

Jennifer Moss:

Burnout is a workplace phenomenon. It isn't just about us being too busy, you know, saying no to more work. Burnout is actually a problem that is deeply rooted inside of our organizations, and that asking someone to listen to rain for 30 seconds, isn't going to solve those systemic problems. Burnout is urgent and we need to start focusing on it now before it's too late.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's Jennifer Moss, workplace expert, international public speaker, and award-winning journalist. She's the best-selling author of *Unlocking Happiness at Work* and the forthcoming book, *The Burnout Epidemic*. Jen had been studying burnout for years, pre pandemic, sounding the alarm. Burnout is getting worse. People are sick. Then by April 2020, 2.6 billion of us had gone into lockdown and places of employment for 81% of the global workforce were fully or partially closed.

I'm LuAnn Heinen and this is a Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most important health and well-being issues facing employers. My guest is Jennifer Moss and we're going to talk about burnout as an organizational rather than individual problem. Jen, welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you're here.

Jennifer Moss:

Thanks for having me.

LuAnn Heinen:

Let's jump right in with what brought you to burnout?

Jennifer Moss:

Well, I've been working in workplace research and understanding how happiness and well-being impact productivity, engagement, and health and happiness inside of workplace cultures for a decade now that led me to my first book, *Unlocking Happiness at Work*. But over the last, I would say the last five or six years, I've started to realize that organizations that are really focusing on these well-being strategies aren't necessarily understanding that they're different from burnout prevention strategies. A lot of leaders are sort of putting these band aid solutions with their well-being tactics on problems that need to be solved way further upstream. That research led me and that understanding led me to really going deep into burnout. That's been my focus now - how do we create upstream interventions that really lead to healthier and happier workplaces and not just kind of come at it a much too late, like we have been seeing for a long time now.

LuAnn Heinen:

Let's clarify what burnout is. What are its hallmarks?

Jennifer Moss:

Well, that's a great question. Burnout actually is identified as essentially chronic workplace stress that has been left unmanaged. The WHO identified this in 2019 as a part of their international classification of diseases, which actually led to a lot of confusion because people are now thinking that it should be solved with pharmacological responses and have a medical diagnoses. They sort of made sure that they kind of reframed that for the world and said actually it's not necessarily a disease, but it is really a part, a syndrome of chronic stress. There are aspects to it that can affect our physical and mental health. What they also did was really make it known as a workplace phenomena, an occupational phenomena, and that changed the conversation around burnout for a lot of the rest of the world.

Those of us that have been working in this space for a long time have been pushing for that conversation. I've worked with Dr. Christina Maslach and also Dr. Michael Leiter. They were involved in my latest research and they've been sort of singing this from the rooftops for so long. There are six main

causes of burnout and all of them really tie back to the organization and the leadership level. I want to make the caveat that self-care and well-being are very important. They are important optimizational tools for people's mental health and well-being, but they are not burnout prevention tools.

LuAnn Heinen:

I want to talk some more about that, but first Mental Health America's *2021 Mind The Workplace Report* says four in five employees feel emotionally drained from their work, which they characterize as an early sign of burnout. How bad would you say burnout is right now?

Jennifer Moss:

It is exponentially worse than it was before and it was really bad before. It had already been something that was the leading cause of death in the U.S., not *the* leading, but one of the top six.

LuAnn Heinen:

Did you say that burnout is a leading cause of death?

Jennifer Moss:

One of the lead causes of death in the U.S. It's within the top six, within workplace stress in general<sup>1</sup>. It's a major predictor. There's hundreds of thousands of dollars that we spend in our health outlay.

LuAnn Heinen:

How bad is it right now?

Jennifer Moss:

It is exponentially worse. It was a problem before, a major problem before and why I'd invested so much time in it. But in the last year, I say it's really been like putting a match to a workforce in drought. We had these big systemic problems going on for years, and then you have a crisis which tends to exacerbate existing problems already. What happens is it highlights where there were gaps. Obviously we know that there's been pay gap for years. We know that women have been disproportionately affected in the workforce before COVID. Now we're seeing a really huge exodus of women from the workforce, because there were so many problems that hadn't been solved, like the fact that they are responsible for so much more familial expectations and that juggling has just made it very difficult for women to handle both.

We also saw issues with insufficient rewards for efforts. You see people in the front lines, doctors, nurses, those in the police force, we see a lot of people that should have been considered essential workers, that weren't nurses, working insanely more hours than before and not getting the pay that they deserve. Same with teachers. We put them into another baptism by trial, getting them to learn technology on the spot, something that should have been well prepared long before COVID. All of these things, and I could name many examples, but so many of these things all just came together and we sped up the future of work by a decade and we weren't prepared for it.

