

# How Do You Talk to Your Boss About Burnout?

[Tierney Finster](#) Apr 16



You know that feeling when you wake up and check Slack before you even shut off the phone alarm that's startled you awake in the first place? Don't worry, it happens to all of us. [In fact, 83 percent of millennials sleep with their phones atop or beside their beds](#), meaning messages from their bosses and co-workers are often the last things they see before going to bed as well as the first things they see the next morning.

And while [Tim Ferriss](#) and his followers push for a [four-hour work week](#), many others have replaced the 40-hour-work-week and its rigid 9-to-5 boundaries with a flexible, but "always-on" approach.

Although such a schedule gives them less active responsibilities of being an “employee,” it also means less time to feel like a human being (or parent, partner, lover, friend, etc.). This is further complicated by fluctuating [understandings of how available employees must be to their supervisors at night and over the weekend](#).

[As such, about 50 percent of the workforce reports chronic exhaustion, a significant increase from previous decades, according to the Harvard Business Review, which asserts burnout isn't just about exhaustion, but loneliness too](#), further complicating the impact of work on one's emotional and physical lives. (In terms of bodily toll, burnout is associated with heart disease, immune disorders, sleeplessness and weight gain.)

Employers understand this, too. That's why there's been a concerted push even beyond Silicon Valley nanny states like Google (a corporate village of meals, massages and meditation) to curb worker burnout. It's obviously not just altruistic—the process of recruiting, hiring and training new employees is super expensive, so employers would rather deal with avoiding and/or treating burnout than losing a good employee. But still, it's something.

Yet how are you—the employee—supposed to talk to them about it? What's the best way to tell your boss (or HR apparatus) that you've been ground to a pulp by them, and it doesn't feel, at the moment at least, like you've got anything left to offer? No matter how sensitive they might be to burnout—and how much they view you as an integral part of the company—disclosing your inability or disinterest in working so hard to the people who pay you seems like an easy route to getting fired.

To figure out the most constructive way to have this conversation, I recently spoke to a few bosses, entrepreneurs and business experts about their own experiences with burnout and how to come across as an asset, not a liability, while coming out to your company as burnt out.

### **Pausing isn't quitting.**

"In today's workplace, there's a growing recognition of the value of transparency, and people are speaking up much more freely regarding formerly taboo topics like sexual harassment, mental health and burnout," says [Dorie Clark](#), a marketing consultant and author of [Entrepreneurial You](#). "The important thing here is to convey your commitment to the mission of the organization, so it doesn't sound like whining or that you don't have a sufficient work ethic.

"If you can emphasize that you've been pushing yourself past your limit in service of the mission, and you're concerned that you're reaching the point where you soon won't be able to effectively execute the mission anymore, that will get even a hard-charging leader's attention. Most thoughtful bosses recognize that you can't treat people like robots and assume they never need to eat or sleep or leave the office—it's just not sustainable."

### **Have an idea of what you want.**

"Come armed with solutions and specific requests," advises [Ellen Ensher](#), a professor of business management at [Loyola Marymount University](#) and an expert on mentoring. "Schedule a private time to talk, and let them know what exactly it is that you want. After all, we have robust findings that clearly show the negative effect of burnout on organizational outcomes like productivity and long-term

illnesses—i.e., healthier employees keep insurance premiums lower.

“Organizations are becoming more enlightened, and communication and empathy are more important now, which is largely due to the positive feminization of management. That means that as women take on more and more leadership roles, they want to create ways of balancing their work and personal lives. This, in turn, benefits men, too. The timing is good, too, because I don’t think this emerging generation wants to make the same sacrifices their parents did in service of a company anyway. They’ve seen work-related health issues and divorces and don’t want to repeat that pattern.”

### **Don’t worry about seeming entitled.**

“In order for a company to still truly support its employees, it needs to get involved in supporting their health and wellness,” [Dan Schawbel](#), the best-selling author and *Forbes* trend forecaster [told me late last year](#). “This is a new social responsibility, but it’s only going to help business. Half of all turnover is due to burnout, and people are burned out because they’re working harder for no additional money.

“It’s not getting better either. This is the first generation that’s going to make less than their parents. Older generations think young people are entitled and asking for way too much, but the reality is that back when Baby Boomers were the age of millennials, they weren’t dealing with this kind of situation. Plus, it’s costing companies way more to replace these employees than it does to create healthier work environments for them. So they have to be a lot more understanding of the realities of their workforce’s lives.”

**Most of all, do what’s best for you—even if that means giving up everything in your life you think means something.**

“Last December, I went to the hospital on Christmas Eve with a severe case of [gastritis](#),” says [Pedro Sorrentino, the co-founder of ONEVC, a seed-stage venture capital firm in Silicon Valley](#). “It felt like I was having a heart attack, and for a second there, I was afraid I was dying. It wasn’t a big deal in the end, but it was a great wake-up call.

“It’s tough because building anything that matters in life will take sacrifice, including pain, and you have to push yourself to improve on a daily basis. I have a section on my blog devoted to being one percent better everyday, but admittedly, that’s impossible. It’s more about having a state of mind where you try to help yourself. I wasn’t helping myself when I was sleeping very little and drinking eight or nine cups of coffee every day last year.

“When you’re building a business, you must make time for yourself. The best way to optimize your performance at work is to sleep seven hours a night, exercise on a regular basis and eat well. This, along with yoga meditation, has helped me a lot with stress, as has adopting a more minimalist lifestyle—[Marie Kondo](#) on steroids if you will. I used to live in a luxury apartment with super nice furniture, but I got rid of all that, along with my car. I reduced what I own to the absolute minimum and moved into an old house with five other people. I now feel more humble and more human. I’m still motivated to work hard, but I’m not sure I want all my things back. I think the ultimate status is no-ownership, but full-access. Everything on demand—and on your own terms.”



*Tierney Finster is a contributing writer at MEL. [She last wrote about how being HIV-positive can still be a crime.](#)*