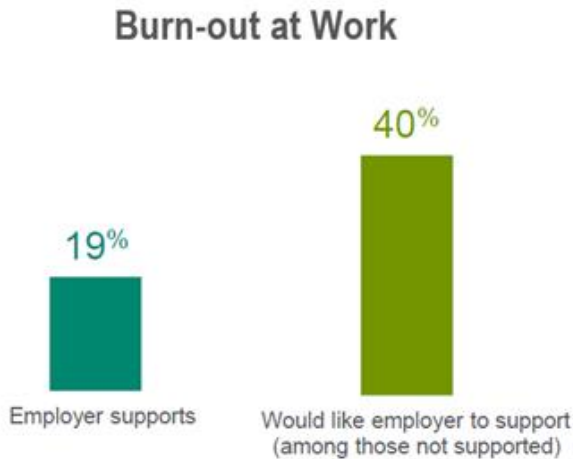


## Burnout Insights: A Conversation with Amit Sood, MD

New survey data from the Business Group and Optum reveal that 19 percent of employees say their employer supports them from getting burned out at work. Among those employees who *don't* feel they get adequate support from their employer, 40 percent want help for “burnout at work.” LuAnn Heinen of the Business Group interviewed resilience and neuroscience expert Dr. Amit Sood about the root causes of burnout, employer strategies to prevent and address it, and the most common mistakes he sees across organizations seeking to combat this significant problem.



Source: National Business Group on Health and Optum, Workplace Well-being and the Employee Experience, 2019.

**Dr. Sood, the World Health Organization is recognizing burnout as a legitimate syndrome resulting from “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” What’s your reaction to this?**

WHO’s recognition is a prudent and responsible step toward finding effective solutions for burnout. It’s important to note, however, that WHO hasn’t categorized burnout as an illness. Instead, WHO has described burnout as an occupational phenomenon, a factor influencing health status or contact with health services.

Today’s workplace stresses us with a combination of demand-resource imbalance, lack of control, and struggle with meaning. Our brain is equipped to handle these stresses in the short term. But when the stressors persist, and the resulting stress becomes chronic, the brain’s adaptive mechanisms decompensate.

The decompensation causes striking neural changes, shifting the brain from a state of thoughtful engagement to reactive disengagement. This neural shift impairs well-being and performance—which in turn further increases stress. Workers locked in this downward spiral experience exhaustion, lose engagement, and begin feeling unworthy—the hallmarks of burnout.

The good news is that burnout has identifiable, and thus reversible, causes. Optimization of stressors and enhancing individual resilience can reverse burnout. Given the strong negative impact of employees' burnout on their health, relationships, and work performance, finding innovative solutions to prevent and mitigate burnout should be one of the highest priorities of the employers. WHO's recognition will collectively help us progress in that direction.

### **Where should employers focus their efforts to prevent or address burnout?**

Well-being is a shared responsibility between the individuals and the systems. Let's answer three questions that can help employers in their efforts to prevent and reverse burnout.

*First: Why aren't our employees thriving?*

Measuring the prevalence and drivers of burnout using structured instruments and qualitative tools is a useful first step. The data so obtained sets a baseline and drives future efforts. While the specific details will be unique to every organization, in general, most struggles fall into three buckets—demand resource imbalance, perceived lack of control, and difficulty with finding meaning.

Second: What structural changes can enhance employee well-being without sacrificing organizational mission and performance?

Ideas worth pursuing include optimizing the workload, increasing employee involvement in the decisions affecting them, aligning rewards with personal meaning, enhancing operational efficiency, fostering collegiality and cohesiveness in the team, increasing transparency in communications, and ensuring each team member finds meaning in his or her work. In assigning work responsibilities and planning rewards, it is important to realize that external motivators not aligned with the core values hurt internal motivation. Organizing work to engage employees' internal motivation is an excellent long-term strategy to minimize burnout, even in the context of high workload.

Third: How can we maximize individual resilience and well-being?

Work is just one among many stressors. An employee facing a personal mental health challenge, a family health crisis, or a major relationship issue, will struggle with engagement and productivity at work. Hence, offering ongoing solutions to enhance personal resilience are essential for a thriving individual, team, and organization.

The first-tier approaches to personal resilience decrease resilience depleters such as sleep deprivation, unhealthy lifestyle, and toxic politics. The second-tier approaches include offering evidence-based structured resilience solutions that are increasingly being developed and refined for widespread dissemination. Finally, offering personalized individual coaching while creating a culture of resilience and well-being in the organization sustains the momentum.

Often, the first and the second-tier approaches are worth applying simultaneously since a large body of research shows that healthy lifestyle and restorative sleep are difficult to achieve if an individual has high levels of unmitigated stress.

Three additional points worth considering are:

- One, burnout isn't completely preventable or curable. Most organizations will invariably have a proportion of employees who are struggling and need help. This awareness sets a realistic expectation.

- Two, every organization is unique in its struggles. The burnout solutions thus need customization and not offered out of the box for different groups in different industries.
- Three, minimizing burnout isn't a one-time affair. It requires ongoing work, ideally managed by a team specifically focused on burnout. Further, going forward, any substantial changes in the organization's workflow should be evaluated for its impact on employees' well-being, keeping in mind that in many organizations, employees are already experiencing "change fatigue."

**We've learned that you can't address nutrition, physical activity and obesity at the individual level alone; changes in policy, the environment and culture are even more impactful. Does this apply to burnout as well?**

Partially so. Burnout is related both to work-related cognitive and emotional overload, and the limited ability of our brain to lift the load.

