



# How to save leaders, employees and organisations on the brink of burnout

*Leaders are human too – many are struggling, too few are thriving. Burnout is rife. When those with the responsibility for improving wellbeing and mental health for employees are themselves fatigued or overwhelmed, embedding an organisational culture with wellbeing at its core becomes a paradox and takes on a whole new level of complexity.*

In this special feature article, Audrey McGibbon shines a torch into burnout's darkest corners. With the spotlight firmly (but gently and constructively) trained on an organisation's senior leaders as both the source of the problem and the solution, she finishes on a brighter note by highlighting several clear strategies for integrating better wellbeing and mental health habits into the DNA of leaders and the organisations they serve.

## Think like an engineer.

Built to carry 150% of their maximum load before finally snapping, the world's best aeroplanes are created with much more flex than they are ever intended to use. Great leaders have a similarly impressive capacity to flex. Their ability to tolerate, adapt and function resiliently while operating under heavy cognitive and emotional loads is often key to their selection into leadership roles in the first instance. But just like aeroplanes, all leaders – even the most resilient and capable – will also have a point at which they ultimately snap.

While scientific simulations are used to analyse the exact circumstances and reasons for aircraft malfunctioning and to pinpoint the early warning signals for risk-management and mitigation, there are no such standardised laboratory tests for leaders. More's the pity.

Since before the GFC, we have been witnessing a series of high-stakes, real-time experiments to test and determine leaders' differential load carrying capacities. While most leaders have the necessary personal assets and resources at their disposal to keep functioning well for a long time, and some are nothing short of extraordinary in how well they continue to perform against the odds, none are machines. In sheer evolutionary terms, humans were not built to withstand relentless stress, certainly not for months, let alone years, on end. Even the most superb specimen of a human brain and body cannot continue to operate at peak performance on an infinite basis under challenging conditions.

A 'single extreme' critical incident can sometimes be all it takes to trigger a leader's undoing, but the more common scenario occurs when they are pushed to the brink and beyond by 'longevity extremes.'

In aeronautical terms, this 'fatigue test' involves watching and waiting for the inevitable point of implosion to finally occur after imposing consecutive long-haul flights and excessive flying times beyond those originally intended, without adequate rest, maintenance or care.

Ring any bells, anyone?

Has pressure testing of leaders on a real-time, live experimentation basis become one of the very few unambiguously predictable certainties in leaders' otherwise VUCA worlds today? The irony is not lost.

## Take the buzz out of burnout.

Burnout is a term that has been bandied almost daily over the past 18 months, but it is not a new phenomenon. Relevant published research dates back more than 40 years, and its emergence proliferated during the 2008/9 global financial crisis (GFC), and in the years that followed. Before Covid-19 was a thing, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had already listed burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) in May 2019, citing concerns of a 'stress epidemic' among employed adults, globally.

Misreporting by both professional and mainstream press fuelled extensive controversy and prompted subsequent clarification by WHO with an additional statement explaining that although burnout is now officially listed in the ICD, it is described only as '*an occupational syndrome*' which negatively influences individuals' health status and prompts their contact with health services – and **not** as an actual bone fide medical condition.

## Don't play the blame game.

When someone experiences burnout, whose fault is it? It's a question that requires careful consideration of both the seed and the soil.

In recent years, there has been a significant (albeit slow) shift away from viewing burnout as a stigmatised problem which is primarily the fault of the individual employee and attributable solely to flaws within their capacity to tolerate stress and/or inadequate personal coping strategies for dealing with challenges.

Evidence now points towards greater acceptance of burnout occurring only when stressful employment conditions are not successfully managed, over prolonged periods. Recognising how the specific work role and employment context contribute to burnout raises significant regulatory, social and economic implications, risks and opportunities for boards, senior management and employees to work together to protect and promote systemically healthy, thriving workplaces.

