



Chronic Stressors & Burnout

Chronic stress and burnout are real and can have a significant impact on the health of organizations, staff, and communities.

While chronic stress and burnout are issues that food banks and other organizations have been dealing with long before COVID-19, the increased demand and stress brought on by this crisis highlights the importance of acknowledging the issues, recognizing signs, and understanding the implications of chronic stress and burnout on an organizational and personal level.

What are some key stressors within the network?

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Adjusting to the new norm of working virtually with stakeholders such as staff, board of directors, donors, and agency partners

Meeting staffing needs

- Where to find the help needed
- Fewer volunteers, hiring temps, training in hectic environment
- Information overload

MANAGEMENT AND TEAMS

- Increased pace for staff and volunteers
- Setting up operations for social distancing
- Doing more with less people or new people
- Low-touch direct distribution models
- Higher volumes—logistics and flow
- Resources to sustain work and demand
- Keeping up with increased demand for food
- Sustaining and building positive staff morale
- Managing in chaos
- Keeping communication open
- No time to plan

PERSONAL

- Fear for personal risk and safety (front-line)
- Managing a new work environment (remote)
- Balancing caregiving demands
- Coping with isolation
- Ongoing disaster response: No end in sight
- Work-life balance: Needing time off
- Uncertainty in job responsibilities

"Staff at our food banks are worried about the next 30-60 days, and I can't see how we can say we'll be back to normal in that time period. Indeed, I believe it to be the opposite. Having been directly involved in Sandy in 2012/13 and the reconstruction of our economy after the 2008 crash I know there is no easy answer. And it's even harder now since we can't punch back."

*—Kim Guadagno
President and CEO of Fulfill*

Consider thinking about this through the lens of a team, rather than individual wellness alone. It is especially important to recognize that there are a number of teams within each food bank, so it's not solely up to the CEO to drive this forward. We all have a role to play in creating healthy teams.

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What are the signals of burnout?

It's important to look for changes in patterns of behavior—both the positive and negative:

- Have you noticed changes in staff attitudes?
- How has productivity of teams and individuals changed?
- Are you hearing about challenges or do you sense that people are suffering in silence?
- Are you seeing an increase in call-outs, sick time, irregularities in attendance?

The World Health Organization defines burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” that can happen to an individual when chronic stress in the workplace is not addressed or well managed. Burnout is characterized by:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
3. Reduced professional efficacy

Nearly two-thirds of employees deal with burnout at work. Not only can these issues negatively impact the individual, but they can also have major implications for their organizations.

“As the CEO, I am aware of many signs of stress and burnout in staff and think that this pandemic has many people on high alert, feeling like there is no end in sight, and often taking their frustrations out on each other—which leads to making mistakes. Change has been the enemy, and not everyone responds well to the many forms and fast-paced environment, like rethinking distribution models every week and adapting to shifts in food sources.”

—Kara Ross President & CEO of Food Bank of Eastern Michigan

“There's so much emotion roiling around us all. Did we do the right thing? Is it enough? Are there people angry or hurting and we're not addressing it? What does the future hold? The good news that helps me sleep at night and that makes me so proud to work at FBSJ is that I feel confident the entire leadership staff makes decisions that are the best for the staff and organization. It's a good feeling!”

*—Janet Kotsakis
Talent Management Administrator of
Food Bank of South Jersey*

What happens if these issues aren't addressed?

Chronic stress and burnout that is not addressed in the workplace may lead to physical and mental health problems. The Mayo Clinic describes a variety of possible consequences of burnout including:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Sadness, anger or irritability
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Vulnerability to illnesses

Employees who are burnt out miss more work and are less productive during the workday. Prioritizing ways to reduce stress for individuals in your organization will ultimately improve the health and functioning of not only your employees, but also improve your organization as a whole. To best help the communities we serve we must be able to take care of ourselves first.

NEXT STEPS

To learn more about actions you and your food bank can take to address the effects of chronic stress and burnout within your teams, check out the [Next Steps module HERE.](#)