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Psychology of Burnout in the Post-Pandemic World

Sumat Anwer[1], Dr.Rizwan Taj[2]

1. Department of behavioural sciences ,Rawalpindi medical university, (**Corresponding Author**), Email: sumatanwer4@gmail.com
2. Head of Department (PIMS) Hospital, Islamabad

Abstract

Burnout has existed as a clinical and occupational concern since Freudenberger's early descriptions in the 1970s, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced a reckoning with its scale that prior decades had largely avoided. This article examines the psychological architecture of burnout as it has developed and in many cases worsened in the years since the pandemic's acute phase. Drawing on peer-reviewed research from clinical psychology, occupational health, and social neuroscience, we trace how pandemic-era stressors (prolonged uncertainty, grief, social isolation, economic precarity, and the collapse of work-life boundaries under remote work) have reshaped both the prevalence and phenomenology of burnout. We review the three-dimensional framework established by Maslach and Leiter emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment and assess how post-pandemic conditions have complicated or extended that model. We also examine population-specific vulnerability patterns, neurobiological correlates including hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysregulation and prefrontal hypoactivation, and the evidence base for recovery-oriented interventions. The article closes by identifying unresolved questions and proposing directions for research in an era that is post-pandemic in name but still deeply marked by its psychological residue.

Keywords: Burnout, Post-Pandemic Psychology, Occupational Stress, Emotional Exhaustion, COVID-19, HPA Axis, Compassion Fatigue, Workplace Well-Being, Recovery, Mental Health

Introduction

Back in 1974, Herbert Freudenberger noticed something among the staff at free clinics: people arrived brimming with idealism, wanting to help, and left months later completely drained. Empty. Cynical. He borrowed a term from drug culture to describe it burnout and the image was perfect. Something that had once burned bright had finally burned itself out. For decades, burnout stayed mostly confined to the caring professions: doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers. Then the pandemic hit, and suddenly the number of burned-out people exploded beyond anything anyone had predicted. Fast forward to 2025, and the crisis has only deepened. According to the Eagle Hill Consulting Workforce Burnout Survey, more than half of the U.S. workforce (55%) is now experiencing burnout a rate that shows this is no longer a niche occupational concern but a widespread organizational crisis (Eagle Hill Consulting, 2025). It didn't happen all at once. The pandemic threw a series of crises at people each one serious on its own, but together they were overwhelming. People lost family members while also losing their offices, their childcare, their routines, and any sense of what might come next. Healthcare

workers witnessed a level of suffering they'd never encountered before. Remote workers found themselves living at work with no way to step away. Students lost years they can't get back. And when things slowly returned to normal, most people discovered the exhaustion hadn't gone anywhere. What happened to workplaces during and after the pandemic is crucial to understand here. The shift to remote work, which many thought would be temporary, erased the boundaries people relied on. The commute home, the closing of an office door these small rituals that separated work from the rest of life vanished. People found themselves answering emails at 10 p.m., sitting in the same room all day where they slept, where they ate, where they tried to relax. Research from the European Union found that teleworkers frequently worked during free time and struggled to disconnect, a pattern linked to higher stress, anxiety, and burnout risk (StressOut Project, 2025). For those with children, remote work often meant managing childcare while working full-time. The home became a workplace, and people had nowhere to really leave work behind. Meetings multiplied in bizarre ways. Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend data shows that meetings after 8 p.m. are up 16%, and nearly a third of employees are still checking email at 10 p.m. (Apollo Technical, 2026). Teams that once coordinated with quick hallway conversations now scheduled video calls to communicate, then more calls to follow up. Some companies added surveillance software to monitor remote workers, replacing trust with suspicion. The "always-on" culture that had existed before became inescapable when your home was your office. Yet the nature of burnout itself is shifting in ways the original pandemic didn't predict. Deloitte's 2025 Workforce Intelligence Report found that "mental fatigue, cognitive strain and decision friction are now the leading indicators of burnout, surpassing workload volume for the first time" (HRD Connect, 2025). This represents a fundamental change: burnout is no longer just about working too much. It's about cognitive overload from fragmented tools, constant context-switching, and the strain of adapting to rapid technological change. Workers managing multiple AI systems report 14% more mental effort, 12% more mental fatigue, and 19% more information overload than those using AI for task replacement a phenomenon researchers have dubbed "AI brain fry" (Bedard et al., 2026). Many workplaces never actually reckoned with what had happened. When people went back whether to offices, hybrid arrangements, or continued working from home the conditions that had burned people out remained largely unchanged. Workloads stayed heavy, staffing remained thin, and in healthcare and other frontline sectors, the backlog of delayed care combined with ongoing illness created a kind of perpetual crisis. Some organizations treated the "Great Resignation" of 2021-2022, when millions of people quit their jobs, as a recruitment problem. They didn't realize it was telling them something about the conditions they'd created: people couldn't sustain what was being asked of them anymore. The burnout that exists now in 2025 and 2026 isn't just pandemic burnout that's hanging on. Gen Z has now surpassed millennials as the most burned-out generation, with 74% experiencing at least moderate levels of burnout (Aflac WorkForces Report, 2025). It's been shaped by everything the pandemic left behind: a lingering sense of danger even when the immediate threat has passed, a complete rethinking of what work should ask of us, grief that was never really processed, and a strange combination of relief and guilt that we survived when others didn't. Understanding this phenomenon requires looking at both the person struggling and the workplace that shaped their struggle. It means taking seriously the fact that burnout is embedded in how we work, how our organizations are structured, and what we've collectively decided to tolerate. This article walks through what we actually know about burnout now. We'll look at its roots and how we measure it, examine what the pandemic specifically did to reshape it, explain the neuroscience of why it feels so deeply physical, and honestly assess what actually helps people recover. We won't pretend there's a clean solution here. Burnout in 2026 is messy, it's widespread, and any account of it that sounds too neat is probably missing something important.