## Study the symptoms.

True burnout unfolds insidiously in stages over a lengthy process, whereby all three of its core symptoms become increasingly manifest and intense:

1. A state of complete emotional, physical, and mental **exhaustion** caused by excessive and prolonged work-related stress.
2. Growing **alienation** from work because of increased stress, frustration, cynicism, and emotional numbness.
3. **Decline in performance** due to compromised concentration, creativity, and positivity.

## Be aware of the consequences.

Burnout is a major threat to the stability of the workforce. When burnout is pervasive and rest alone proves inadequate for recovery, a strategy involving some combination of medical psychiatry, functional integrative medicine and/or psychological therapeutic support may be necessary.

Assistance through liaison meetings, stress management programs, mindfulness-based stress reduction assistance, and meditation apps are proven somewhat effective in resolving symptoms, but there is an urgent need to overcome stigma and financial barriers to make treatment readily accessible.

Better still, progressive employers are increasingly investing in fulsome psychosocial risk assessments i.e. they are proactively identifying, evaluating, controlling and monitoring the wide range of possible psychosocial risks which may be contributing to the occurrence of burnout in the first instance. The value of addressing how a problematic work environment may trigger or at least exacerbate and prolong excessive work stress cannot be overstated.



Factors such as poor job design, unreasonable schedules, impossible deadlines, unfairly delegated or inequitably distributed work, uncaring leadership, difficult workplace relationships and team dynamics, inadequate support, insufficient resources and poor person-job fit are quite rightly coming under more scrutiny as a consequence of the growing burnout rates. Bring it on!

Put bluntly, burnout impairs both an individual's and an organisation's ability to thrive and grow sustainably. It is highly correlated with a litany of physical and mental health conditions such as elevated blood pressure, heart disease, compromised immune system, anxiety, depression and impaired cognitive functioning. Burnout is also negatively correlated with wellbeing, job satisfaction and performance.

Burnout not only negatively impacts a wide range of physical and mental health, work and life outcomes for individuals but also those of employers, society and the economy.

## Clarify and calculate the costs of Covid – don't speculate.

Covid-19 has presented a myriad of new issues to further confuse the understanding of burnout and to exacerbate the challenges of measuring and mitigating its risks.

On the one hand, there have already been thousands of hastily published academic journals reporting significantly intensified levels of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy (and therefore findings of elevated burnout rates) among medical professionals, first responders, front line employees and those in the education sector.

On the other, there has been a lack of reliable, published data about what is happening with

burnout in other complex and demanding professional roles. Historically, this may be because employers haven't fully appreciated burnout's strategic significance or perhaps more cynically, haven't wanted to go looking into dark corners.

More recently, Boston Consulting Group (BCG, 2021) found 79% of employees reported a negative impact with increased anxiety and loneliness because of Covid-19. The UK's leading HR body (CIPD) listed a total of only 12 employee wellbeing and burnout related submissions for its Applied Research Conference in January 2021.

No-one yet knows with any accuracy about the true half-life or length of afterburn from the negative burnout, wellbeing and mental health impacts of Covid-19 conditions on employees, and here's the thing:

***If we're not measuring or benchmarking wellbeing and burnout accurately, we can't manage or improve it in our organisations.***

As concerns about the escalating human, economic and social burdens of Covid-19, burnout, mental health and wellbeing continue to grow, so too, do the days of plausible deniability appear numbered.

Thank goodness.

## Spare a thought for leaders.

Six years ago, the Managing Director of a state-owned corporation in Australia once shared with his executive team that he '*didn't have a single care*' about whether they or the people they had working for them were happy, satisfied, well or healthy '*so long as they just deliver the results.*

'[He may have been slightly less polite, and interestingly he was ousted by the Board not long afterwards.] It's difficult to imagine any leader holding such misguided beliefs today, and if they did, impossible to conceive they would be as foolish to express them aloud.

What do you think? Have you seen progress in the organisation(s) you know?

