

HR Insights

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Addressing Silent Burnout in the Workplace

Burnout is the state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion from prolonged stress. According to Spring Health's 2026 Workplace Mental Health Annual Report, 74% of employees have experienced burnout, while 61% of HR professionals say employee burnout has increased in the past year. Traditional burnout is generally easy to spot with missed deadlines, behavioral issues, absences and visible disengagement. These warning signs allow employers to address the issue and help employees manage their burnout. However, a quieter, less obvious version is becoming more prevalent.

Silent burnout refers to employees who are struggling with burnout but do not exhibit the classic symptoms. These employees may even be high performers and seem fully engaged—until they hit their breaking point, resulting in severe consequences, such as a health crisis, resignation, or a sudden collapse in work performance or quality. In Spring Health's report, HR leaders estimate that 30% of employees are experiencing silent burnout.

It can be easy to miss, but thoughtful employers can take deliberate actions to understand this type of burnout and the risks it poses to both their organizations and their employees. This article discusses the difficulty in identifying burnout, the importance of addressing it and strategies to help mitigate this risk.

Why Silent Burnout Is Easy to Miss

Most managers are trained to watch for signs of burnout. However, employees with silent burnout don't exhibit significant red flags, making it a distinct and potentially more damaging risk to individuals than regular burnout. The following factors make it especially difficult to identify:

- **Masking behavior**—Unlike with traditional burnout, where signs might include more atypical or hostile behavior, employees with silent burnout tend to mask stress, not showing signs that anything is wrong.
- **Presenteeism**—Presenteeism is when an employee is physically at work or logged in but is mentally checked out. Those with silent burnout may perform enough to avoid raising concerns, yet they are still quietly suffering from it. This can go undetected for months.
- **Culture-driven silence**—The fear of appearing weak, job insecurity and poor relationships with managers can make it hard for employees to address or even identify their burnout. Talking about this issue may feel risky for employees in an unsupportive workplace culture, leading them to mask the issue and struggle in silence.

Because workers with silent burnout typically don't show any warning signs, the issue often isn't identified until an employee has already resigned, faced a health crisis or stopped producing quality work. Employers are left without the opportunity to alleviate the problem.

Why Addressing Silent Burnout Matters

Spring Health's research found that 60% of burned-out employees describe feeling emotionally drained and exhausted at work, even when their output gives no sign of it. Burnout can have a tangible impact on employees' work and employment decisions. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness's (NAMI) Workplace Mental Health Poll released in March 2026, 1 in 4 employees have considered quitting their job due to the impact work has on their mental health, and 7% actually did.

Not only is silent burnout an individual well-being issue, but it can also impact an organization's bottom line. The Counseling Center Group puts current U.S. workforce burnout at 55%, the highest level in six years, and finds that burned-out employees are nearly three times more likely to say they plan to leave their employer within the year. The risk compounds when it's the best employees who are quietly burning out. High performers tend to carry institutional knowledge, client relationships and informal yet essential mentorship roles, so their leaving can put employers in a critical situation. In a labor market where alternatives like gig and freelance work offer a lower-friction exit than confronting a burnout conversation head-on, that quiet departure path only gets easier to take.

Signs to Watch For

Silent burnout doesn't come with complaints or obvious warning signs. Yet employers can train leaders to monitor for more subtle signs that their team members may be experiencing this type of burnout. On a managerial level, symptoms to watch for include:

- Declining quality of work with no corresponding rise in complaints or visible frustration
- Reduced initiative, such as someone doing exactly what's asked and nothing more, when they used to go above and beyond
- Oddly extended "quiet" hours, such as logging in early or late without a matching increase in output

- Disengagement from optional, previously enjoyed activities, such as team events, mentoring and cross-functional projects

What Employers Can Do

On a broader scale, employers should proactively implement structural safeguards to identify and address silent burnout. This can enable employers to intervene before silent burnout costs organizations through turnover and productivity losses. Employers should consider the following strategies:

- **Train managers to check in without being invasive.** Normalizing conversations about workload—not just performance—gives employees an opportunity to speak up before they reach a breaking point.
- **Fix the structural issues, not just the symptoms.** Workload audits, realistic staffing levels and clearer boundaries around after-hours availability address the conditions that produce burnout in the first place, rather than asking employees to cope better with an unsustainable load.
- **Ensure employees are aware of benefits.** Employee assistance programs (EAPs) and mental health coverage only help if employees know they exist. In fact, NAMI reports that 1 in 4 workers don't know whether their employers offer EAPs or mental health benefits. Employers should raise awareness of available resources by frequently sharing benefits information across various channels throughout the year.
- **Build psychological safety.** Employees need to believe that discussing work challenges openly or raising a concern about burnout won't be read as a lack of commitment or cause them to be judged. Feeling safe to discuss issues can allow managers and employers to help burnt-out workers, whether by adjusting workloads or finding mental health resources.

Conclusion

Because silent burnout hides behind continued performance, employees don't show it the way they do traditional burnout; employers have to look for it rather than wait for it to surface. Organizations that take action to address silent burnout put themselves in a position to prevent the loss of valued employees.

Contact us for more resources.