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<sup>1</sup> References on stress as a leading cause of death: Stress has been identified as "a major contributing factor to the six leading causes of death in the United States." (Salleh MR. Life event, stress and illness. *Malays J Med Sci.* 2008;15(4):9-18.) There is also research to indicate that workplace stress is a leading cause of death in the U.S. (McGregor J. This professor says the workplace is the fifth leading cause of death in the U.S. *The Washington Post.* March 22, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2018/03/22/this-professor-says-the-workplace-is-the-fifth-leading-cause-of-death-in-the-u-s/.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2018/03/22/this-professor-says-the-workplace-is-the-fifth-leading-cause-of-death-in-the-u-s/))

LuAnn Heinen:

Picking up on part of what you were just talking about, is this problem in equal concern for different types of workers – remote, in office, frontline. I mean everyone's situation is different. You talked a lot about mothers. We know what a particular challenge it's been for women. What about by type of worker?

Jennifer Moss:

We did see in our data that essential workers were the most hit. We also see that there's different types of burnout for different types of people. Especially now we're seeing zoom burnout affecting those people in the knowledge-based economy, people working from home, it's a much different experience for them, women are disproportionately affected like I mentioned. We're also seeing this layered effect on people of color that are dealing with social and civil unrest and then they're also dealing with just the regular inequities at work. We're also seeing millennials are most impacted from a loneliness and isolation standpoint. They're highly lonely and in our research they were the most hard hit. People living alone compared to those that have supports and single parents, and again those like single occupancy dwellers, they are being the most impacted. It seems like burnout is being spread all around. There doesn't seem to be one group that is necessarily more impacted. However, the frontline workers and those in health care and those in teaching, we've seen definitely experiencing a rapid increase in burnout, but they were already in real risk and real danger leading up to the pandemic.

LuAnn Heinen:

One of the *Harvard Business Review* articles you wrote is titled, *Burnout Is About Your Workplace, Not Your People*. Why do you say that burnout is not an individual problem?

Jennifer Moss:

Well, what we've done for a long time is sort of pushed that back to the individual to manage their own self-care, to reduce their burnout. You see lots of articles about how to say no to your boss around workload, and I actually feel like that just say no standpoint or phrase is so steeped in privilege and bias. There's a lot of people that can't say no or don't have the environment where it's easy for them to do that. Especially women don't feel as comfortable as their male counterparts to say I don't feel like I can handle this workload. There's a bunch of things that I think have just been played out for a long time. It's made it an individual problem to solve, but as you really look at those root causes, which is unsustainable workload, perceived lack of control, so micro-managing those insufficient rewards for effort, lack of supportive community which means lack of healthy relationships in the workplace, lack of fairness and mismatched values and skills. All of those six causes are really infrastructure and policy-based issues. We do have a role to play and there are personalities more at risk and we should go to work as well as we possibly can from within our control. But, yes, it's a myth to expect our employers should make us happy, but it's also an expectation that they don't distract, detract, or decrease our happiness. That is one of the things that we need to understand. It's a company problem. It's not a self-care employee problem. It's not just a leadership problem. It's a we problem to solve.

LuAnn Heinen:

The tools for well-being you've said won't specifically prevent burnout - more yoga, wellness technology, meditation apps, gym memberships, that kind of thing - you're saying don't count on that to prevent burnout, but are there protective factors at the individual or organizational level?

Jennifer Moss:

I think yes, that you have individuals that should be still practicing self-care, and well-being perks are a phenomenal thing for an organization to provide. Providing those subsidized gym memberships and WellTech, more yoga onsite, and all those things that really help for you to optimize your mental health. That it's an opt-in offering is really great because we shouldn't ignore the help that we're being given, because it does us more harm than good. We really do need to see that there are other tools that can

solve for burnout that the company has to provide, like creating flexible goals instead of having these concrete goals, having flexible hours and understanding that right now it's not business as usual. If people need to take breaks at certain times of the day, because there's homeschooling of kids or whatever that is or even just dealing with grief, that there's support around that. We need to make mental health a safe word at work. That means creating psychological safety, allowing conversations between managers and their employees be completely safe, having mental health training for managers so when someone comes to them with a problem or wants to talk about potential risk of burnout, that they know where to go, they know where to direct their employees to go. There's different types of tools that you would use to prevent burnout versus the tools that you would provide to help employees manage their self-care.

