

Where to Start If You Feel Burned Out at Work



Burnout expert Christina Maslach talks about the causes of burnout at work and how employees and employers can start addressing it.

BY JASON POHL | MARCH 10, 2023

When it comes to workplace woes, Christina Maslach has heard it all.



The hard-working team that's celebrated less than the office slackers. The professionals who wind up in a soul-sucking job. The employees required to attend office BBQs but left out of workplace decision making.

It's been 40-plus years since Maslach, a psychology professor emerita at UC Berkeley, first wrote about workplace trauma and burnout. She's since pioneered a body of research that has influenced how we think about work—and what it means when work isn't working out.

The Burnout Challenge, her new book from Harvard University Press, distills decades of research on workplace culture into a slim volume that she and coauthor Michael P. Leiter hope serves as a solutions-focused template for employees and employers alike.

Their book is loaded with examples collected from decades of research that help build a spectrum of what they call six “mismatches” that plague employee-employer dynamics: mismatches with workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values.

They hope to help people either escape a potentially problematic situation—or quit altogether. Their book also comes at a time of transformation: Many workplaces are still figuring out the post-pandemic reality. Many have changed for the better. But Maslach and Leiter say many “perils” remain.

“A dysfunctional workplace is not something for people to endure,” they write. “It is something to change.”

Berkeley News spoke with Maslach about her new book, what the pandemic revealed about work, and when to walk away. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Berkeley News: The word burnout has been used a lot, especially lately. It almost feels like it’s lost its meaning. Let’s start broad: How do you describe and define burnout in today’s world? What does it look like?



Christina Maslach, Ph.D.

Christina Maslach: Burnout is being used by people to describe all kinds of other things. It’s evocative. It has imagery. Job burnout, which is what I’ve been doing research on, and which the World Health Organization recognized officially in 2019, is basically a response to chronic job stressors in the workplace that have not been well-managed. It shares a lot with stress, but it goes beyond that. When people are talking about burnout, that’s what we’re really focusing on.

The experience has three interrelated components. One is exhaustion, which is the stress response. A second is not just feeling stressed and exhausted and tired, but really feeling negative, cynical, hostile. It's having a "Take this job and shove it" feeling about the workplace. They don't know what they're doing. They're not well managed. They don't like being there. They don't like the people. That leads to what I consider more of the hallmark of burnout than just the stress and exhaustion. It leads to this cynicism about the workplace.

And then the third component that we see is people begin to feel negative about themselves, instead of just about their workplace. "What's wrong with me?" "Why did I go into this job?" "I'm not proud of some of the stuff I've done." "Why can't I handle it?"

All of this, as the World Health Organization points out, can lead to all kinds of subsequent outcomes down the road, including physical health problems, mental health problems, poor performance, and quitting the job. It can have ripple effects.

You've given it your all, and there's nothing left to give. In some sense, that's the epitome of burnout in the workplace.

BN: A theme of the book seems to be that the workplace burnout problem isn't something individual workers should be forced to manage through self-care. You see it as much bigger than that—as a relationship issue. Why does that distinction matter?

CM: It matters because how you frame the questions leads you to a different kind of answer. If you frame the question as "What is wrong with the worker who's burned out?" then the solutions tend to be about how that person does self-care. How does that person take care of themselves and figure out what to do? Do they need time off? Do they need to see a doctor? Do they need to see a therapist? It's all saying that the problem is located within the individual and, therefore, solutions are aimed at that individual. That includes, "Why don't you leave?" If you ask it that way, you're answering it in terms of what happens to a person or what actions somebody could take to fix that person, heal that person.

