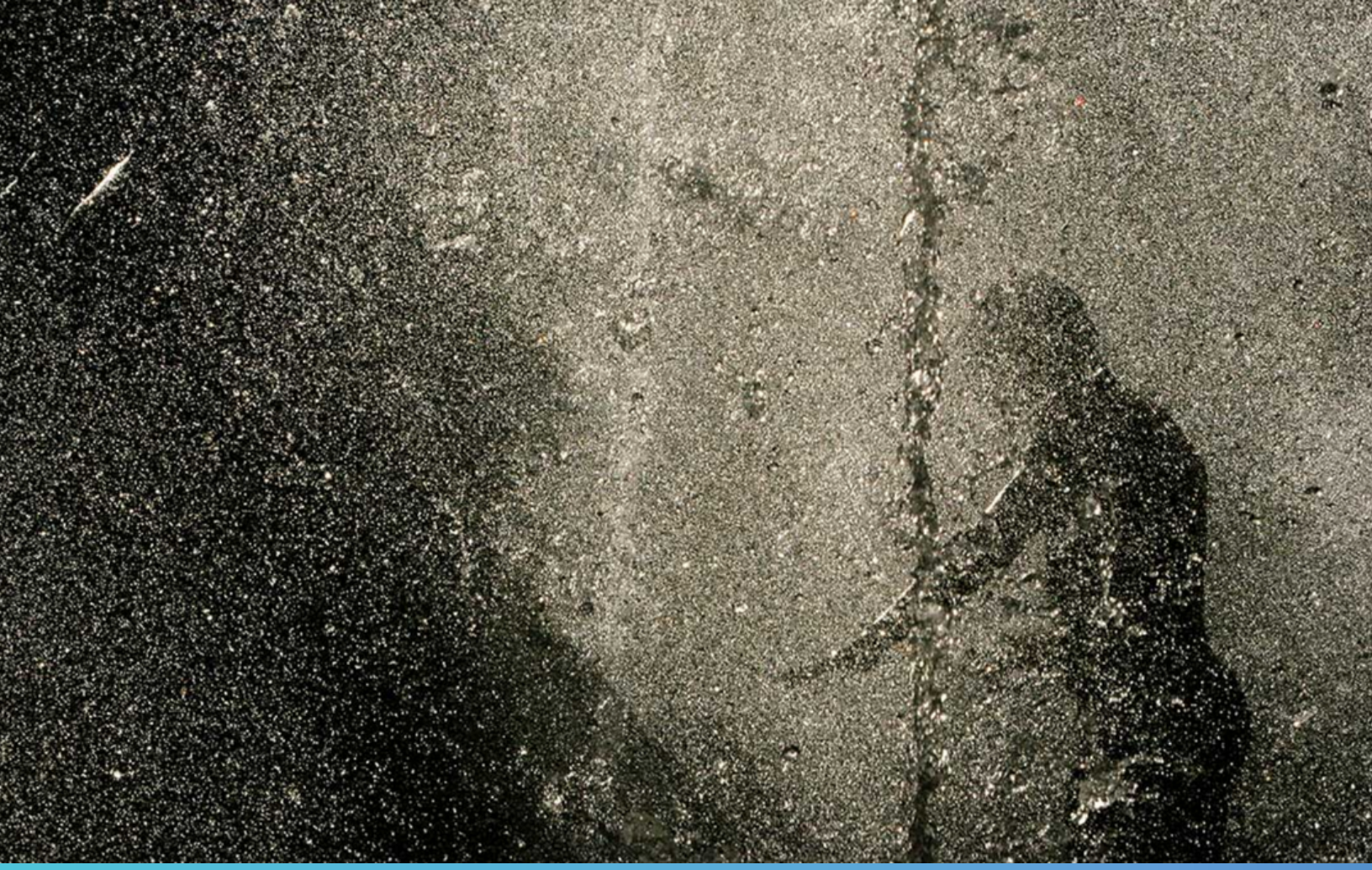

WHY SOME PEOPLE GET BURNED OUT AND OTHERS DON'T

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ARTICLE

Burnout

Why Some People Get Burned Out and Others Don't

by Kandi Wiens and Annie McKee

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Summary. Everyone faces stress at work, but some people are able to handle the onslaught of long hours, high pressure, and work crises in a way that wards off burnout. You can get better at handling stress by making several mental shifts:

- Don't be the source of your stress. Resist your perfectionist tendencies and your drive for constant high achievement. Recognize when you're being too hard on yourself, and let go.
- Recognize your limitations. Don't try to be a hero. If you don't have the ability or bandwidth to do something, be honest with yourself and ask for help.
- Reevaluate your perspective. Do you view a particular situation as a threat to something you value? Or do you view it as a problem to be solved? Change how you see the situation to bring your stress levels down. **close**

Stress and burnout are not the same thing. And while we know that stress often leads to burnout, it's possible to handle the onslaught of long hours, high pressure, and work crises in a way that safeguards you from the emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities that characterizes burnout. The key is tapping into your emotional intelligence.