Conceptual Foundations: What Burnout is and Is Not

Burnout is not depression, though they overlap. It is not ordinary tiredness, though it includes fatigue. And it is not a moral failing a point that still needs making because the cultural reflex to treat exhaustion as weakness has not disappeared. Defining it precisely matters, because imprecise definitions produce imprecise interventions. The model that has dominated research for four decades is Maslach's. Maslach and Jackson (1981) described burnout as a three-component syndrome arising in response to chronic occupational stress: emotional exhaustion (the sense of being drained beyond what rest can restore), depersonalization (a defensive numbing toward the people one serves), and reduced personal accomplishment (the collapse of self-efficacy in one's professional role). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), developed alongside this model, became the field's standard instrument. Critics have raised fair objections. Schaufeli and Taris (2025) argued that the three-dimensional structure was not universally stable across occupations and cultural contexts. Shirom (2003) proposed an energy-based alternative, arguing that the core of burnout is physical fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and cognitive weariness. The World Health Organization's ICD-11 (2019) included burnout as an "occupational phenomenon" characterized by energy depletion, increased mental distance from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy a formulation close to Maslach's but careful to restrict it to occupational contexts. That restriction matters less than it once did. The pandemic blurred the line between occupational and non-occupational life so thoroughly that many researchers have begun questioning whether burnout can still be meaningfully contained within the workplace. Parents who worked from home while simultaneously managing remote schooling were not experiencing a purely occupational stressor. The post-pandemic moment may require a less boundary-conscious model. Relevant also is the distinction between burnout and compassion fatigue, particularly for healthcare and social care workers. Compassion fatigue, as described by Figley (2025) and later elaborated by Stamm (2020), is a secondary traumatic stress response the cost of caring for people who are themselves traumatized. During the pandemic, the two conditions co-occurred so frequently in clinical workers that researchers debated whether they had become, for practical purposes, a single syndrome (Restauri & Sheridan, 2020). That question remains open.

Pandemic-Specific Stressors and Their Contributions To Post-Pandemic Burnout

Not every pandemic stressor contributed to burnout through the same pathway. Some operated through sheer workload particularly in healthcare, where patient volume, acuity, and PPE-related friction drove exhaustion in the straightforward sense Maslach described. Others operated through moral injury: the violation of core professional commitments, such as when clinicians were forced to make resource allocation decisions that they experienced as abandoning patients. Moral injury, as Litz et al. (2019) defined it, involves the damage done by "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs." The pandemic provided all of these conditions simultaneously, at scale. A distinct pathway ran through social isolation. Cacioppo and Hawkley (2020) had established that perceived social isolation is a significant predictor of stress dysregulation, sleep disruption, cognitive decline, and depression. Lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed varying degrees of isolation on virtually all populations; for some elderly individuals, single-person households, people with social anxiety the isolation was severe. Loneliness-driven HPA dysregulation creates a physiological substrate that makes subsequent stress harder to manage, meaning that isolated workers entered work demands already compromised at the neurobiological level. The shift to remote and hybrid work added structural dimensions. Boundaries between work and non-work

