes. If this happens, do what you can to fix the problem but, if it remains, remember that you tried your best and focus on having a clear conscience of your effort and your limits. No one can guarantee that every little thing will go according to plan.

- **Learn how to say no sometimes**  
There's a misconception that always agreeing to do one more chore only leads to good things. In fact, not knowing when to stop will probably cause overload, stress, and burnout. When a request for one more assignment comes, discuss your availability with who's asking and express your concerns about time management.
- **Never forget: Prevention is the best cure**  
If we could choose, we wouldn't want to learn a lesson by going through a tough time, right? But that's not always possible. So, once the burnout has passed (and you're fully back on track) use your experience to make smarter choices, avoid what may trigger you, and care for others that could be going in the same direction. A great project manager is someone who can be [a guide and an inspiration](#) to a team inside and outside of work.

# CONCLUSION

We hope this book has provided you with valuable and accurate information regarding Burnout syndrome. When you're a project manager, the best thing you can do to advance in your career is to educate yourself on matters that affect your day-to-day job. Prepare to look after your employees and, consequently, your business. We hope you put this knowledge to use and that your team becomes even stronger and more in sync as a result. We wish you success!





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