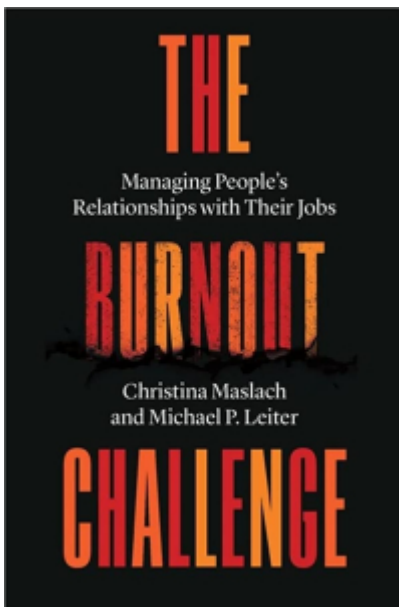
I'm not objecting to coping and self-care. But we really need to understand why. What are the causes and not simply the effects? You can do all the self-care in the world, but at some level, if the stressors are the same, you're still going to have the

problem.

If you think of it in terms of cause and effect, we need to look at both sides. What's going on in the workplace? What's going on with the individual? It's not pointing a finger at one or the other. It's both-and. We've got to look at all of this. The goal is, how do we get a better fit, a better match so that people thrive rather than get beaten down by the workplace?

If you think of the mantra that has been around forever—*If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen*—it's a recognition of a gap, a mismatch between the job and the person. But it's saying, "It's your problem. If you can't do it, then go away. Don't be here." Meanwhile, nothing is being raised about the space itself. Could the heat be turned down? Could we redesign the kitchen to be a better place?

BN: You identify a spectrum of six mismatches—workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values—that are most common between employees and workplaces. How does acknowledging those mismatches help employers and employees overcome this broader burnout issue?



The Burnout Challenge: Managing People's Relationships With Their Jobs (Harvard University Press, 2022, 272 pages)

CM: The notion of a match or a fit between people in the job is actually not a new one. For years, we've talked about ergonomics and the fit between the physical environment and the workers. When computer workstations first came out, people

were blowing up their wrists and hands with carpal tunnel syndrome because the equipment wasn't designed to match the human body well. We learned to change the design of chairs so that we don't have so much musculoskeletal damage. That kind of notion has been there for a long time.

Of course, when we train people, we're teaching them to match the job. We've given them skills, education, and practical experiences. What's new about it for us is that we're saying it applies just as well to not only people's physical body, but to their psychological motivation, to what makes people tick.

It's hard to say one or more of these six mismatches are more common. There's certainly ones that are more commonly thought of and focused on, like workload. But that's not the whole story. That gets you stressed and exhausted, but it doesn't necessarily lead to the negative cynicism and the negative self-evaluation. So, when people say, "Gee, I'm burned out, we've got so much to do. I'm just really tired," I say, "How do you feel about it? Do you like the job at all?"

"Oh, this is a great place. I am so glad I'm in this particular place," they say.

"How do you feel about the quality of your work?"

"It's good. Good. I'm just so tired."

"You're overextended," I say. "You're not burned out. You're still functioning. It's just that it's hard. You've got too much to do with not enough resources to get it done."

Obviously, there are ways to try and say, "How can we fix this? Can we work on it? Can we change some of the tasks?" If we add something to somebody's plate, what do we take off? In general, we are really good at adding, but we are bad at subtracting. That's part of the problem.

BN: You write that the "post-pandemic transition presents possibilities and perils" when addressing burnout. What do you mean? And do you think we're living up to those possibilities as a society, at this point?

CM: I'm not sure we're enough down the road to really know. I mean, people keep saying things like quiet quitting, quiet hiring, hush vacations where people are working from anywhere and not letting the company know that they're not at home.

The pandemic had, in some sense, forced us to recognize that a job doesn't have to be the way it is. It could be different. We had to do it differently. In some cases, what we learned from doing it differently were great things. Not to give the pandemic a silver lining, but there is one. People discovered they don't have to commute all the time, they can spend more time with family.

There were also things that did not work well. Teachers got thrown into the deep end of the pool with little support to try and teach without preparation, without good equipment, without any really good support. And I think with health care, some things worked well, some things didn't.

We can learn from the mistakes that didn't work, and we can learn from the possibility that it could be different. We can think out of the box, not just for the pandemic, but going forward.

BN: And the perils? How should people use the book to address those?

