



PROTECT EMPLOYEES FROM BURNOUT:

The 7 Predictors

meQuilibrium

EVER SINCE THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) DECLARED BURNOUT A “WORKPLACE SYNDROME” IN MAY 2019, THE TOPIC HAS CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF HR PROFESSIONALS AND RANK-AND-FILE EMPLOYEES ALIKE. IN REALITY, IT’S BEEN A SIMMERING PROBLEM FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS.

The global pandemic is exacerbating and accelerating existing workforce problems, driving record levels of anxiety and massive disruptions to employee engagement and productivity.

As I described in my Forbes column, *The Leader’s Guide: 5 Phases Of Today’s Traumatic Disruption*, this includes an increasing risk of exhaustion and burnout. Of course, essential workers and those on the frontlines are at particularly high risk. But despite the positives associated with working from home, remote work is also associated with this increased risk.

You may start seeing in yourself or your team members some of the 7 behaviors that are highly associated with the risk of burnout: sleep problems, physical complaints, lack of work-life balance and life satisfaction, poor stress management, low work engagement and poor emotion control. We describe these in this ebook and offer practical suggestions for addressing them.

Make sure your team is aware of the emotional wellbeing and behavioral health supports available to them. Even small improvements in individual cognitive performance can make a positive impact for your organization and reduce the prevalence of burnout—especially now.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO REACH OUT. WE’RE HERE TO HELP.



JAN BRUCE

CEO and Co-founder
meQuilibrium

WHY IS IT THAT TWO EMPLOYEES IN THE SAME JOB PERFORM DIFFERENTLY UNDER STRESS?

Why does one burn out in six months while another remains ready for whatever the world throws their way.

FOR EXAMPLE:

One heavy machine operator calmly navigates a malfunction, while another makes a dangerous error.

One customer service representative cheerfully helps customers year after year, while another quickly becomes frustrated, burned out and quits his job.

One stock trader turns sudden market volatility to her advantage, while another panics and makes bad trades.





WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THESE DIFFERENCES?



HOW EMPLOYEES MANAGE DEMANDS.

Burnout occurs when the demands being placed on an employee exceed the resources available to deal with them.

