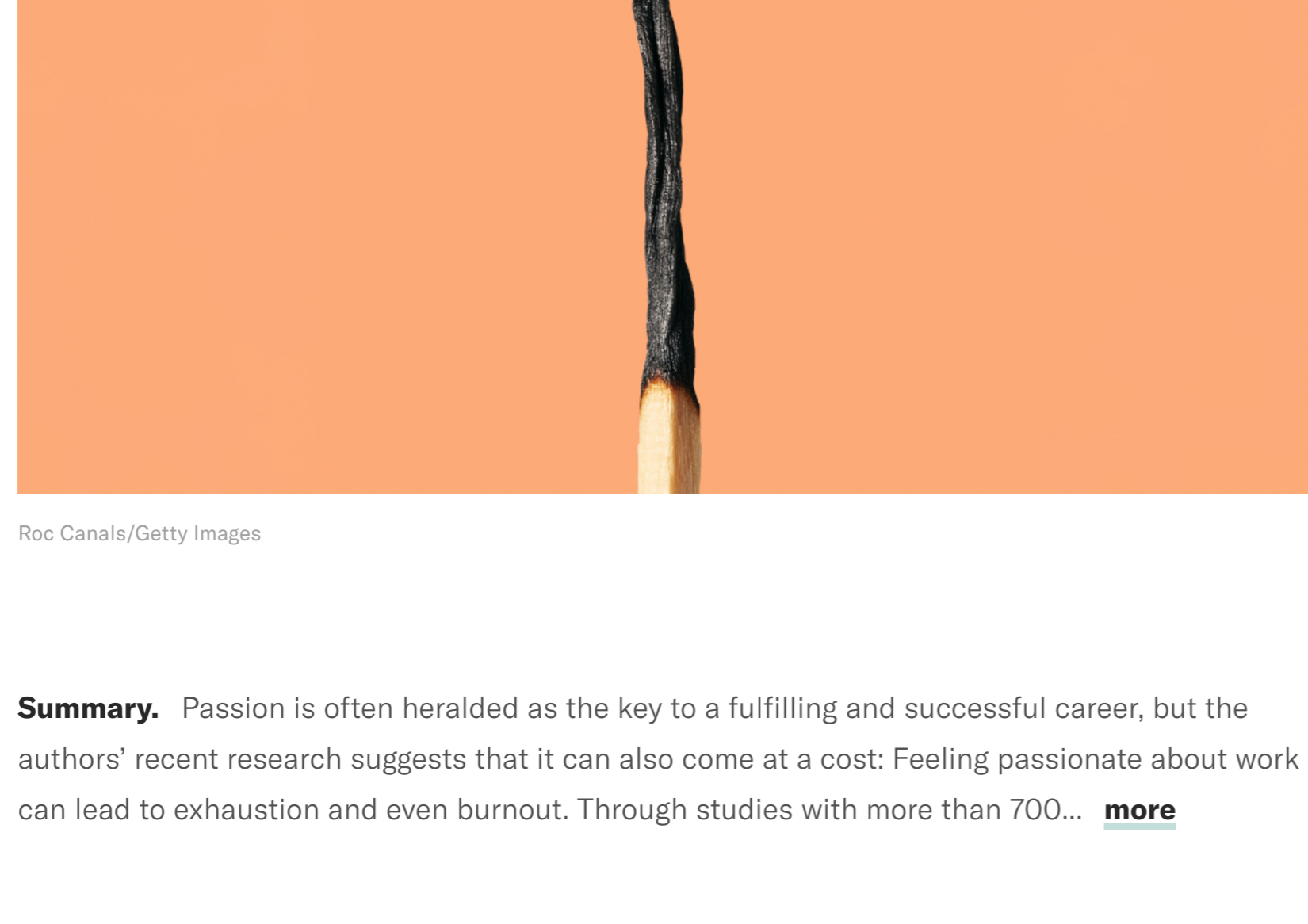


Burnout

Don't Let Passion Lead to Burnout on Your Team

by Joy Bredehorst, Kai Krautter, Jirs Meuris, and Jon M. Jachimowicz

May 17, 2023



Roc Canals/Getty Images

Summary. Passion is often heralded as the key to a fulfilling and successful career, but the authors' recent research suggests that it can also come at a cost: Feeling passionate about work can lead to exhaustion and even burnout. Through studies with more than 700... [more](#)

"Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life." So goes the well-worn adage, a ubiquitous mantra that has pushed a generation of workers to try to find (or build) a career that enables them to follow their passions. But is being passionate always a positive?

Studies have shown that passion is associated with a host of positive outcomes, from a reduction in stress to a boost in productivity and career growth. But in our recent research, we found that feeling passionate about work can also come at a cost: It can lead to exhaustion — and even burnout.