A culture that fosters perfectionism, excessive competition, fear, and adversarial relationships, with little control and meaning in work, is sure to kindle burnout. The mental fatigue of sixteen-hour workdays doing "meaningless paperwork" can't be completely reversed with mindfulness training. Similarly, the emotional fatigue of toxic workplace politics will be difficult to overcome with resilience training. A work environment that cultivates a culture of collegiality, professionalism, collaboration, trust, and kindness is conducive to minimize burnout. A culture that celebrates vulnerability instead of judging, helps remove the stigma associated with mental health issues. The leaders of the organization have an outsized influence in nurturing such a culture.

Individual factors, however, are equally important. The human brain's tendency toward excessive mind wandering, negativity bias, and cognitive fatigue, generates and multiplies our stress. Overall, three factors influence a person's emotional well-being—genetic vulnerability, childhood adversity, and adult stressors. People with all three strikes are likely to decompensate quicker. Also, the human brain has a finite ability to process information or endure emotional load. That load is increasing at an unprecedented pace. A few decades ago, an average employee received only a few communications in a day. That number is now in hundreds for most.

Burnout thus results from a combination of organizational factors and individual predispositions, a valuable insight that informs us that burnout solutions need a combination of individual approaches paired with policy and environment interventions that promote a culture of resilience and well-being.

**You've said that "optimizing the load as well as enhancing our ability to lift the load are both needed." Can you talk more about this?**

I see load optimization and enhancing capacity as two wheels of a bicycle. One can't function well without the other.

The load has two parts—cognitive and emotional. Cognitive load is challenging to decrease in most industries. You won't hear many leaders saying, "Let's do less for more." The resulting emotional load, however, can be optimized by providing greater control and aligning work with a

higher meaning. The latter two (control and meaning) are the most amenable and cost-efficient organizational approaches to optimize the load.

Enhancing our ability to lift the load roughly correlates with personal resilience. Resilience is an individual's ability to withstand challenges, bounce back from adversity, and grow despite life's downturns. Our resilience depends on three integrated steps:

- acquiring an awareness of the human neural struggles that multiply our stress, including a weak attention, and predisposition to mental fatigue and negativity bias
- intentionally cultivating an attention that is strong and focused, so employees can remain effortlessly engaged and experience less cognitive fatigue, and
- developing an attitude (mindset) that helps employees reframe and recover from stressors by better managing fear, envy, and hopelessness, and nurturing courage, hope, gratitude, and meaning

Research by several groups shows that programs offering attention and attitude training help employees grow resilience, and such growth impacts meaningful outcomes ranging from personal well-being to positive health behaviors, and greater engagement and productivity.

Solutions that are easy to learn, scalable, enjoyable, highly effective, and relevant for the twenty-first-century struggles are the ones most likely to have lasting impact.

**In your review of the science and experience with helping different organizations, what are some of the common mistakes you have seen?**

Most organizations are doing the best they can to promote employee resilience and well-being. I will mention five areas where organizations could focus better.

**This or that:** Some executives (and researchers) hold a strong opinion about structural versus personal solutions for burnout, believing that only one group of solutions are needed or effective. Such an approach is likely to leave both organizations and individuals struggling in the long term. Most organizations need a balance of individual and organizational strategies.

**One and done approach:** Behavior change isn't a one-time investment. It entails a long-term commitment to initiating and maintaining healthier habits. Preventing and addressing burnout is similar. Organizations that include addressing employee well-being and resilience as an integral part of their systems and procedures, and not consider it an unnecessary line item in the budget, are likely to succeed with their efforts.

**Lack of leadership engagement:** An ideal burnout solution works both top-down and bottom-up. Leadership engagement and embodying of personal resilience and well-being set the tone for the dissemination of best practices across the organization. Similarly, employee engagement and feedback in designing the solutions is critical to long-term success.

**Reactive approach:** Presently, three out of four workers experience excessive stress. Many complain that their days feel full, but not fulfilled. The resulting burnout impairs attention and executive functions and causes early exhaustion with cognitively demanding tasks. Thus, waiting for a sentinel event to begin investing in well-being and resilience will be too long a wait. I believe, it is fair to assume that most organizations have a significant number of employees who are presently struggling with excessive, maladaptive stress. A proactive rather than reactive approach is our best hope.

**Unrealistic expectations:** The science of burnout, particularly research into the most effective strategies, continues to evolve. Several groups are innovating novel ideas, developing more effective, scalable, and engaging solutions, blending technology with in-person connection. It will take time to chart the overall impact of these approaches. Lack of efficacy or engagement with one approach doesn't always mean the same disappointing results with another approach.

With most burnout interventions, outcomes such as employee resilience, well-being, happiness, stress, anxiety, engagement, and health behaviors, are the first ones to move. With time, employers can expect improvement in burnout, productivity, and turnover metrics, eventually impacting the bottom line.

Dr. Amit Sood is a former Professor of Medicine at Mayo Clinic, former director of the Mind-Body Medicine Initiative and chair for student life and wellness. He is the creator of the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Resilient Mind program and has authored multiple books including *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living*, *The Mayo Clinic Handbook for Happiness*, *Immerse: A 52-Week Course in Resilient Living*, and *Mindfulness Redesigned for the Twenty-First Century*. Dr. Sood received the 2010 Distinguished Service Award, the 2010 Innovator of the Year Award, the 2013 Outstanding Physician Scientist Award, and the 2016 Faculty of the Year Award from Mayo Clinic. He was honored as the Robert Wood Johnson Health Care Pioneer in 2015. *The Intelligent Optimist* (formerly *Ode Magazine*) selected Dr. Sood as one among top 20 intelligent optimists helping the world to be a better place. In 2016, Dr. Sood was selected as the top impact maker in healthcare in Rochester, MN. For more information visit [The Resilient Option](#).