In a study of 1500 readers of the Harvard Business Review (HBR, 2021) from across 46 countries in the last quarter of 2020, a decline in both their general wellbeing (85%) and in their work-related wellbeing (89%) was reported, with

mental health struggles, home-life challenges and increased level of unsustainable work demands cited as the most common reasons for the perceived decline.

Certainly, our clinical observations and reports from across a wide network of workplace psychologists, corporate health and wellbeing professionals and direct statements from a growing number of leaders all point strongly to growing, genuine concerns about the elevated levels of fatigue, exhaustion and increased emotionality now coming to the fore for those with the biggest of responsibilities.

**Using a combination of observational, rational derivation and empirical analysis, the leaders who seem to have been most adversely impacted thus far by Covid-19 are those who:**

- were not already set up or accustomed to working from home before its onset,
- work in less structured or routinized roles with diffused responsibilities,
- have more extroverted personalities, who need to spark off and with others, and who favour a 'charismatic leader' style of interaction with others,
- feel less inclined to plan and organise their work, who are not so productive in isolation,
- perform primary carer-giver or home-educator roles especially for children under age 11.



GLWS wellbeing data also indicates some concerning patterns of burnout and overwhelm. An unpublished study comparing an assessment of 50+ senior women's' GLWS wellbeing data immediately prior to the first round of Covid restrictions in Australia during April 2020 with another assessment conducted 6 months later, showed a 7.1% increase in their self-perceived risk of burnout and an 8.3% drop in their sense of control and engagement with their work over the same period 6 months prior. This trend has since been repeated in two similar longitudinal studies.

## Remember what happens when high achievers are pushed to the brink and beyond.

Over a year into the world's Covid experience, executive teams, HR professionals and senior leaders appear to have been largely 'holding it together' for an unnaturally long period of time. However, just as the aeroplane will eventually implode when taken too far past its predicted 'fit for purpose' load, so too will an organisation's leaders eventually snap if the early signs of strain go undetected or ignored.

The uncontrollable, unstoppable VUCA world in which most organisations now find themselves would appear to have created a relentlessly evolving and exponentially harder series of stress tests for leaders, year in year out over the best part of two decades. When individuals experience unnaturally prolonged periods of stress even those who think of themselves as highly resilient 'Type A' personalities will eventually arrive (though sometimes not consciously) at the new and unfamiliar territory of being overwhelmed.

A previously considerable and demonstrable capacity to tolerate, cope and endure is no longer enough to facilitate thriving.

Almost permanently switched-on, the central nervous system is pushed into a state of *hyper-arousal* – where being stuck in a 'fight-flight' response causes a way of thinking, feeling and being that takes them past the point of being psychologically agile, emotionally controlled or able to self-soothe, into new and frequently distressing states of heightened emotional, physiological and/or behavioural dysregulation. It's at this point we see (or more often hear about) leaders 'acting out' in pivotal, spectacularly awful moments where an 'amygdala hijack' causes the sort of an emotional or behavioural implosion and infamy which can be instantly career ending and come with devastating health consequences.

Less dramatically, the implosion can occur in slow motion, unfolding as a series of lesser incidents which accumulate over time before ultimately resulting in irretrievable reputational damage and/or a languishing executive.

For other high achieving, career-oriented professionals, prolonged periods of overwhelm can tip them into an equally extreme but opposite direction. Instead of 'acting out', their distress and dysfunction manifests as 'acting in', triggering a state of *hypo-arousal*. Instead of the classic 'fight-flight' reaction, their central nervous systems go into an extended 'freeze' response. It's in this state, we see leaders become unusually withdrawn, disconnected and detached from even close colleagues and/or family, as a result of growing emotional numbness, dissociation from work, switching to autopilot. One day, they may simply quit, resigning or retiring 'for personal reasons'; and/or experience a health crisis which necessitates protracted treatment and a lengthy recovery away from work.