Passion Disrupts Recovery

To understand the short- and long-term effects of passion, we asked more than 700 full-time U.S.-based employees across various industries to provide daily responses about how passionate and burned out they felt at the beginning and end of each workday. And consistent with prior research, the employees reported feeling less burned out on days when they felt more passionate about their work. But on the day following a particularly passionate day, employees actually felt more burned out than usual.

This is because on days when employees experienced higher levels of passion, they also felt more energized. This energy boost made their work seem easier, and so they ended up investing more time and energy into it — but this also caused employees to overlook their own needs, fail to prioritize rest and recovery, and ruminate about work rather than mentally switching off from their jobs when the workday was over. In other words, feeling more passionate both led workers to exert more energy at work and left them with fewer mental resources to recover from the extra-demanding day they had just experienced. This in turn resulted in these employees feeling especially burned out the next day, their energy levels so depleted that they were unable to maintain their passion for work.

It's a vicious cycle: When our passion is at its peak, we become full of vitality, but we are less likely to notice the toll that extra exertion takes on us, and so we become unable to detach from work and engage in the rest we need to avoid exhaustion. Indeed, in a follow-up study with tech employees, we found that employees who reported being particularly passionate were least likely to take a break, even when explicitly asked to do so, likely burning them out in the long term.

Of course, shunning passion isn't the answer. Passion is a critical driver for both employees' wellbeing and organizations' success. But our research suggests that the pursuit of passion does not have to take such a heavy toll — and that there are several steps workers and managers can take to keep healthy passion from turning into exhaustion and burnout.

Take Control of Your Passion

As an employee, it is important to recognize that finding a job you feel passionate about is just the first step. Maintaining that passion over time requires a concerted effort to take breaks, rest, and recover when needed. So instead of allowing your passion to control you, take control of your passion. Feeling passionate about your work may push you to work harder, but it doesn't have to: To the contrary, a burst of passion today may serve as a sign that you need to set up guardrails to prevent exhaustion tomorrow.

For example, after an intense training session or competition, athletes prioritize post-exertion recovery with regenerative practices such as ice baths, creams, and massages that prevent injuries and ensure optimal performance long-term. Similarly, after a particularly intense, passionate day at work, employees should be proactive about making time for emotional recovery. In our study, we found that just one extra day off helped employees detach from work and return with higher-than-usual levels of passion the following workday.

Whether you're an athlete or an analyst, sprints can be an effective way to channel your passion and make meaningful progress toward a goal, but they're not a sustainable approach in the long run. Prioritizing recovery not only provides a much-needed respite, but also increases passion going forward, ultimately enabling a healthier, more sustainable day-to-day experience.

Encourage a More Sustainable Kind of Passion

At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that there's only so much you can do as an individual employee. Especially for people who work multiple jobs, work in industries that are particularly exploitative, have additional caregiving responsibilities, or face other systemic barriers that make it harder to rest and detach from work, sustaining passion without succumbing to burnout can be challenging or even impossible.

For example, in our ongoing research, we've found that men often have more flexibility in how they can allocate their work and non-work responsibilities, while women are expected to complete a "second shift" of housework and childcare duties at home, meaning that men may have more freedom than women do to recover after a passionate workday. Too often, maintaining passion becomes a luxury reserved only for those with the financial security and temporal flexibility to rest, recover, and retain their passion long-term.

These inequities are widespread and difficult to root out — but effective management can go a long way to reduce their impact and help employees feel passionate while avoiding exhaustion. Rather than encouraging unsustainable passion and pushing people to burn themselves out, managers should help their teams navigate the challenges that can come with feeling passionate about work. That means managing workloads, monitoring emotional exhaustion, and building systems that support work-life balance (especially in a remote work environment, in which boundaries between work and personal time are increasingly blurred).

To be sure, this may run counter to some managers' intuitions. Many organizations explicitly use passion as a hiring criterion, and some employers even use employees' passion to legitimize assigning them extra work, ultimately exacerbating exhaustion. But our research demonstrates that prioritizing passion above all else is ineffective and harmful. Instead, managers should adopt a longer-term mindset, focusing not just on fostering passion in the moment, but also on helping employees maintain that passion over time.

The word "passion" comes from the Latin *patis*, which means suffering. In German, the word for passion is *Leidenschaft*, which roughly translates to "the ability to endure hardship." Passion is often heralded as the key to a fulfilling career, and yet the very origins of the word suggest that it may contain a hidden, darker side. Indeed, passion deceives us by making work not feel like work, and in so doing, it drains us of both our energy and our passion itself. The ability to endure suffering and hardship is critical for our success, but it's equally critical to recognize the toll that endurance takes, and take steps to protect ourselves and our teams — before our passion burns us out.