LuAnn Heinen:

At the organizational level, if you're trying to get a handle on how big is my problem in this company, you've said before that employee engagement is a poor benchmark when it comes to assessing employee burnout. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Jennifer Moss:

Yes, in the MBI, which is the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, kind of the gold standard of measuring burnout, engagement or lack of engagements are antipodes, so the idea that they both are polar of each other - you have no engagement, it's a sign of burning out; high engagement, prophylactic to burnout. The thing is that is inaccurate in what we're finding with our data right now in that you can be highly engaged in those engagement numbers, especially when organizations are tracking engagement as sort of a benchmark for people being well, that isn't really true because I know, and we've seen this across the board and in my work consulting, that people with high levels of engagement can also fall victim to sort of obsessive passion or passion driven burnout. You see that in leadership, you see that in people like doctors and nurses who are very compassionate and empathetic and they end up with empathy and compassion fatigue. It doesn't mean that they're not engaged. It doesn't matter that they're so productive and they're putting in all the hours and they're doing a lot of good work, that doesn't necessarily mean that engagement is not making them burnt out. It's an important factor because we do see a lot of people that have high engagement that they're less likely to burn out, and it does decrease the risk, but it's not just the polar opposite. Organizations that are measuring just engagement or just burnout, should be actually figuring out how to combine those two data insights together to come up with the real sort of picture of burnout in their organizations.

LuAnn Heinen:

If engagement isn't a useful metric, what are some leading indicators of burnout that managers can look for?

Jennifer Moss:

Managers can look for lack of engagement and just a feeling of exhaustion. Lack of engagement is predictor, but mixed with people feeling regularly exhausted by their work, dreading of work and the frequency of that. People feeling exhausted by their work, sort of in these compressed workloads, say accountants feel like that during tax time, and you see teachers feeling like that in June. That's normal and often if you ask, how do you think you'll feel in three months, they'll say we're back to normal again. It's more if you start to see people expressing cynicism and that belief that it's sort of fatalist, that this is going to be like this forever and I'm going to feel like this for a long time or it's not going to get better in three months. When they start to predict that they're in this for the long haul, that's where you start to see people really getting into a point of being ill. You lose them. Retention is a big problem in that a predictor of attrition happens when you see people in that place where they're not predicting that it's going to get better. That sweet spot where you find people who are really just at risk of burnout or burning out in the moment.

LuAnn Heinen:

So how can leaders show up most effectively when burnout is at issue?

Jennifer Moss:

I think it's an overarching theme of the book and I just wrote an article about empathetic leadership and how important that is. We need to be very careful of not sort of following the golden rule, do unto others as you had done unto yourself. I mean, you can give an example of a 65-year-old white male leader; the way that he might want to be treated could be different than a 23-year-old recent graduate woman of color. We need to start thinking of do unto others as they would have done unto themselves. That requires active listening and sort of golden rule 2.0 in empathetic leadership and human centered leadership. We need to be better listeners. We need to be sort of anthropological, like what are the things that are going on in your life potentially that can impact all these other areas of work? How do I make sure people have more voice at the table? How can I encourage dissenting opinions? How do I make it so that there's turn taking in meetings, that there's emotional sensitivity and psychological safety. That's how managers really need to be thinking. It's all rooted in empathy because empathy is really upstream. The more we prescribe that mindset and that way of thinking about our people in the organization, the more likely we'll catch these problems before they become much bigger and harder to fix.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's helpful. What would be your top three tips for organizations?

Jennifer Moss:

First, I would say to ask, gather data, be better at checking in. Every Friday have that kind of meeting where you ask people to share how their week went, what were the barriers, what were the barriers of de-motivation and what tools did they use to motivate? What do they really love about their week? What were things that created purpose or meaning in their work and making sure that people can job craft their role so that it brings more purpose and meaning into their job. So definitely checking in and having conversations that aren't just tactical or transactional, much more about what's going on in everyone's life. Also for leaders we found this year, because we've sort of flattened the hierarchy, there's a lot of CEOs who are also working parents who have had to work from home and go through this or people that have been pushed out as an essential worker and are dealing with things that are the same as that person that might be considered a subordinate or their boss. It's that kind of flattening that's really been helpful and maybe creating more of those kind of conversations. I would also say that we need to get better at being reasonable about where we're at right now and reminding ourselves that this is not business as usual, that we have no frame of reference for this, that we need to have grace and compassion for each other. There's a lot of learning and lack of mastery and lack of self-efficacy. So all of those feelings are just making us feel a little less available, maybe mentally, all the time. We also dealing with brain fog, which is a big problem for a lot of people, just chronic stress and our brains whether we realize it or not, have been impacted this year. We just need to give a little bit more flexibility and grace and compassion, like I said, and everyone can be doing that in the organization.