Whether hyper or hypo aroused, both dysfunctions are compatible with the burnout process and being in a *'state of complete emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged work-related stress' and/or 'growing alienation from work because of increased stress, frustration, cynicism, and emotional numbness' and/or 'decline in performance due to compromised concentration, creativity, and positivity'*.

## Embrace the leader – wellbeing paradox.

It's rather stating the obvious, but sometimes I like to point out that organisations, boards and executive teams are not inanimate matter, but are comprised of real actual human beings! A defining characteristic of the human condition is that we all have wellbeing needs which fluctuate as we go throughout our lives, and no one is ever immune to burnout or mental health needs. Not even leaders.

It follows logically (albeit with somewhat perverse irony) that leaders who may themselves be struggling or increasingly vulnerable to the risks of burnout are inherent to the magnitude and

complexity of adequately seeing and improving wellbeing as both an individual and systemic challenge for the organisations they lead.

Transforming an organisation's work culture and practices so that 'thriving and sustainable' become the true lived experiences of all employees, and not mere homepage rhetoric is not an easy job.

If the leaders of our major institutions and businesses are themselves increasingly at risk of burnout and experiencing varying degrees of its insidious tripartite afflictions (exhaustion, negativity about work and sub-optimal performance), duty obligates us to ask who is fit to lead the significant paradigm shift that is needed and with all it entails?

An evaluation of how the changing wellbeing needs and expectations of both current and future leadership cohorts may be impacting their capacity to sustain the delivery of positive business outcomes identifies two 'home truths' as key priorities for consideration and action as an early leader-wellbeing initiative:



## ***1. Burnout and low leader wellbeing were already rampant even before Covid-19.***

Observational and empirical data from thousands of leaders' GLWS wellbeing profiles predating the start of the pandemic clearly shows that few leaders came into March 2019 or the demands that have ensued since with the full tanks of fuel necessary for peak energy and sustained high performance. Tanks have since been topped up infrequently and only ever it seems, with just enough to deliver to the next deadline. Proper holidays and down time have become rare, switching off has become increasingly harder, and boundaries have eroded for all bar the most disciplined self-care gurus.

## ***2. Burnout observations are rising significantly across all sectors and across all levels of employees, including leaders at the very top.***

The human equivalent of the aeronautical 'longevity extremes fatigue test' is playing out live in many organisations as an existential health crisis of a different sort. While it may be too early to draw irrefutable conclusions about the future trajectory of burnout and consequences of changing wellbeing expectations, boards, executive teams, organisational policy makers and/or shareholders who have the power to endorse or change an organisation's vision, purpose, strategy and priorities would be ill-advised to downplay either the impact of wellbeing, mental health and burnout on the executive leaders in their system or the strategic relevance of their wellbeing to the sustainability of the organisation's success.

## **Consider wellbeing the new disruptor.**

Just as a lack of innovation and unwillingness to disrupt BAU saw the average business lifespan of organisations slashed from 85 to 33 years within the first two decades of this century (McKinsey & Company, 2019) so too will the inability to respond effectively to burnout, wellbeing and mental health become this generation of leaders' new existential challenge.

Our experience of helping organisations find the nexus between burnout, wellbeing, leadership and sustainable success has prompted reflection on the common thread that connects 'good wellbeing' in progressive organisations.

## **Nurture 'the seed and the soil' holistically.**

With any health and wellbeing strategy, it's important to avoid overly reductionist and simplistic 'one size fits all' approaches to what is evidently a complex and evolving challenge, where wellbeing is both a variable in determining individual and organisational measures of success, as well being a prized outcome itself.

Risk assessment, containment, governance and responsible recovery options are critical elements in every strategy, but a more compelling and holistic approach will also embrace the philosophy that 'prevention is better, easier and cheaper than a cure' and will be more effective in inspiring change at the top.