This is what one of us (Kandi) discovered in a recent study ("Leading Through Burnout") where we assessed 35 chief medical officers (CMOs) at 35 large hospitals for their level of stress and tried to determine what, if anything, they do to deal with burnout. The findings surprised us: despite the fact that an overwhelming 69% of the CMOs described their current stress level as **severe**, **very severe**, or **worst possible,** the majority were *not* burned out according to the Maslach Burnout Inventory. In our interviews with these CMOs, we found a common theme to what kept their stress under control: emotional intelligence.

As one of us (Annie) has written about before**,** research suggests that emotional intelligence (EI) supports superior coping abilities and helps people deal with chronic stress and prevent burnout.

> Emotional self-awareness, one of the components of EI, for example, allows us to understand the sources of our frustration or anxiety and improves our ability to consider different responses. Self-management, another EI competency, allows us to stay calm, control impulses, and act appropriately when faced with stress. Conflict management skills allow us to channel our anxiety and

emotions into problem-solving mode rather than allowing the situation to bother us—or keep us up all night. Empathy also helps to fight stress. When we actively try to understand others, we often begin to care about them. Compassion, as with other positive emotions, can counter the physiological effects of stress. And, attuning to other people's perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs contributes to our ability to gain trust and influence others. This, on a very practical level, often means we get the help we need before stress spirals into burnout.

What You Can Do to Manage Stress and Avoid Burnout

People do all kinds of destructive things to deal with stress—they overeat, abuse drugs and alcohol, and push harder rather than slowing down. What we learned from our study of chief medical officers is that people can leverage their emotional intelligence to deal with stress and ward off burnout. You, too, might want to try the following:

- **Don't be the source of your stress.** Too many of us create our own stress, with its full bodily response, merely by thinking about or anticipating future episodes or encounters that might be stressful. People who have a high need to achieve or perfectionist tendencies may be more prone to creating their own stress. We learned from our study that leaders who are attuned to the pressures they put on themselves are better able to control their stress level. As one CMO described, "I've realized that much of my stress is self-inflicted from years of being hard on myself. Now that I know the problems it causes for me, I can talk myself out of the non-stop pressure."
- **Recognize your limitations**. Becoming more aware of your strengths and weaknesses will clue you in to where you need help. In our study, CMOs described the transition from a clinician to leadership role as

being a major source of their stress. Those who recognized when the demands were outweighing their abilities, didn't go it alone—they surrounded themselves with trusted advisors and asked for help.

- **Take deep breaths when you feel your tension and anxiety rapidly rising**. Mindfulness practices help us to deal with immediate stressors and long-term difficulties. Several of our study participants described using mindfulness techniques to slow their heart rate and bring their tension level down when faced with a stressor. As one leader described, practicing mindfulness "allows me to be more open to other solutions and I don't waste time in defense mode." Heightening your awareness of your breathing may be difficult at first, for example, but remember that attention is the ultimate act of self-control.
- **Reevaluate your perspective of the situation**. Do you view a particular situation as a threat to something you value? Or do you view it as a problem to be solved? Changing your perspective on whether you're experiencing distress or eustress can have an eye-opening effect on your ability to bring your stress level down. One CMO described the shift in her mindset, "What once felt like stress is now good stress; I'm motivated to think of it as a problem to be solved."
- **Deescalate conflicts by putting yourself in the other person's shoes**. The stress from conflicts often leads to burnout so it's best to deescalate conflicts when you can. Be inquisitive, ask questions, listen deeply. Keep your attention to the other person and focus on what he is trying to tell you. By seeking to understand his perspective, you'll be in a much better position to gain his trust and influence him. One person we interviewed uses this approach consistently. He described how sharpening his empathic listening skills has enabled him to foster greater collaboration and create buy-in with his colleagues. In a recent situation, he said a physician stormed into his office and said "You must do this or babies will die." Instead of reacting defensively and potentially causing more harm, he steadied himself and focused his attention on seeking to understand the physician's perspective. His

response deescalated the conflict and resulted in a healthy, less stressful conversation.

By using and developing your emotional intelligence, you can put a stop to burnout—for you, and for others. Remember, though: improving EI takes time and effort. Be patient with yourself, as well as forgiving and kind. The last thing you want to do is to make improving your EI another source of stress.

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