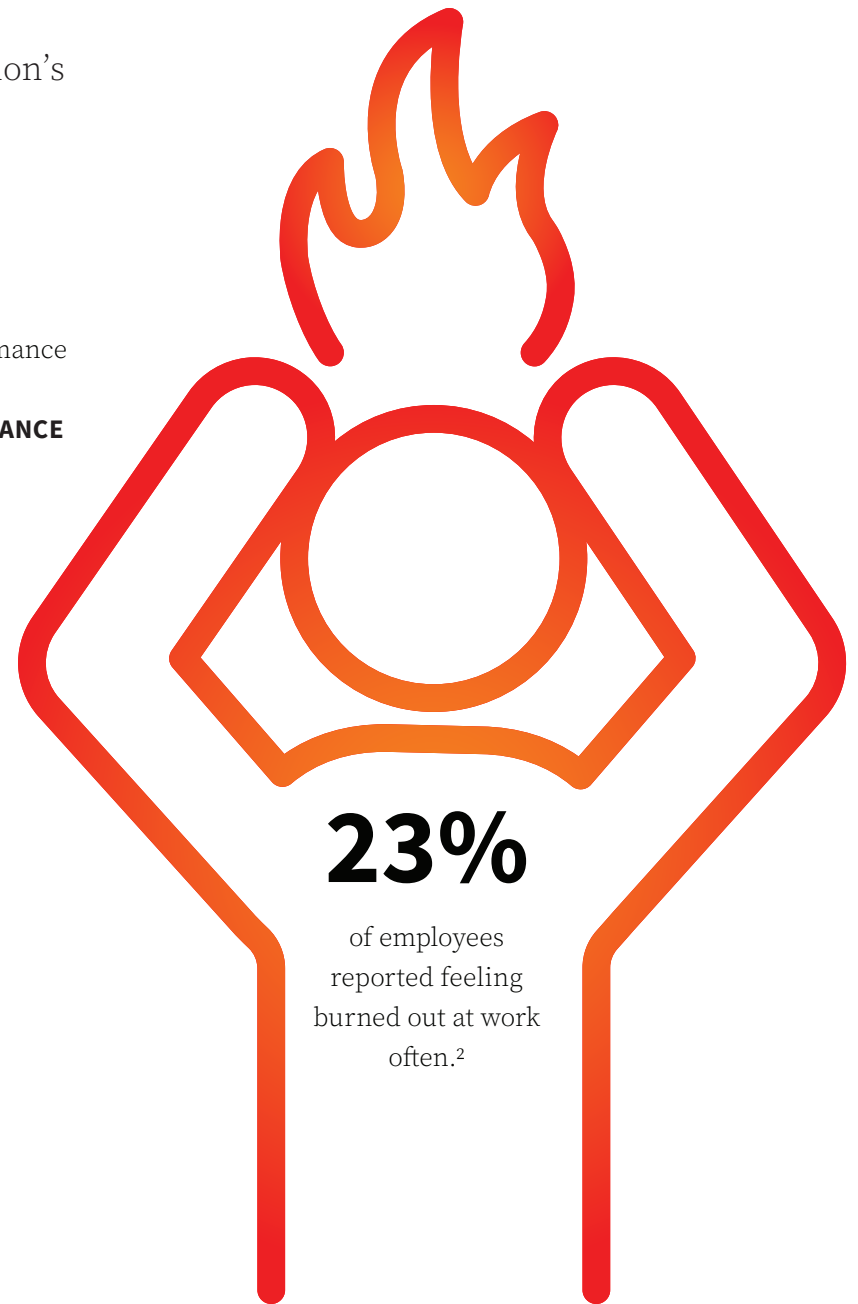
Employee performance is the most important factor in any organization's success and yet there is enormous variability in performance that has nothing to do with education, training, or experience. The key variable differentiating how employees react under pressure is how they manage their own mental and emotional states.

Employees who don't have the skills to manage stress effectively are prone to poor performance and potentially fatal mistakes, and they're more likely to burn out on the job. **ONCE THEY BEGIN TO BURN OUT, THE DECLINE ACCELERATES — ENGAGEMENT DECLINES, PERFORMANCE SUFFERS, SLEEP DEPRIVATION AGGRAVATES, AND EMOTION CONTROL IS LOST.**

According to the World Health Organization, burnout can arise from "unsuccessful management of chronic work-related stress, resulting symptoms such as 'feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy.'"¹

The risks of burnout for employees is great. **A 2018 GALLUP POLL FOUND THAT 23% OF EMPLOYEES REPORTED FEELING BURNED OUT AT WORK OFTEN.**²

The costs of burnout to a business and to the economy are enormous. An article authored by experts at Harvard Business School and Stanford Graduate School of Business reported that workplace stress accounts for \$190 Billion in health care costs.³



The way an
employee thinks
under stress

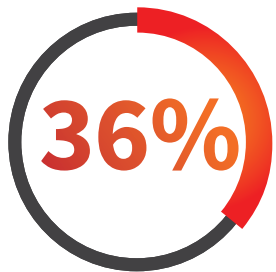
**MAKES A
DIFFERENCE**



5 THINKING STYLES

Our research identified how employees adapt and react in times of stress. This study of more than 200,000 data profiles uncovered how some thinking styles leave people at high risk for burnout while other thinking styles are more protective.

AN EMOTIONALLY CHARGED FIRST REACTION is typical of employees who are empathetic and team-oriented but lack the skills to control their emotions and set boundaries.



FORGING AHEAD REGARDLESS OF THE RISK drives innovation, but can also get these employees in over their heads due to poor work-life balance and low stress management skills.