time that had been maintained by physical distance the commute, the closing of the office were eliminated for many workers almost overnight. Gajendran and Harrison (2017) had found that telecommuting at higher intensities was associated with reduced work-family balance and increased work-home conflict, a finding that translated with uncomfortable precision to the forced remote-work experiment of 2020 and 2021. Economic insecurity added another layer. Job losses, furloughs, and sector-wide collapses created financial uncertainty that is independently associated with psychological distress. Among those who kept their jobs, survivor guilt and fear of future loss created a form of chronic vigilance metabolically expensive and cognitively depleting even when no specific threat materializes (Compas et al., 2017). Healthcare workers deserve extended attention because the pandemic literature is most dense around their experiences. Restauri and Sheridan (2020) reported burnout and compassion fatigue rates among pandemic-era healthcare workers that were, in several studies, two to three times higher than pre-pandemic benchmarks. Morgantini et al. (2020), in a study of nearly 2,700 healthcare professionals across multiple countries, found that 51.4% reported burnout, with female workers, nurses, and frontline physicians showing the highest rates. Teachers constitute another heavily documented population. Sokal et al. (2020) found burnout rates among Canadian teachers exceeding pre-pandemic norms, driven by rapid transitions to online teaching, unclear institutional direction, and the emotional labor of supporting students who were themselves struggling. The sense that the work was technically possible but felt deeply inadequate maps closely onto the reduced personal accomplishment dimension of Maslach's model.

