



Leading Through Burnout

How to Communicate, Support & Retain Your Team





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PHASES of BURNOUT

Burnout doesn't happen overnight. It progresses through distinct neurological phases, each marked by measurable changes in brain function and observable patterns in behavior, cognition, and workplace performance.

Understanding these phases is crucial for workplace wellbeing.

Early recognition allows for timely support, preventing progression to more severe stages that can lead to prolonged absence and potential employee turnover. Each phase reveals specific warning signs across physical, behavioral, emotional, and workplace domains.

Brain Activity & Neurological State

Early Phase: Overdrive

- Amygdala hyperactive, responding to minor stresses
- Hippocampus working but interrupted by cortisol
- Prefrontal cortex fatigued from overtime work
- System still functioning, just overworked

Middle Phase: Breaking Down

- Amygdala constantly signaling danger
- Hippocampus begins shrinking, misfiring
- Prefrontal cortex loses control over thinking
- Stress loop stays on permanently

Late Phase: Survival Mode

- Amygdala dominant and constantly reactive
- Hippocampus significantly impaired, memory poor
- Prefrontal cortex severely underactive
- Brain rewired for survival, not growth

Physical, Emotional & Cognitive Indicators

Early Phase

Middle Phase

Late Phase

Physical:

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequent headaches• Muscle tension• Sleep trouble• Fatigue that improves with rest• Mild stomach upset• Slight BP increase• Working longer hours• Skipping breaks/meals• Difficulty focusing• Slight social withdrawal | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constant exhaustion• Increased infections• Muscle pain• Jaw clenching• Noticeable weight changes• Increased errors• Irritability with others• Meeting avoidance• Neglecting self-care• Substance reliance | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chronic fatigue,• Sleep disorders• Frequent illness• Inflammation• Autoimmune flares• Chest pain• Hormonal imbalance• Frequent sick calls• Emotional numbing• Reduced empathy• Isolation• Talk of quitting |
|---|--|---|

Emotional

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling overwhelmed but hopeful• Occasional irritability or anxiety• Self-doubt or imposter feelings | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Persistent frustration or cynicism• Emotional sensitivity, quick tears• Loss of motivation or joy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emotional exhaustion or apathy• Helplessness, hopelessness• Depression, anxiety, panic |
|--|---|--|

Cognitive

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty concentrating• Still able to complete tasks• Minor forgetfulness | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Significant forgetfulness• Indecision and confusion• Negative self-talk increases | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Severe concentration loss• Loss of purpose or identity• Depersonalization |
|---|---|---|



Workplace Performance & Productivity

Performance changes follow predictable patterns. Track these metrics to identify which phase an employee may be experiencing and determine appropriate intervention level.

Early Phase: Subtle Decline

- Subtle drop in energy and engagement
- Tasks take longer than usual
- More mistakes or forgetfulness
- Avoids new projects, sticks with familiar
- Less likely to contribute in meetings

Middle Phase: Significant Drop

- Motivation and focus drop significantly
- Quality drops, deadlines missed
- Appears distracted, less detail-oriented
- Emotional reactivity increases
- Team friction and communication breakdown
- Prefers working alone, avoids extra responsibilities

Late Phase: Performance Collapse

- Productivity plummets dramatically
- May stop responding to emails or calls
- Work left incomplete
- Missed meetings with "don't care" attitude
- Physical and emotional exhaustion visible
- Potential medical leave or resignation

Absenteeism Patterns: The Critical Indicator

Absenteeism patterns provide objective data for phase identification. These patterns often appear before other signs become obvious and can trigger early intervention conversations.

Early Phase Intermittent Absences

- Short, scattered days off often disguised as illness or personal days
- Increased use of sick days for minor issues.
- Pattern is irregular but noticeable.