A STRONG NEED TO CONTROL as the default reaction to stress can lead to high levels of frustration and sleep issues when the change or cause of stress is not within one's control.



SCANNING FOR THE POSITIVE provides a natural protective effect for people who default to this thinking style under pressure.



PEOPLE WHO ARE CONFIDENT IN THEIR ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS face change by looking for the problem they can solve and focusing on it. As a result, they have the lowest risk of burnout.



ARE AT HIGHER RISK FOR BURNOUT

THE SEVEN BURNOUT IDENTIFIERS:

Keys to Understand
and Mitigate Risk

IT'S NOT REALISTIC TO EXPECT TO HIRE ONLY RESILIENT EMPLOYEES WHO ARE CALM UNDER PRESSURE AND ABLE TO STAY ENGAGED IN WORK REGARDLESS OF THE DEMANDS PLACED ON THEM. Yet most organizations have no idea how to measure and predict risk of burnout. As a result, they're vulnerable not only to losing valuable employees to turnover, but to the kinds of errors and tragedies that happen when workers aren't able to manage pressure.

THERE ARE SEVEN IMPORTANT FACTORS HIGHLY ASSOCIATED WITH BURNOUT RISK.



**SLEEP
PROBLEMS**



**STOMACH, HEAD AND
BACK ACHES**



**LACK OF
WORK-LIFE BALANCE**



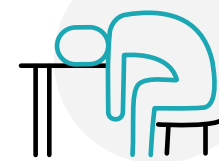
**DISSATISFACTION
WITH LIFE**



**POOR STRESS
MANAGEMENT**



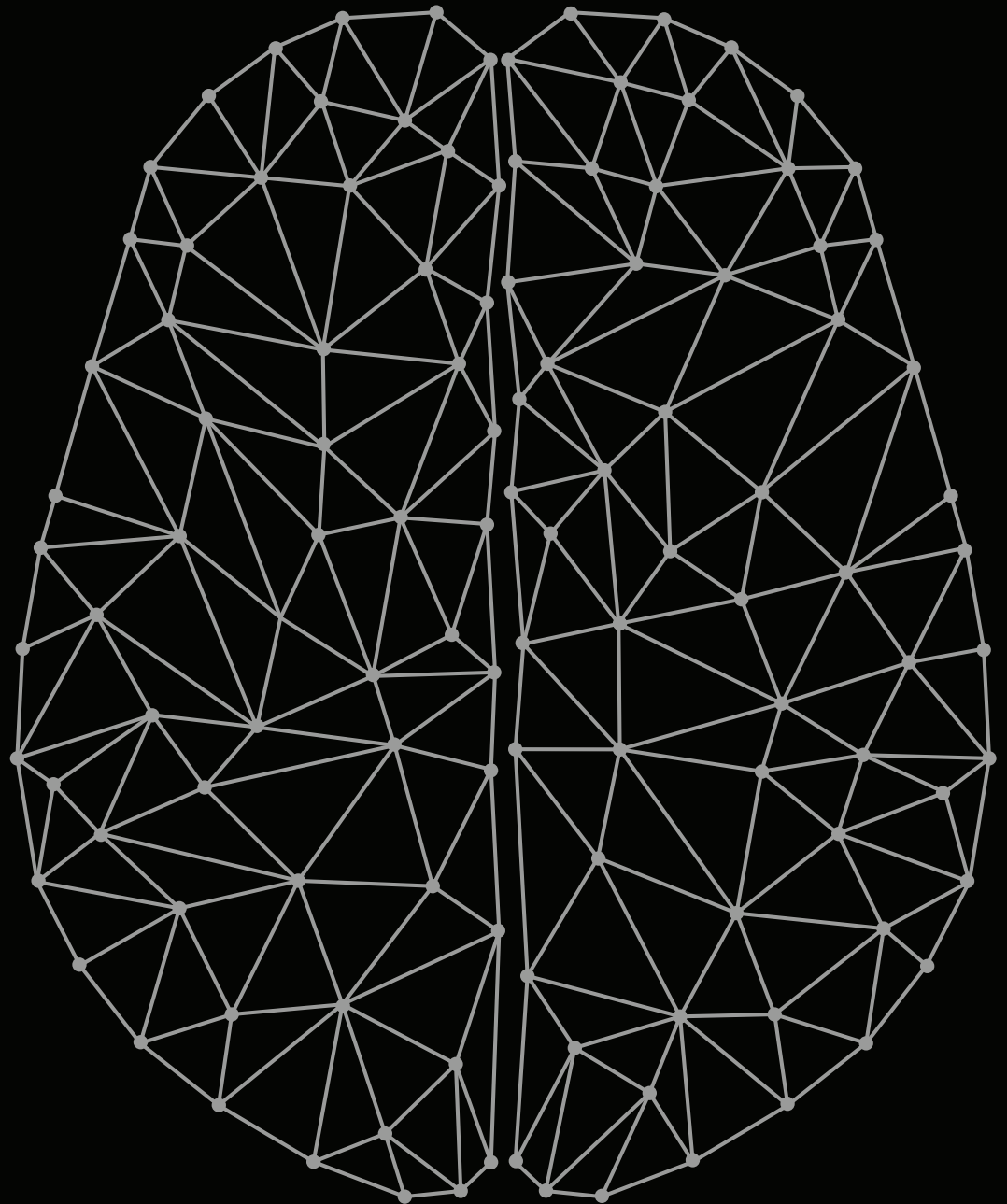
**LOW EMOTION
CONTROL**



**LOW WORK
ENGAGEMENT**

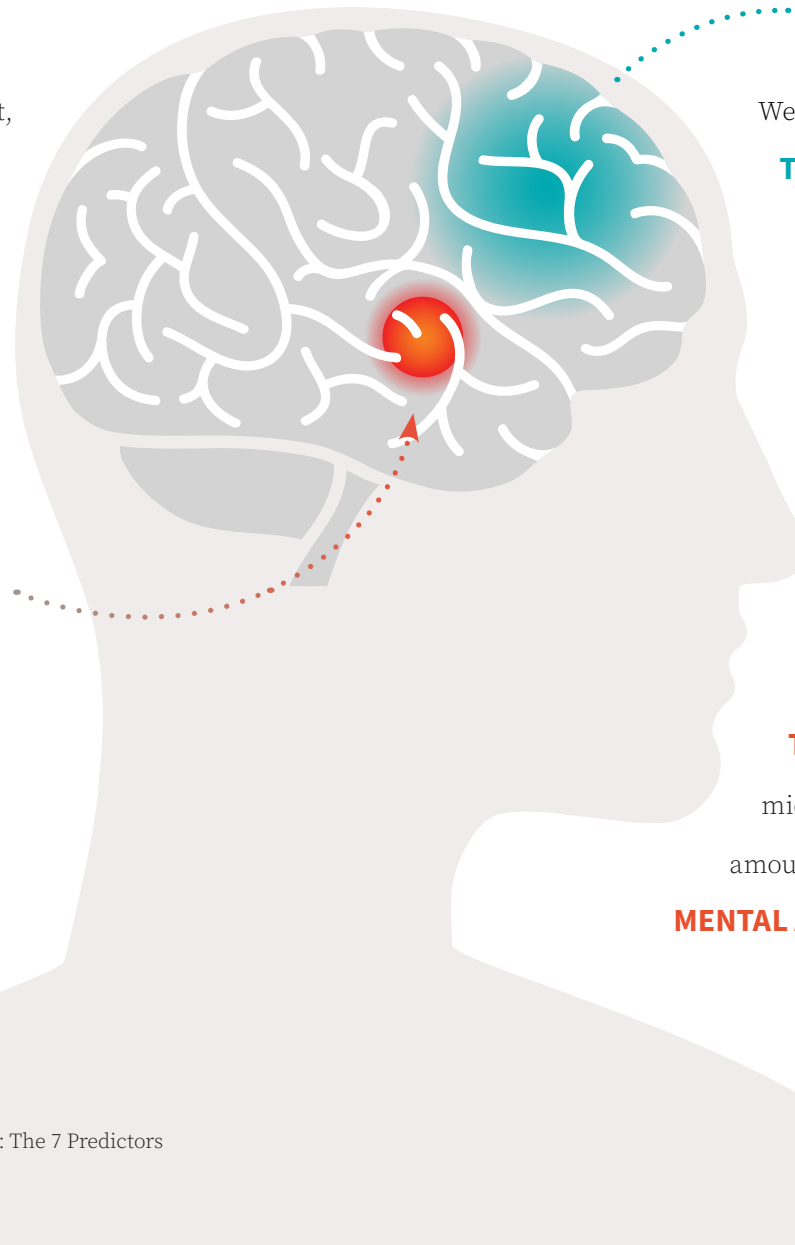
Exploring how employees respond under stress, and why some are more able to adapt and stay engaged while others crumble and burnout, has helped us understand risk in the workforce.

