

Combatting Burnout in the Museum Sector

The American Alliance of Museums offers the following information on combatting burnout to foster the health and well-being of people in the museum sector. The information shared here is based on the best available information as of publication.

In April 2021, the Alliance released the results of a survey called “[Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field](#).” The respondents, most of whom identified themselves as full-time or part-time museum staff, reported that the pandemic has taken a significant toll on their mental health and well-being—even worse than it has on their financial situation. More than one-fifth of museum staff think it is unlikely they will be working in the museum sector in three years and cite burnout as a significant barrier to remaining in the field.

In light of this troubling finding, this document shares resources that can help combat burnout, from the creation of supportive work environments to the practice of self-care. It provides resources for both organizations managing burned-out employees, as well as individuals experiencing burnout themselves, who research shows have an equal part to play in addressing the problem.

How Organizations and Individuals Can Address Burnout

As researchers note in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, “[Your Burnout Is Unique. Your Recovery Will Be, Too](#),” the most effective approach to reducing burnout is twofold: employers must create conditions that help prevent burnout and provide access to resources that can help with recovery; individuals must identify the nature of their own particular burnout and choose solutions that will work best for them.

Research has definitively shown that burnout is an organizational problem, not an individual one. But while responsibility for preventing employee burnout rests squarely on the shoulders of employers, remedying burnout after it has begun is much less straightforward. Studies show that external efforts to pull someone out of burnout—no matter how well intentioned—often fail. While this by no means recuses employers from taking accountability for supporting the mental health of their employees, recent research suggests that when someone is feeling burned out, the best person to help them recover may be themselves. As a first step, individuals need to identify the nature of their own burnout. Researchers at the University of Washington’s Foster School of Business recently conducted several studies exploring three distinct types of burnout—exhaustion, cynical detachment, and a reduced sense of efficacy—and identified the types of actions most appropriate to treat each of these types.

(Summary adapted from “[Your Burnout Is Unique. Your Recovery Will Be, Too](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, April 12, 2021).

Primary Causes of Burnout

The primary causes of job burnout have been identified as:

- » Lack of control over the workplace environment, schedule, assignments, workload, or how work is accomplished.
- » Unclear job expectations regarding authority, decision-making, and metrics for success.
- » Dysfunctional workplace dynamics, including interpersonal conflict, bullying, and micromanagement.
- » Extremes of activity, including both monotony/repetition and high workloads/chaotic conditions.
- » Lack of social support, inside or outside the workplace, from colleagues, friends, or family.
- » Work-life imbalance, including lack of boundaries between personal and work time.

Preventing Burnout

Organizations can help prevent burnout by:

- » **Including staff** in the process of identifying the causes of burnout at your organization and crafting an organizational response. The response may include improving workplace culture, revising policies and procedures, and creating safe, accessible mechanisms to report concerns.
- » **Giving individuals control** over their work, for example, by sharing or delegating authority for decision-making.
- » **Setting clear and reasonable expectations around jobs and assignments** and working with employees to establish appropriate and realistic metrics of success.
- » **Making work environments as comfortable and inviting as possible** through workplace design that helps to minimize interruptions, facilitate socialization and collaboration, and empower employees to tailor the work environment to their individual needs.
- » **Integrating well-being into the organizational culture** by offering programs for health and self-care that accommodate a broad range of identities, lifestyles, and personal preferences. Managers can encourage use of these programs through their own participation, while being supportive both of employees who chose to participate and those who do not.
- » **Encouraging clear and consistent communication** from leadership to staff, and within and between departments or organizational layers.
- » **Training managers** to practice supportive listening, foster teamwork, solicit and value employee input, connect daily work to the organization's mission, and help employees focus on their core strengths.
- » **Fostering healthy work-life balance** by setting healthy expectations regarding work hours and encouraging employees to use their vacation time.

Recovering from Burnout

Research from the University of Washington suggests that the nature of an individual's burnout will determine the most effective strategies for recovery. Steps towards recovery may include:

- » **Identifying the nature and causes of your own burnout** by documenting symptoms and sources of stress.
- » **Seeking support** from co-workers, colleagues, friends, and family. Access services from an employee assistance program if one is provided by your employer.
- » **Evaluating options** in collaborating with a supervisor and crafting a burnout plan that is supported by the organization.
- » **Integrating exercise or relaxation activities** into daily routine, which might include walking or stretching breaks during the workday, sports activity, yoga, or meditation.
- » **Creating a personal plan for work-life balance** and recruiting support from supervisors, colleagues, and family members to establish and maintain appropriate expectations and boundaries.
- » **Prioritizing sleep** by establishing a consistent sleep schedule, keeping screens out of the bedroom, avoiding caffeine late in the day, limiting alcohol consumption, and creating a comfortable sleep environment.

Resources for Organizations

[How to Prevent Employee Burnout](#)

Gallup

This article summarizes the nature, causes, and results of employee burnout, and provides links to numerous resources for employees, leaders, and managers. It includes a summary of five ways organizations can alter their systems, structures, and workspace to reduce stress, and recommends addressing one major cause of burnout (lack of agency) by increasing job autonomy and flexibility and reducing micro-management.

[How to Prevent Employee Burnout: HR professionals share their advice for minimizing worker stress and boosting retention](#)

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)

When this article from SHRM was published in 2017, employee burnout had already reached record levels and was sabotaging workplace retention. A 2016 survey of HR professionals conducted on behalf of Kronos Inc. and Future Workplace pointed to unfair compensation, unreasonable workloads, and poor management practices as chief contributors to the problem. In this article, a dozen HR professionals offer advice on reducing burnout by adjusting workplace policies and practices, for example, by setting clear priorities, abolishing arbitrary rules, cultivating fairness and balance, and encouraging employees to take mental health days.

Resources for Individuals

[Job burnout: How to spot it and take action](#)

Mayo Clinic

This fact sheet created by Mayo Clinic staff reviews the symptoms, possible causes, risk factors, and consequences of job burnout, along with tips for handling it.

[Things You Need to Know About Burnout](#)

GEMM (Gender Equity in Museums Movement)

This tip sheet from GEMM offers five tips to help museum professionals identify burnout and take steps to build resilience in the face of stress and exhaustion.

[How Women Who Do It All Can Combat Burnout](#)

Cleveland Clinic

It has been widely observed that the pandemic has placed a disproportionate burden on women as primary caregivers for their families. In AAM's individual impact survey, women rated the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and well-being as more severe compared to men, and women were significantly more likely than men to identify burnout as a potential barrier to remaining in the museum sector. This short article from the Cleveland Clinic suggests some strategies to push back against the cultural expectations that place undue stress on women in the workplace and at home.

[Resources on Practicing and Fostering Self-Care](#)

American Alliance of Museums

Organizations and individuals can integrate self-care and wellness programs into their strategies for preventing burnout and fostering recovery. For more information on this topic, peruse these resources on self-care available in the Alliance Resource Library.

Last updated May 3, 2021

Support Free COVID-19 Resources for the Museum Field

The current crisis is taking a distressing financial toll on cultural organizations, and AAM is no different. In these challenging times, we ask that if you can, consider supporting our [advocacy work](#) and making extensive [COVID-19 resources](#) freely available for our field, by [making a donation](#) or [becoming a member](#) of AAM. Thank you for your much-needed support.