

Business

Seeing workplace misery, they offer company

The Guardian ,
MARTHA C. WHITE THE NEW YORK TIMES,
10 July 2024,
1157 words,
English,
CSUGC,
A9,
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When Karen Schiro, a real estate agent in Fairfax Station, Virginia, realized last year that she was suffering from burnout, she reached out to a burnout coach, Ellyn Schinke, based in Tacoma, Washington. “I knew that I was burned out and I just didn’t know how to fix it,” she said.

Over six months of weekly video calls, Schiro, 45, learned how to pare down her overloaded to-do lists. Making changes like adding a line to her email signature saying that she does not respond to messages sent after 6 p.m. seemed like “stupid stuff,” she said, but it took an outsider’s perspective to pinpoint these adjustments.

“When you’re burned out, it’s hard to think of those things and implement them,” Schiro said.

Even before the COVID19 pandemic disrupted how and where people work, the World Health Organization ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)) recognized burnout. In 2019, it defined the hallmarks of this type of chronic workplace stress as exhaustion, cynicism and ineffectuality — all attributes that make it tough for people to bounce back on their own, said Michael P. Leiter, a professor emeritus at Acadia University ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)) in Nova Scotia who studies burnout.

“It’s hard, at that point, to pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” he said. “It’s really helpful to have a secondary point of view or some emotional support.”

Enter the burnout coach. Operating in a gray area between psychotherapy and career coaching, and without formal credentialing and oversight, “burnout coach” can be an easy buzzword to advertise. Basically anybody can hang out a shingle.

As a result, more people are marketing themselves as burnout coaches in recent years, said Chris Bittinger, a clinical assistant professor of leadership and project management at Purdue University ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)) who studies burnout. “There’s no barrier to entry,” he said.

Turning a profit is another matter. When Rhia Batchelder, a Denver resident, started a career as a burnout coach in 2021, she lived off her savings at first, supplementing her income with freelance legal work and dog-walking gigs as she honed her sales and marketing skills.

“Coaching in general is a very unregulated industry,” she said. “I spent probably hundreds of hours researching burnout.”

This lack of oversight makes it difficult to say how many burnout coaches there are, but researchers who study burnout such as Leiter say a pressure-cooker corporate culture, a shortage of mental health care resources and the disruption of the pandemic have created a critical mass of burned-out workers searching for ways to cope.

Kim Hires, a burnout coach based in Atlanta, said few people knew what she did when she started her business a decade ago. “Now, I don’t have to explain it,” she said.

But burnout coaches struggle from a lack of credentialing. Some earn certifications via organizations like the International Coaching Federation, a large nonprofit coaching association. But unlike a life coach, an executive coach or a wellness coach, a burnout coach has no specific certification.

They say they must cobble together certifications and continuing education in topics like stress management and sleep health — which even advocates acknowledge can make the practice sound like a gimmick.

Educational institutions, however, are responding to the growing interest.

Terrence E. Maltbia, the director of the Columbia Coaching Certification Program at Columbia University ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)), said the university was adding the topic of burnout to its continuing education curriculum, after its biennial survey of coaching program alumni and executives found that interest in burnout skyrocketed between 2018 and 2022, an increase he characterized as unprecedented.

“The market is driving it because people need to work, and work is more stressful,” he said.

The latest annual survey by the American Psychological Association ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)) found that 77 per cent of workers experienced work-related stress within the past month. Often, help managing that stress is hard to come by: More than half of the U.S. population lives in an area with inadequate access to mental health care, according to the Health Resources and Services Administration ([javascript:void\(0\);](#)).

Brett Linzer, an internist and pediatrician in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, said some people prefer talking to a burnout coach because stigma remains around mental health.

“There’s a cultural narrative that doctors need to figure out things for themselves and can’t rely on other people,” Linzer said. Talking to a burnout coach made him more empathetic and a better communicator, he said, and helped him cope after the deaths of two friends and colleagues.

Personal experience also plays a role in many burnout coaches’ pitches. Batchelder, the Denver coach, left a career in corporate litigation that left her disengaged and exhausted.

“I started researching burnout to help myself,” Batchelder, 33, said. Learning stress-management tools such as breathing exercises, establishing boundaries and setting routines gave her insight to help clients.

These coaches said they don’t replace therapists but instead provide a different kind of support. Some clients said they appreciated how a burnout coach could relate to their workplace challenges.

“She could understand what I was going through,” said Tara Howell, a communications manager for a Baltimore nonprofit who began working with Batchelder while also seeing a therapist.

“My sessions with Rhia were a lot more practical,” Howell, 28, said. “I’d considered working with career coaches, but it didn’t seem right for what I wanted.”

While some employers might pay for sessions with a burnout coach under the umbrella of professional development, most coaches and clients report that people pay out of pocket for coaching — which can cost \$250 or more for a 45- or 60-minute one-on-one session, with packages of sessions running into the thousands of dollars.

Interest in burnout coaches comes amid shifting views on workplace wellness. William Fleming, a fellow at Oxford University's Wellbeing Research Center, found that many employer-provided wellness services, like sleep apps and mindfulness seminars, largely don't live up to claims of improving mental health.

"Those interventions — not only are many of them not working, but they're backfiring," said Kandi Wiens, the co-director of the medical education master's degree program at the University of Pennsylvania (javascript:void(0);) and a burnout researcher.

Fleming said these initiatives were ineffective because they focus on the individual rather than issues like overwork or lack of resources that lead to burnout. "You're trying to mitigate symptoms of the problem without getting to the root causes," he said.

Burnout coaches themselves acknowledge that they are not a panacea. "There's definitely a limit to what coaching can do," Batchelder said. "There's so many institutional stressors."

This article originally appeared in [The New York Times \(javascript:void\(0\);\)](#).

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Document CSUGC00020240710ek7a00007

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