Burnout
Can Change
**THE BRAIN'S
PHYSICAL
STRUCTURE**



SCIENTISTS NOW KNOW THAT BURNOUT CAN CHANGE THE BRAIN'S PHYSICAL STRUCTURE AND AFFECT COGNITIVE FUNCTIONS THAT ARE RELATED TO CREATIVITY, WORKING MEMORY, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND OTHER EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS.⁴

To prevent or alleviate burnout, the challenge is to **LEARN TO SHIFT OUT OF STRESS RESPONSES** in the midbrain because when we're in it, our thinking is narrowed and we become negatively reactive.



We need to **LEARN WAYS TO SHIFT FROM THE MIDBRAIN TO THE FRONTAL LOBE** where executive function, ration, and creative thinking take place.

One important reason that **STRESS LEADS TO BURNOUT** is that the midbrain burns excessive amounts of energy, leading to **MENTAL AND PHYSICAL BURNOUT.**

When an employee feels attacked by their boss, or trapped in a tortuous meeting, or furiously angry with a decision that's been made, these are all mid-brain experiences.

In contrast, when employees are creatively solving a problem, collaborating productively with colleagues, imagining innovative solutions, or in a flow state on a project, these are frontal lobe, or forebrain activities.

IF WE SPEND MOST OF OUR TIME DOING THOSE THINGS, WE'RE FAR MORE ENGAGED IN OUR WORK, MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE IN OUR MENTAL STATE, AND UNLIKELY TO BURN OUT.



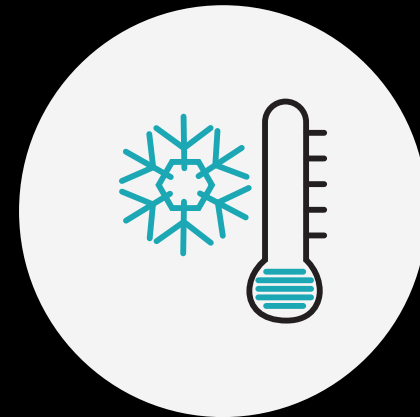
UNDER STRESS, THE “**FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE**” RESPONSE IS INVOKED BY MIDBRAIN STRUCTURES CALLED THE AMYGDALAE.



FIGHT



FLIGHT



FREEZE

THIS IS OUR MOST BASIC RESPONSE TO STRESS, AND IT HAPPENS OFTEN — TOO OFTEN. IN FACT, THE REACTION HAS BEEN CALLED THE “AMYGDALA HIJACK” BECAUSE IT TAKES US OUT OF RATIONAL, PRODUCTIVE THOUGHT AND TRAPS US IN STRESS LOOPS.