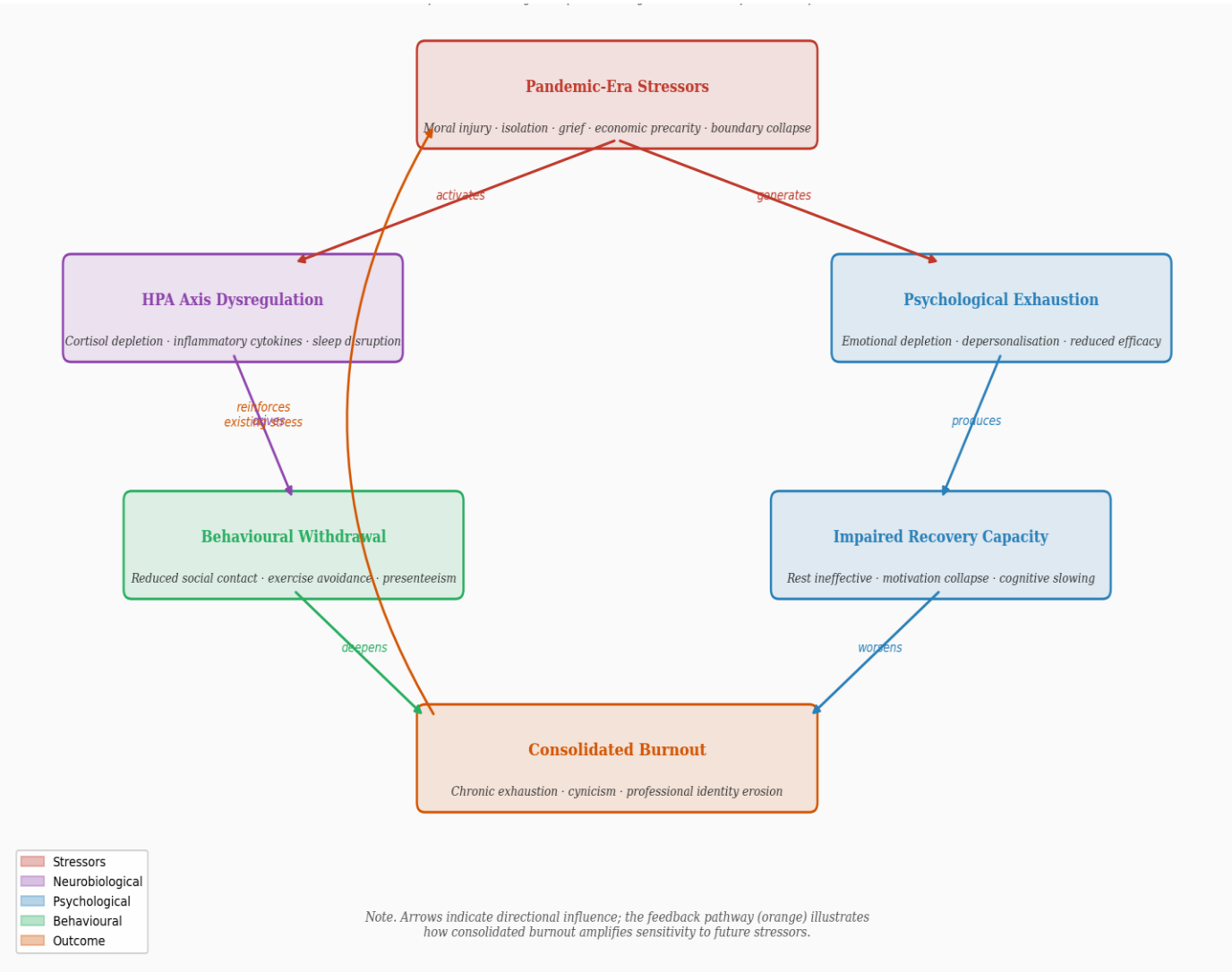

Figure 1. The Post-Pandemic Burnout Cycle: a self-reinforcing feedback loop involving chronic stressors, neurobiological dysregulation, and impaired recovery. Arrows indicate directional influence; the orange feedback path illustrates how consolidated burnout amplifies sensitivity to future stressors.

Work-Life Balance

Burnout has often been framed as a psychological or organizational phenomenon, which is accurate, but the framing can obscure how deeply physical it is. Chronic stress the substrate from which burnout develops has measurable effects on brain structure, endocrine function, immune regulation, and sleep architecture. Understanding these effects matters for two reasons: it helps explain why burnout is so difficult to reverse through willpower or vacation alone, and it identifies biological targets that intervention might address. The HPA axis is the endocrine system's primary stress-response circuit. Under acute stress, the hypothalamus releases corticotropin-releasing hormone, which stimulates the pituitary to release adrenocorticotropic hormone, which in turn stimulates the adrenal cortex to produce cortisol. Cortisol mobilizes energy, modulates immune function, and prepares the body for rapid action. Under chronic stress, this circuit dysregulates. Burnout-specific HPA patterns are complex: some studies show hypercortisolism in earlier stages and hypocortisolism in more advanced burnout, suggesting that the system has been chronically overactivated to the point of depletion (Toker et al., 2012; Melamed et al., 2016). Functional neuroimaging studies have identified structural and functional

differences in burned-out individuals compared to controls. Savic (2015) found reduced grey matter volume in the prefrontal cortex and altered connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala in workers with clinical burnout. The prefrontal cortex mediates executive function, emotion regulation, and decision-making; the amygdala is central to threat detection and emotional reactivity. Reduced top-down regulation of the amygdala by the prefrontal cortex is consistent with the emotional dysregulation, heightened reactivity, and difficulty concentrating that burned-out individuals report. Sleep is both a consequence of burnout-related neurobiological changes and a mechanism through which those changes are perpetuated. Armon et al. (2018) found bidirectional relationships between burnout and sleep disturbances in a longitudinal study, meaning that poor sleep predicts subsequent burnout and burnout predicts subsequent sleep problems a cycle that is difficult to interrupt. Pandemic conditions, which disrupted circadian rhythms through reduced daylight exposure, social isolation, and the blurring of day-night structure in remote work, created new or worsened existing sleep problems in large numbers of people. The immune system is also implicated. Prolonged stress exposure is associated with elevated pro-inflammatory cytokine levels, and chronic low-grade inflammation has been linked to fatigue, cognitive slowing, anhedonia, and social withdrawal symptoms that overlap substantially with burnout (Miller et al., 2019). Whether inflammation is a cause or consequence of burnout, or both simultaneously through feedback loops, remains methodologically contested. What is not contested is that burnout is as much a physiological event as a psychological one.