And I think thirdly, and finally, it's really getting a better understanding and education around what burnout is and looking to get more data information around that, asking are people frequently feeling these things? What is it as an employer or manager that I need to know, what kind of mental health 101 can I be taking right now so that I can be a better, more educated manager for my people. It's great to be empathetic, but if you have empathy without knowledge and the right tools and support systems in place, once again it becomes more of a well-being tactic and optimization tactic versus a really strong, organized, and systemic approach to solving for burnout.

LuAnn Heinen:

What I think you're saying is you can be a wonderful listener and you can show a lot of empathy, but if you as a leader or as an organization aren't able to lighten the load and the burden on people or hire more people or offer part-time schedules, then it may not be so effective.

Jennifer Moss:

That's exactly it. The problem that I've seen is that there's a lot of data gathering, which is great and I know this is something I mentioned in the book quite a bit in my interview with Dr. Maslach and she's felt this for decades, is that we go and ask people how they're feeling, we do probably have a good intention around asking these questions, but then we get the feedback and we don't do anything with it and we don't talk about what we can do or we can't do. We're not transparent about what we've learned. I think that's a really big problem because we decrease trust, which is one of the most important aspects to a culture that doesn't have burnout is high trust will reduce burnout. So don't ask if you can't do something about it. Also think okay, but I can ask and do something about it. It is not as hard as I think. It doesn't need to be this major overhaul of our entire infrastructure. We just need to start like with weekly check-ins as a way to get really good, small data. What are we learning about the themes of our group? What is the dynamic of my team that I can do something about? Every manager can do something about their team if they just know what are the big resonant themes that keep sort of bothering and upsetting and stressing out their group. We have to look at it in a micro way, that it's about small steps, small effective and regular steps that aren't just taking a survey once a year and then deploy some sort of program and end it after a year. Do something weekly, make it micro and make it actionable, and then you'll start to build trust. Then that grows across the organization.

LuAnn Heinen:

Can you share any real world or real company examples of employers that have taken action and serve as something of a success story?

Jennifer Moss:

Yes, I have dozens and one of them really stood out for me. There was a couple, one of them was Continuum. I talked to Elaine Davis and she had started to work with this company called Branch. She had to actually take tens of thousands of employees and move them from these service centers, call centers, and move them home. Most of these people that worked for her didn't have post-secondary education, some of them didn't have high school, some of them it was their first job, some of them were last jobs. She really tried to help women who had previous incarcerations. She had come actually from a big, huge pharmaceutical company, wanted to do something meaningful in a workforce that was much different. So she took them all offline and, again, worked with this company Branch to be able to provide them their pay when they needed it. Instead of every two weeks, what she did was she made it so that she could have them basically work and when they needed that money, they could borrow 50% of their pay at any time. For them, especially during the pandemic where they were in real trouble and they were waiting on support, that was a massive help. I was able to interview one of the people that she helped and it was the difference between food stamps or having food on the table. We can't forget about this other part of the workforce, where every two weeks getting a paycheck doesn't matter to them, although lots of people are living paycheck to paycheck, having sort of a really innovative way of being able to support people with basic needs, like pay was an interesting and profound idea that I had never heard before and she just put that into action. Starting before the pandemic, but when it came to actually being in the middle of a crisis, it was probably the most important factor that helped retain almost all of her tens of thousands of people that were working for her.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's great. Basic needs, lack of basic needs and the whole Maslow hierarchy, it's a major source of stress.

Jennifer Moss:

There's lots of really great examples. I also spoke with Hewlett Packard and they had some good, really great ways of thinking about well-being, but when you talk about it people really just needed to be able to buy food, and that's what it comes down to. We have to think as granular as that, when it comes to what people are dealing with this year, and we have other people dealing with things like overwhelming amounts of video conferencing, but we also have people that literally cannot go to the hospital because they can't afford it. There's every single part of our workforce that's having an impact this year and for some of the workforce it's as consequential as life or death. That for me is really why I'm so passionate about getting people to think about burnout in a way that is urgent and necessary.

LuAnn Heinen:

Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I learned a lot and I know our audience will too. I really appreciate your time today.

Jennifer Moss:

Thanks so much for having me.

LuAnn Heinen:

I've been speaking with Jennifer Moss about her work on burnout captured in a new book, *The Burnout Epidemic*, coming out in September and available now for pre-order. You can also download Jen's February 2021 *Harvard Business Review* article, *Beyond Burned Out*, and visit her website, <https://www.jennifer-moss.com/>.

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