By paying close attention, we can recognize which of the three “F’s” is most common for us, and identify when they’re happening. We can also learn to identify the signs in others. For example, if you notice that a colleague’s eyes continually dart to the door of the conference room, they may well be feeling stress and having a flight response. When we hold our breath under stress, that’s a freeze response. And when someone goes on the attack when stressed, they exhibit “fight”. Spending too much time stuck in stress response loops burns us out quickly.

HOW TO ESCAPE THE AMYGDALA HIJACK AND REDUCE RISK OF BURNOUT

We will be triggered or hijacked repeatedly, but with practice we can shift out of that state more quickly. In fact, by doing so we strengthen the neural pathways from the midbrain to the forebrain and shifting becomes easier overtime.

THERE ARE SOME BASIC TECHNIQUES WHICH HELP CREATE THIS SHIFT:



BREATHE

Particularly in the freeze response, we tend to hold our breath. Breathing signals to our bodies that everything is okay.



RECOGNIZE

Give a name to the feeling when you are stressed. Recognizing what's happening begins the shift because it uses rational thought and metacognition.



GET CURIOUS

Curiosity is a forebrain activity. Stopping to get truly curious about whatever is happening will bring us into a calmer frame of mind and activate more productive thinking.



NEW PERSPECTIVES

The exercise of multiple perspective-taking is a simple and effective way to shift thinking to the frontal lobe. Simply ask, "What would my [INSERT PERSON HERE] say?"



USE HUMOR

This can be difficult under stress. Whether it's the irony of the situation, the absurdity, or any other way you can find humor, this will light up the best parts of your brain and the amygdala hijack will be over.

CONCLUSION

KNOWING HOW THE MIND WORKS AND LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE RESPONSES TO STRESS, EMOTIONAL STRAIN, AND EXHAUSTION, PROVIDES THE FOUNDATION FOR RESILIENT SELF-MANAGEMENT.

Exhaustion and burnout trigger different reactions in different people based on their go-to style of coping, as demonstrated by variance in burnout risk by thinking styles.

The answer to why two employees in the same job react so differently under pressure is that they have different levels of skill at managing their own emotions and cognition, and different predisposing factors.

Managing stress skillfully shifts us out of mid-brain activity and into calmer, more productive rational thinking. These skills are highly trainable, but are not a part of any ordinary education or training.

Even small improvements in individual cognitive performance make large positive impacts for organizations. With skillful cognitive management, performance is boosted, team dynamics improve, and burnout decreases.



ABOUT MEQUILIBRIUM

meQuilibrium builds, delivers, and supports the only clinically validated resilience program on the market today. Its mission is to help individuals and organizations unleash and realize their potential, achieving measurable improvements in well-being, adaptive capacity, purpose, and performance. To achieve this, meQuilibrium combines behavioral psychology, neuroscience, and data with its proprietary algorithms. On a cloud-based platform, meQuilibrium delivers the insights that lead to resilient transformation.

LET'S TALK



METHODOLOGY

This study is based on data from more than 200,000 full-time employees who have completed meQuilibrium's proprietary 90-question resilience assessment. The population data is anonymized, aggregated, fully privacy protected, and HIPAA compliant. meQuilibrium's assessment has been validated against the COPSOQ Burnout Scale and the Maslach Exhaustion Subscale, as well as PHQ-9, GAD-7, and others. The assessment identifies the 18 key factors of resilience, seven of which were found in this study to be strongly correlated with burnout measures.

FOOTNOTES:

1. "Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases". WHO. 28 May 2019. Retrieved 2019-06-01.
2. Employee Burnout, Part 1: The 5 Main Causes, Ben Wigert and Sangeeta Agrawal, Gallup
3. The Relationship Between Workplace Stressors and Mortality and Health Costs, by Joel Goh, et al Management Science March 13, 2016, Vol. 62, Issue 2, Pages 608-628.
4. Deligkaris, P., Panagopoulou, E., Montgomery, A. J., & Masoura, E. (2014). Job burnout and cognitive functioning: A systematic review. Work & Stress, 28, 107–123.