Preventing Burnout in the Workplace
By
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In the midst a great deal of change in our office, Jim's behaviors gradually changed. Over a period of months we noticed Jim making sarcastic comments about our clients, withdrawing from our usual socializing, making mistakes in his typically competent work. His punctuality turned in to tardiness several days a week and he seemed exhausted all of the time.

You may recognize these symptoms as the result of unchecked stress culminating in professional burnout. Many workers find themselves burnout and not knowing what to do about it. Some times denial and a sense of hopelessness prevent workers from asking for help. What can managers do to prevent burnout in their workplace? First, be aware of the signs and symptoms of burnout. Second, get to know employees to see whether or not they display individual personality characteristics listed below which make persons more susceptible. Third, promote a healthy work environment as a preventive measure to employee burnout. Finally, encourage and support self-care.

Symptoms of burnout

Burnout is the long-term stress reaction. Christina Maslach in Burnout, defines burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally overextended & depleted of emotional resources), depersonalization (negative & cynical detached response to others & may include a loss of idealism) and reduced personal accomplishment (decline in feeling of competence & productivity at work).

The attitudes and behaviors that may indicate burnout are as follows.
- Anger
- Short attention span
- Physical exhaustion
- Loss of interest in clients
- Absenteeism
- Compulsive behaviors (shopping, worrying, substance abuse, smoking)
- Poor productivity
- Personality change
- Poor work relationships

Individual personality characteristics of people at risk for burnout

Perfectionist employees who have always been successful tend to be more prone to burnout. Research indicates young, idealistic, professionals who have unrealistic expectations about the work situation are more vulnerable. Also, empathic people who pour too much of themselves into their jobs and haven't developed good stress-coping mechanisms. Jim described above was a young idealistic professional who was out to

"change the world". He had started his job armed with high levels of energy, ready to work long hours. He poured himself into the job but he wasn't very open to the feedback about how to do things better. Jim had always been successful at everything he had done. Over time, he wore down, losing energy toward his job. His frustrated grew when he didn't achieve his unrealistic expectations. Gradually, his frustration and poor coping turned into burnout.

Workplace factors that may contribute to burnout

A stressful work environment that offers little or no opportunity for personal growth, has an overwhelming workload, and offers little or no support, can lead to burnout. Other work environment factors leading to burnout include.
- Ambiguity – lack of clear expectations
- Lack of autonomy – little input into decisions
- Lack of control of one's job activities, pace, workload
- Role conflict – unsure about authority and responsibility
- Conflicting or competing demands
- Deadline pressures without proper resources
- Too much change (products, technologies, policies, ownership)
- Inadequate feedback about changes and companies status

Prevention of burnout

Stress is a common every day occurrence in the workplace. Learning to pace yourself and develop effective coping behaviors is essential in survival. Here are some suggestions about increasing self- care and preventing burnout.

Individual Strategies

- Identify and build on strengths & learn to manage your weakness by simplifying, eliminating, and delegating
- Clarify your values & address spirituality issues
- Evaluate & modify your negative self-talk
- Forgive yourself & others
- Learn to relax and recreate
- Change your routine
- Set realistic goals & prioritize
- Seek out positive feedback
- Engage in decompression activities
- Recognize your stress tolerance
- Be open to feedback
- Maintain your physical health
- Manage your time

Organizational Strategies

Managers can strive to promote a work environment that advocates: autonomy, positive staff interaction, and opportunities for growth and development, and employee support. Considerate managers who listen and respond to the needs of employees can help reduce distress and provide opportunities for NICE stress – New Interesting Challenging Experiences. Other strategies include.

- Good pay
- Promotion opportunities
- Work control addressed – participation in decision making, say in how work day is organized, able to modulate the pace of the work
- Address work home interference – cross-coverage, childcare, part-time work, flexible work hours, adequate time off
- Encourage & support continuing education, training, and enrichment
- Provide for coaching

By recognizing the symptoms of burnout and taking individual and organizational actions to develop preventive measures, employees in your workplace can become healthier, enjoy work, and increase productivity.