**‘Holistic’ is another one of those ambiguous wellbeing words. In this context, we define a ‘holistic’ wellbeing strategy as one where due consideration is given to ensuring the scope of planned initiatives meets three criteria:**

- 1. Breadth of coverage.** Are multiple dimensions of wellbeing addressed in both the personal and work contexts? Or too narrowly focussed?
- 2. Inclusivity and relevance for all employees.** Is wellbeing and mental health positioned to appeal to and encompass the entire workforce or only those are struggling or unwell? Is it a complete plan or one that inadvertently stigmatizes rather than humanises?
- 3. Individual and systemic focus.** Does the plan have a bias towards ‘fixing individuals’? What is the organization’s transformation plan? How will it be integrated and embedded into improved BAU conditions? Is there enough attention on the ‘soil’ in the plan? Regulatory pressure is mounting to include psychosocial risk management as a core compliance activity.

## 4 progressive strategies to prevent a wellbeing implosion (and support thriving).

Four strategies are essential for impactful, lasting change. Irrespective of whether the organisation’s motivation to change stems from risk mitigation and containment of a burning platform, or from

opportunities and benefits realisation, they have been proven equally applicable and necessary across all the success stories we have reviewed. In a clear case of needing to walk before the organisation or its leaders can run, strategies 1 and 2 (either sequentially or concurrently) must be progressed before 3 or 4 can be successfully implemented.



**1. LEARN and build better wellbeing literacy at all levels, starting at the top.** Proactively educate all senior leaders, managers, supervisors and employees about wellbeing. This is not about training everyone to be a lay psychologist. Instead, position 'Enabling Wellbeing' as a measurable capability with increasingly clear and non-negotiable expectations, promote it as one of the few, certain ways to future proof success for both individuals and the organisation. Put the focus on providing practical tools and presenting the evidence to ensure wellbeing is embraced as an inclusive and relevant topic for every employee at every level, including those who may perceive themselves as highly resilient. For suggested topics, content, detail and format, please inquire about the GLWS Reach Wellbeing Foundation Masterclasses and eLearning options. The effect of this strategy is increased willingness to engage in subsequent pro-wellbeing behaviours, and on positive perceptions of leadership care and competence.

**2. LIVE better self-care as a top priority.** A leader's longevity of success – and the long-term sustainability of the organisation and people they are responsible for – is increasingly associated with several factors with more nuanced dynamics than considerations of resilience alone. Grit, stamina, perseverance and toughness are not enough to grow as a person, or to grow a business in today's world.

Key differentiators of thriving now include the ability to detect our uniquely personal 'early warning' fatigue signals; build self-awareness of the imperceptibly small stress fractures deep within us; regularly and constructively take corrective and timely restorative action; uphold proper maintenance; adjust their operating rhythm and proactively plan. Yet many leaders and professionals are often reluctant to engage in the wellbeing initiatives provided by their organisations because they don't see them as

personally relevant, perceive them as useful or helpful to their needs, and/or because of their tendency to downplay their need for self-care while overplaying their resilience and invulnerability. The trouble with this is twofold.

A compassionate duty of care to self requires working hard every day at setting and protecting the time, energy, exercise, sleep, relational and emotional boundaries they need to feel on form. Believing in 'health before wealth' and a willingness to role-model the changes to make this a lived reality fast emerging capability for today's most effective leaders.

We have found one of the most powerful ways to engage leaders in wellbeing is to provide them with an engaging, individual executive wellbeing program tailored to their unique needs and circumstances.

An evidence based, confidential and data driven assessment of personal wellbeing strengths and risks, a comprehensive personal wellbeing report, help to formulate a clear and targeted plan from a specialist executive wellbeing coach, with quality resources and tools and the option for follow-up support is proven to create lasting, better self-care habits and deliver a range of improved organisational outcomes.

When managers have such a personalised experience, the thorough needs assessment serves to triage and identify the precise nature and extent of what support and strategies to provide. The detailed data facilitates a vastly increased specificity of insights and self-awareness – the necessary precursors to informed and motivated changes occurring. Such an experience is almost always reported as high impactful and frequently life changing. As the lightbulb 'switches on' so does their personal commitment to better self-care and an appreciation of their leadership obligations to others.