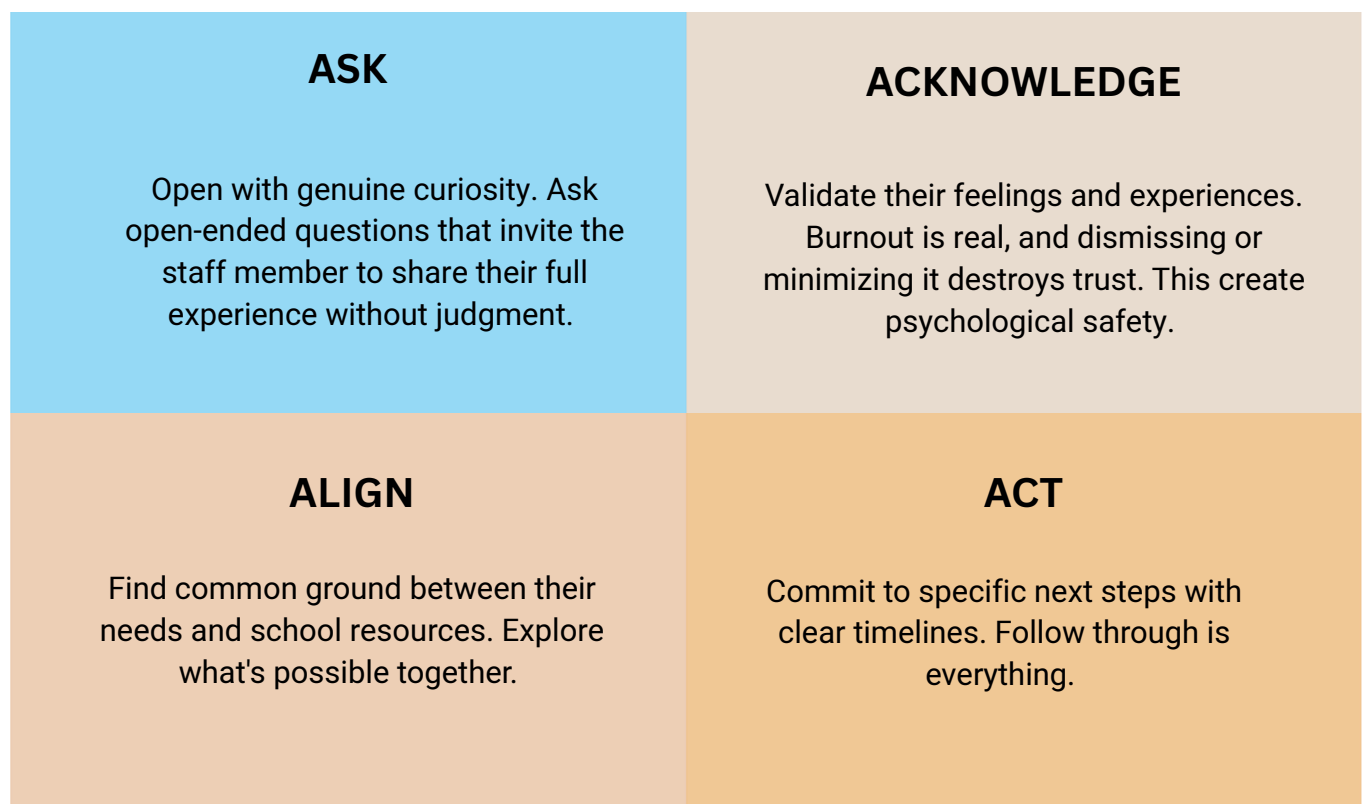
Middle Phase Frequent Absences

- Repeated short leaves becoming more common
- Arrives late, leaves early regularly.
- Requests flexible schedule or mental health days.
- Pattern shows clear escalation.

Late Phase Extended Leave

- Long-term disability or stress leave, often lasting months.
- May not return to same role.
- Represents complete breakdown requiring professional intervention.

Action Framework: Recognition & Response



This worksheet is designed to help you identify, address, and manage burnout. Please complete each section thoughtfully and honestly.

Determine Stage of Burnout

Use the information from resources provided to determine what stage of burnout they are currently experiencing. Describe the key indicators and symptoms you are observing.

What Supports Can I Offer?

Consider the supports that are available to you within your workplace, and externally. This may include resources, people, or strategies.

What Actions Will I Take?

Based on the supports identified, outline specific actions you will take to address your burnout. Be as detailed as possible.

Timelines

For each action identified above, establish a realistic timeline for implementation. Be specific with dates and deadlines.

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Follow Up

Determine how and when you will follow up on the actions you've taken. This could involve checking in with yourself, meeting with a supervisor, or seeking feedback from colleagues.

Progress Review

Schedule regular progress reviews to assess the effectiveness of your actions and make adjustments as needed. Document your observations and any changes you make.

Ongoing Support

Identify ongoing support mechanisms to prevent future burnout. This could include regular self-care practices, maintaining open communication with your supervisor, or participating in employee wellness programs.

NOTES:

6 Key Steps to Retaining Staff Before They Leave

1 Recognizing Early Warning Signs

Notice changes in energy, tone, attendance, engagement, body language, and communication patterns that may signal burnout is setting in.

2 Create Psychological Safety

Establish an environment where staff feel comfortable being vulnerable, sharing challenges, and asking for support without fear of judgment or consequences.

3 Communicate with Empathy and Clarity

Use the 4A Coaching Model - Ask, Acknowledge, Align, and Act - to have supportive conversations that validate experiences and collaboratively problem-solve.

4 Adjust and Accommodate Early

Implement targeted, temporary adjustments like reduced duties, flexible scheduling, or workload rebalancing to provide immediate relief.

5 Follow Through

Always follow through with your agreed actions. This anchors the psychological safety required for actions to be taken and builds trust.

6 Sustain the Culture of Care

Continuously foster a workplace culture where mental health, wellbeing, and work-life balance are normalized, prioritized, and supported.

Keeping Yourself from Burnout: What Systems Can You Implement?

Protect your Bandwidth

- Set single focus work blocks (20-45 mins)
- Batch similar tasks (emails, forms, staffing)
- Eliminate multitasking

Regulate Your Nervous System

- 60-second physiological sigh
- Reduce sensory overload - environment
- A 30-second physical reset (shoulder roll, stretch, small walk)

Importance of Early Intervention

Recognize the early warning signs of burnout, such as decreased energy, increased mistakes, or avoidance of responsibilities. Address issues promptly before they escalate into a crisis.

Build Tiny Micro-Habits

- A 5-minute walk between meetings
- Reframe self talk (I'm so behind)
- Daily 'brain unload' end of day - what's done and to-do tomorrow

Contact us

At Atlas Brain Health, we believe that better brain health creates better lives. Our mission is to make brain health strategies accessible, practical, and empowering for all. Beyond this toolkit, we offer one-to-one and group coaching, group programs, professional development for healthcare providers, workshops, and speaking engagements that inspire and educate teams, organizations, and communities. Together, we can build awareness, resilience, and stronger pathways to thriving.

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