

Toolbox Talk

Burnout



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers recognise the early signs of burnout, understand how prolonged pressure can affect them and know when to slow down, speak up or seek support.

Have you ever got home from work, sat down on the sofa and thought, “I can't even be bothered to talk to anyone tonight”? Most of us have had days like that. A long shift, difficult job or bad night's sleep can leave anyone feeling drained but what happens when that feeling doesn't disappear after a good night's rest or a quiet weekend? When you're waking up tired, dragging yourself through work and feeling like you've got nothing left by the time you get home? That can be a sign that the pressure has been going on for too long. Burnout normally doesn't happen overnight. It builds gradually, which is exactly why it can be difficult to notice. You adapt, keep going and tell yourself you'll feel better next week, until eventually running on empty starts to feel normal.

Why It Matters

Construction can put people under sustained pressure. Early starts, long journeys, deadlines, programme changes, overtime, physical work and the responsibility of getting jobs finished can all add up. Then there are the pressures outside work: bills, family responsibilities, relationships and everything else life throws at us. Sometimes there simply isn't much time left to recover before the alarm goes off and we start again.

Burnout isn't about somebody being unable to handle hard work. Often it's the opposite. The people who keep taking on more, staying late, covering for others and saying yes to everything can be the ones who don't realise how much pressure they're carrying. Eventually that can affect concentration, patience and judgement. You might become less interested in the job, more frustrated with the people around you or start making mistakes that aren't normally like you. On site, where decisions and concentration matter, those changes are worth taking seriously.



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Signs To Look Out For

One of the clearest signs of burnout is feeling exhausted for a long period of time, even when you've had some rest. You might find that jobs you've done hundreds of times suddenly feel like a massive effort. Motivation disappears, Sunday night starts feeling difficult because you're already thinking about Monday morning or you find yourself counting down the hours until you can go home. You may become more impatient with workmates, customers or people at home. Some people withdraw and stop joining conversations, while others become frustrated over things that wouldn't usually bother them. You might struggle to concentrate, forget things or feel like you're simply going through the motions rather than taking any enjoyment or pride from what you're doing.

Everyone has difficult weeks. The important thing is noticing when this becomes the normal way you feel rather than something that passes.

What Can Help

If you're starting to recognise some of these signs, don't automatically assume the answer is to work harder and push through. Start by being realistic about what's taking your energy. Are you regularly working longer than you need to? Are you constantly saying yes to extra work? Are you taking breaks or working through them because you feel you have to? Sometimes the first step is simply admitting that the current pace isn't sustainable.

Recovery outside work matters as well. Give yourself some proper separation from the job where possible. That could mean going for a walk, exercising, seeing friends, spending time with your family or doing something you enjoy where work isn't involved. Rest isn't just sitting on the sofa while answering work messages. Sometimes your head needs a genuine break from thinking about the job.



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If the main pressure is coming from work, speak to someone before you reach the point where you can't cope anymore. A supervisor may be able to look at workload, hours or responsibilities. If the pressure is coming from several areas of life, talking to someone you trust can help you work out what's actually weighing you down and if things have been difficult for a while, speaking to your GP, a counsellor or another support service can be a sensible next step.

Discussion Questions

- What pressures in construction can build up over a long period of time?
- What would tell you that tiredness has become something more than just having a bad week?
- What could we do differently as a team if we noticed someone was becoming burnt out?

Takeaway Message

Burnout usually isn't caused by one difficult day. It happens when pressure keeps building and there isn't enough time or space to recover. The earlier you recognise that you're running low, the more options you have to do something about it. You don't have to wait until you've completely hit the wall before slowing down or asking for support.

Call To Action

Think about the last few weeks rather than just how you feel today. Have you been recovering between working days or have you simply been getting through them? If you realise you've been running on empty for a while, speak to someone and look at what could change and if someone you work with seems permanently exhausted, frustrated or unlike themselves, ask them how they're getting on. Sometimes another person notices we're struggling before we notice it ourselves.



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