

BUSINESS

Under 40 and overworked? How young East TN professionals can battle burnout

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The symptoms of burnout don't appear the same for everyone. One person might experience sleepless nights, while another might be avoiding vacation time or having trouble finding a way to unplug at the end of the workday.

Jen Rittenhouse – who over the years worked for various corporations, from AMETEK to PepsiCo – knows all about burnout and imposter syndrome. These common workplace afflictions are among her areas of expertise as an associate professor of practice within the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's Haslam College of Business.

Burnout and imposter syndrome are linked when employees feel compelled to work harder and harder to avoid feeling like an outsider or ill-equipped to be successful in their role, and the common causes of burnout and imposter syndrome surfaced repeatedly in this year's 40 Under 40 questionnaires as honorees shared stories about the mistakes they learned the most from early in their careers.

Many described saying "yes" too often, overextending themselves early on or hesitating to pursue opportunities because they doubted their own abilities.

One model theorizes three factors contribute to burnout: job demands, job resources and job support. A breakdown in any of these areas can lead to exhaustion and cynicism among employees, said Middle Tennessee State University psychology professor Alex Jackson, who researches employee health and burnout, with a focus on burnout prevention. Employees can begin to feel they are inadequate or that their employer's expectations are unattainable.

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"What that really highlights is that the factors that really contribute to burnout are outside of the person," Jackson told Knox News. "They are ... primarily workplace factors that are contributing to burnout."

The working environment has shifted as technology has evolved, ensuring people are constantly connected and making it harder to switch off at the end of the day. The increased ability to work from home, Rittenhouse said, has decreased "clarity around when you leave the workplace and when you go home."

Underlying expectations to always be "on" for work, Rittenhouse said – along with financial stressors like student loan debt and job insecurity – have led to employees feeling "trapped" to keep working through increased work-related anxiety.

Mental overload has real mental health consequences, which is part of what Alexia Georghiou helps workplaces overcome and avoid as the founder of Knoxville Happiness Coalition, a leadership development and support system.

Keeping people central, she said, helps avoid burnout and the problems it provokes. So can clear communication between employers, employees and their colleagues. Connecting with and understanding co-workers helps everyone stay

motivated to perform their best, she said, especially as automation becomes a more prominent part of the average workplace.

Listening to employees and making accommodations for their changing lives – like when they become a mother or father or begin looking after their own parents as caregivers – helps employees do their best work, she said. And the costs of not doing so are high; roughly \$1 trillion per year in lost productivity comes down to anxiety and depression, according to [a 2024 fact sheet from the World Health Organization](#).

Rittenhouse has a few tips for when burnout takes hold: Acknowledge the feeling, ask a trusted co-worker for support, talk to a mentor outside of work and set some boundaries, like blocking off time on a calendar reserved for focus and relieving stress. Jackson suggests exercising, controlled breathing and a selection of guided meditations offered by UCLA at uclahealth.org/uclamindful.

And don't underestimate the value of building a good home life in avoiding burnout in the workplace, Georghiou said.

“It’s having, maybe, what's being called an old-school mindset - going back to basics ... accepting what you can't change at work and working on yourself and what you need to communicate,” she said. “Whether it's work or someone's death or an accident that leaves you without what you once had, you have to figure out your own happiness outside of that.”

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