**3. LEAD others for wellbeing, sustainable performance and success.** Having embraced better self-care not as a luxury, indulgence or something to be sacrificed when workload increases but as a duty and obligation to self and others around them, the next step leaders will be equipped to take, with credibility, authenticity and confidence is to lead others in ways that inspire and support them to also work and live in ways conducive to their wellbeing and sustainable success. The shift required is to lead mindfully and purposefully with the goal of improving the levels of actionable care and commitment shown to, for and about others' wellbeing. Leaders who are effective in improving wellbeing for others are explicit in role-modelling, encouraging and rewarding of positive, respectful and supportive team dynamics; ensuring personal relationships don't suffer as a consequence of work; determining optimal combinations of challenge, control, autonomy and variety; checking the level and pace of work demands do not regularly exceed what individuals are able to tolerate or process without placing their wellbeing or health

at risk; promoting effective priority, energy and time management and productivity habits; and, insisting on rest, recovery, holiday-taking and other important elements of a well-rounded, sustainable life.

**4. EMBED and integrate data-driven wellbeing practices on an organisation wide basis** across all HR, people and culture employee touch points and processes, and into routine BAU operations, structures and systems. Collect and monitor baseline data from wellbeing measures and outcomes, identify changing patterns in the needs and strengths of the wellbeing profiles for critical talent groups and vulnerable employee cohorts as well as at organisational, divisional, function, business unit, team and individual levels. Review progress and emerging risks.

By the time this fourth strategy is implemented, leaders are able and willing to be both individually and collectively champion, sponsor and positively influence wellbeing advancements across the organisation, and lasting systemic change is starting to occur.



The risks and gaps between an organisation's espoused commitment to employee wellbeing and the lived experience of the majority will have significantly reduced. The cultural norm will have become imbued with 'concern for everyone's wellbeing and sustainable high performance is reflected in everyday actions' as a dominant belief and lived experience. The organisation's employee wellbeing policies will reflect the mutual accountabilities of individuals, teams, leaders and organisational practice.

There will be an equal focus on supporting and building employee's individual wellbeing capabilities and health self-care habits alongside an acceptance of how the specific organisational, team, leadership and role context and psychosocial conditions are also important to effectively manage.

We have a chance to create thriving, sustainable organisations with mentally healthy people where wellbeing is a lived reality rather than mere words on the homepage.

Those who have the position, power, responsibility, drive and determination to bring about lasting change must (be taught and shown how to) also rest, recover, switch-off, replenish and reset. Proactively support individual wellbeing (ideally before the cracks appear) so that individuals can make better decisions and form positive habits. Where possible empower and enable personal agency, choice and responsibility for improved self-care - and supplement all of this individual wellbeing uplift with a rigorous assessment of the health, wellbeing and sustainability hazards lurking within the organisation's systems and processes.

Start with influential business leaders who can authorise change and who need to role-model better self-care before others will follow suit, and before the formal systems and processes will change. A compassionate duty of care to self requires working hard every day at setting and protecting the time, energy, exercise, sleep, relational and emotional boundaries they need to feel 'on form'. Believing in 'health before wealth', role-modelling positive changes and collaborating with other leaders to make wellbeing a lived reality are fast emerging as threshold capabilities for today's most effective leaders.

Preventing psychological harm already exists in the general duties of workplace health and safety legislation, but we are entering a new era with greater specificity around HOW employers must undertake this duty, reflective of a growing global movement to improve psychological health at work (ISO45003). This stronger prevention lens will ultimately help more individuals and organisations thrive and grow sustainably over the longer term, but in the meantime let's hope that the heightened accountability, and pressure from new governance and compliance standards won't push those in today's leader roles to the brink or beyond.