CM: The perils are that things get put in place as a kind of reaction to the pandemic or reaction to work from home or reaction to hybrid without really thinking it through and critically, without getting a more collaborative process. The things that I was saying even before the pandemic were often done with the best of intentions. "What can we do for our workers?" companies would ask. "We will put a volleyball court on the roof so people can go up and exercise and play a team sport." But did they check with all the employees about, of all the things you could do and spend your money, would this be the thing that would really make a difference? No. Did the volleyball court get used? No. They're coming up with stuff under the impression it will be good for employees, but without actually talking to the people who are going to help carry it out or live with it.

So, start with the low-hanging fruit, with the pebbles in your shoe, and then maybe work up to other stuff. What's working well? Where are we not doing so well? What changes could we make? What kinds of things could we do and make sure that the people who are going to be the target of this are fully on board and on the same page?

But if they haven't been asked to contribute, it could be a disaster.

BN: Over all of your years of talking to people about job burnout, what's the one thing that people say would help them prevent it?

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CM: In recent years, the theme that I've heard a lot is, people would say things like, "When I was in school, or when I was being trained, I had a mentor, I had somebody I could go to to talk with, to get advice from, to get feedback, to share things." You knew that this mentor had experience and was trying to help you move forward, and would treat it confidentially.

Then, they'd say things like, "I don't have anybody like that anymore."

People used to be there for each other. Now, I can be surrounded by tons of people, and I don't know one that I could

turn to. People think it's a risk. That they'll be stigmatized. They'll be put down. They'll be out of the running for any promotion or a letter of recommendation. So, they believe they just have to keep quiet and struggle alone. "I wish I didn't have to come in and be there with all of these folks," they think. "I don't have that safe person." That has just struck me so much.

We always say, from a lot of research in the social sciences, that one of the best predictors of people's well-being is that they have social relationships, a social blanket. That you had people who were friends, who were colleagues, who were neighbors, who were family. People that you could argue with, that you could talk to, that you could trust, that you could hang out with, that you could get good advice and help and that you could do the same for others.

BN: What advice do you give to employees about when they should walk away?

CM: The first response is to ask, “Is there some way to improve things here and make it better? Am I the only one who is unhappy with this? Maybe there are others.” Rather than saying, “I’m burned out,” ask the team, “Could we rethink some of our processes?”

And from there, use these six areas we describe in the book. You don’t need a special test or anything like that. But how are things going for me in those six areas? Are there some other opportunities that I could pursue that would be better than what I have now? Do you have somewhere to leap to that you think actually is going to not have the same problems that you’re leaping away from?

For some people, some of those areas are more important than others. People will tolerate mismatches of various kinds as long as the ones that they really care about are OK.

When people hear about the six areas, they start going through a mental checklist.

BN: You have an example of this in the book where someone has followed up with you after hearing about your burnout research and this idea of mismatches. Tell me about that.

CM: Yes. Somebody who was studying for a Ph.D. in the sciences at UC Berkeley. She came up to me after I spoke about stress in labs and said, “I heard your talk four years ago, and I just want to let you know that I was about to quit my dream profession.”

She said, “I was thinking, ‘I’m not cut out for this. I’m not doing well in my lab, so maybe I have to quit because I’m not going to succeed.’ And then I started going down the six areas of my life that you talked about.”

She had negative thoughts about all six of them. And then she realized she needed to get into another lab. That’s not easy to do and make a change. But she kept at it and finally got into a different lab. And she thrived in that second lab. She got research done. She was able to collaborate, she got her name on some publications. And she told me, “I now have some job offers, and I’m going out for interviews.”

It was using that information to ask, “Where am I, and how am I doing in terms of those six areas of mismatch?” And in her case, it was realizing nothing was working well. Her insight was, “It’s the wrong place, it’s not me. Maybe if I’m in a better place, I could do better.” And she did.

The hope is that other people can do that for themselves, as well.

A longer version of this article was originally published on Berkeley News. Read the original article.

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