JB

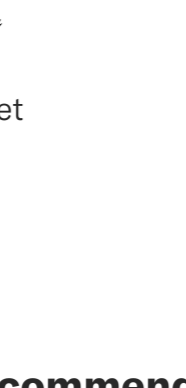
Joy Bredehorst is a PhD student in the Organizational Behavior Unit at the University of Cologne. Her research focuses on temporal dynamics in employees' experience and wellbeing in the workplace.

KK

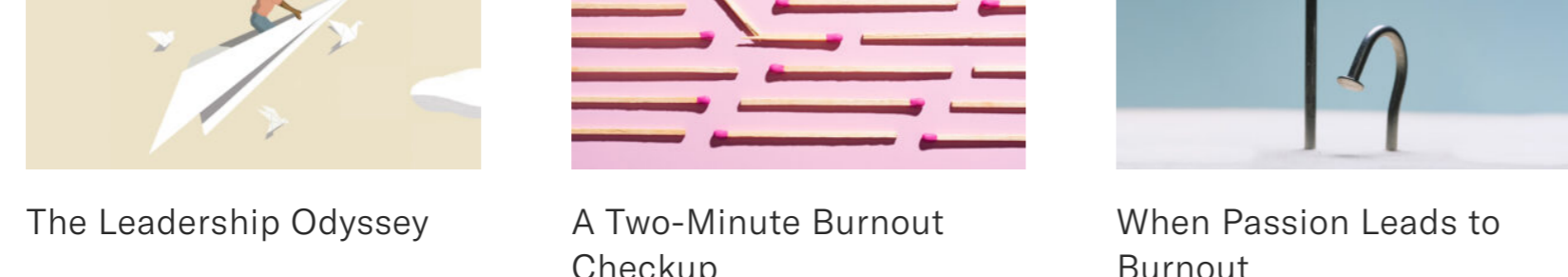
Kai Krautter is an incoming PhD student in the Organizational Behavior Unit at the Harvard Business School. His research interests revolve around maintaining passion for work over time as well as flexibility in extraversion between different situations.

JM

Jirs Meuris is an assistant professor of management and human resources at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He received his PhD in organizational behavior and human resources management from the University of Pittsburgh. His research has focused broadly on how work and organizations affect demographic and economic disparities in society, with a particular interest in the management of law enforcement organizations.



Jon M. Jachimowicz is an assistant professor in the Organizational Behavior Unit at the Harvard Business School. He received his PhD in management from Columbia Business School. He studies how people perceive their passion for work, how they perceive passion in others, and how leaders and organizations seek to manage for passion.



Recommended For You

The Leadership Odyssey

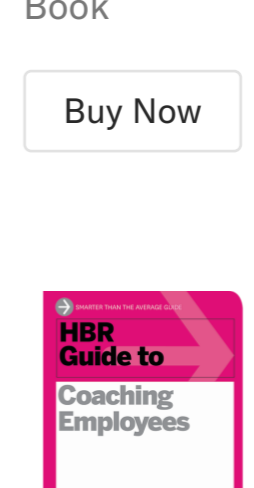
A Two-Minute Burnout Checkup

When Passion Leads to Burnout

PODCAST
Why Burnout Happens - and How Bosses Can Help

Partner Center

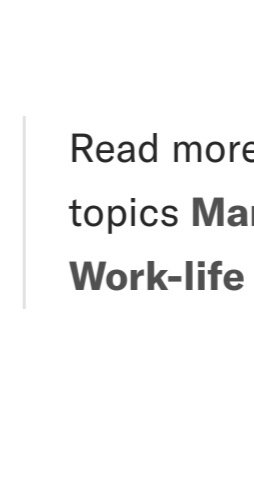
Readers Also Viewed These Items



HBR Guide to Beating Burnout

Book

Buy Now



HBR Guide to Coaching Employees

Book

Buy Now

Read more on **Burnout** or related topics **Managing people** and **Work-life balance**

- Explore HBR**
- The Latest
 - All Topics
 - Magazine Archive
 - The Big Idea
 - Reading Lists
 - Case Selections
 - Video
 - Podcasts
 - Webinars
 - Data & Visuals
 - My Library
 - Newsletters
 - HBR Press
 - HBR Ascend

- HBR Store**
- Article Reprints
 - Books
 - Cases
 - Collections
 - Magazine Issues
 - HBR Guide Series
 - HBR 20-Minute Managers
 - HBR Emotional Intelligence Series
 - HBR Must Reads
 - Tools

- About HBR**
- Contact Us
 - Advertise with Us
 - Information for Booksellers/Retailers
 - Masterhead
 - Global Editions
 - Media Inquiries
 - Guidelines for Authors
 - HBR Analytic Services
 - Copyright Permissions

- Manage My Account**
- My Library
 - Topic Feeds
 - Orders
 - Account Settings
 - Email Preferences
 - Account FAQ
 - Help Center
 - Contact Customer Service

- Follow HBR**
- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - LinkedIn
 - Instagram
 - Your Newsreader