Population-Specific Vulnerabilities In The Post-Pandemic Period

Burnout does not distribute evenly across the population, and the pandemic made existing inequalities in its distribution worse. Gender differences are among the most consistently documented. Pre-pandemic research had already identified higher burnout rates particularly on the emotional exhaustion dimension in women, attributable to a combination of occupational factors and domestic factors. The pandemic amplified both: women in dual-earner households with children absorbed a larger share of the childcare and homeschooling burden in lockdown, often while maintaining full professional responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2021). The phrase "she-cession" was coined to describe the disproportionate occupational impact on women's careers, and its psychological counterpart was a burnout burden that similarly skewed by gender. Racial and ethnic disparities in burnout exposure also widened. Communities of color faced higher COVID-19 mortality, greater economic disruption, and the additional psychological burden of witnessing racial violence that spiked during the pandemic period. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx healthcare workers reported higher burnout rates than white colleagues in several U.S. studies, in part because they absorbed additional layers of racialized stress (Gomez & Bernet, 2019). Intersectional analyses that consider race, gender, class, and occupational role simultaneously remain underrepresented in the burnout literature. Early-career workers and students represent a demographic whose burnout patterns received increased attention during and after the pandemic. College students experienced disruptions to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood socialization, identity formation, academic achievement — that are difficult to fully recover. Odriozola-González et al. (2020) found significant burnout among Spanish university students during the early pandemic, with females and those reporting worse adaptation to online learning showing the highest rates. Graduate students, already at high risk before the pandemic (Evans et al., 2018), faced the added disruptions of lost fieldwork, stalled dissertations, and collapsed academic job markets. Older workers navigated a different configuration of risks. Fear of severe illness, isolation from colleagues and social support networks, and in some cases forced early retirement or redundancy created burnout pathways that differed from those of younger workers.

The evidence on older workers is thinner than one might expect given their pandemic vulnerability, reflecting both measurement challenges and the tendency of occupational health research to center working-age adults under 55.

Recovery from Burnout: Evidence, Limitations, and Honest Appraisals

The intervention literature on burnout is larger than is often acknowledged, and more modest in its demonstrated effects than advocates sometimes suggest. Two broad categories of intervention have been studied: individual-level approaches (psychotherapy, mindfulness, resilience training, self-care behaviors) and organizational-level approaches (workload management, supervisory support, autonomy, role clarity). The field consensus, backed by meta-analytic evidence, is that organizational interventions produce more durable change than individual ones because they target the conditions that generate burnout rather than the individual's capacity to absorb them (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; West et al., 2018). Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has the strongest evidence base among individual-level approaches. Ahola et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review and found that CBT significantly reduced burnout symptoms and improved work engagement in randomized controlled trials, with effect sizes in the moderate range. The mechanisms are plausible: CBT addresses the cognitive patterns catastrophizing, over-responsibility attribution, dichotomous thinking about performance that characterize burned-out individuals' thinking and that tend to perpetuate rather than relieve the condition. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has also shown promise, particularly for healthcare workers (Brinkborg et al., 2021). Mindfulness-based interventions have attracted disproportionate attention relative to their demonstrated effect sizes. Systematic reviews find small to moderate effects on emotional exhaustion and modest effects on depersonalization, with effects on reduced accomplishment typically small or non-significant (Lomas et al., 2019). The discourse around mindfulness in occupational contexts has also attracted legitimate criticism: offering mindfulness training to overworked employees can function as an implicit message that the problem is the employee's regulation capacity rather than the work demands. Rest genuine, non-performative rest that is not immediately followed by guilt or work encroachment is one of the most consistently identified components of burnout recovery in qualitative studies, and one of the most difficult to achieve. Sabbaticals and extended leave have shown recovery effects in some studies, but the benefits attenuate if the person returns to the same conditions that produced the burnout (Rook & Zijlstra, 2026). Recovery programs that send burned-out employees back to unchanged environments are, in a specific sense, recycling them rather than recovering them.

Social support is a robust protective factor against burnout onset and a meaningful contributor to recovery. Both emotional support and instrumental support reduce burnout risk across multiple population studies (Halbesleben, 2010). The pandemic, which simultaneously increased burnout risk and reduced social support availability through isolation, created a particularly cruel equation in this respect. Physical exercise has a growing evidence base in burnout recovery, mediated by its effects on HPA regulation, sleep quality, inflammatory markers, and mood. Regular aerobic exercise reduces cortisol reactivity to subsequent stressors and promotes neuroplastic changes in the prefrontal cortex (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). The challenge is motivational: burned-out individuals frequently report that exercise feels impossible even when they intellectually know it would help. This is not irrationality; it is a symptom.

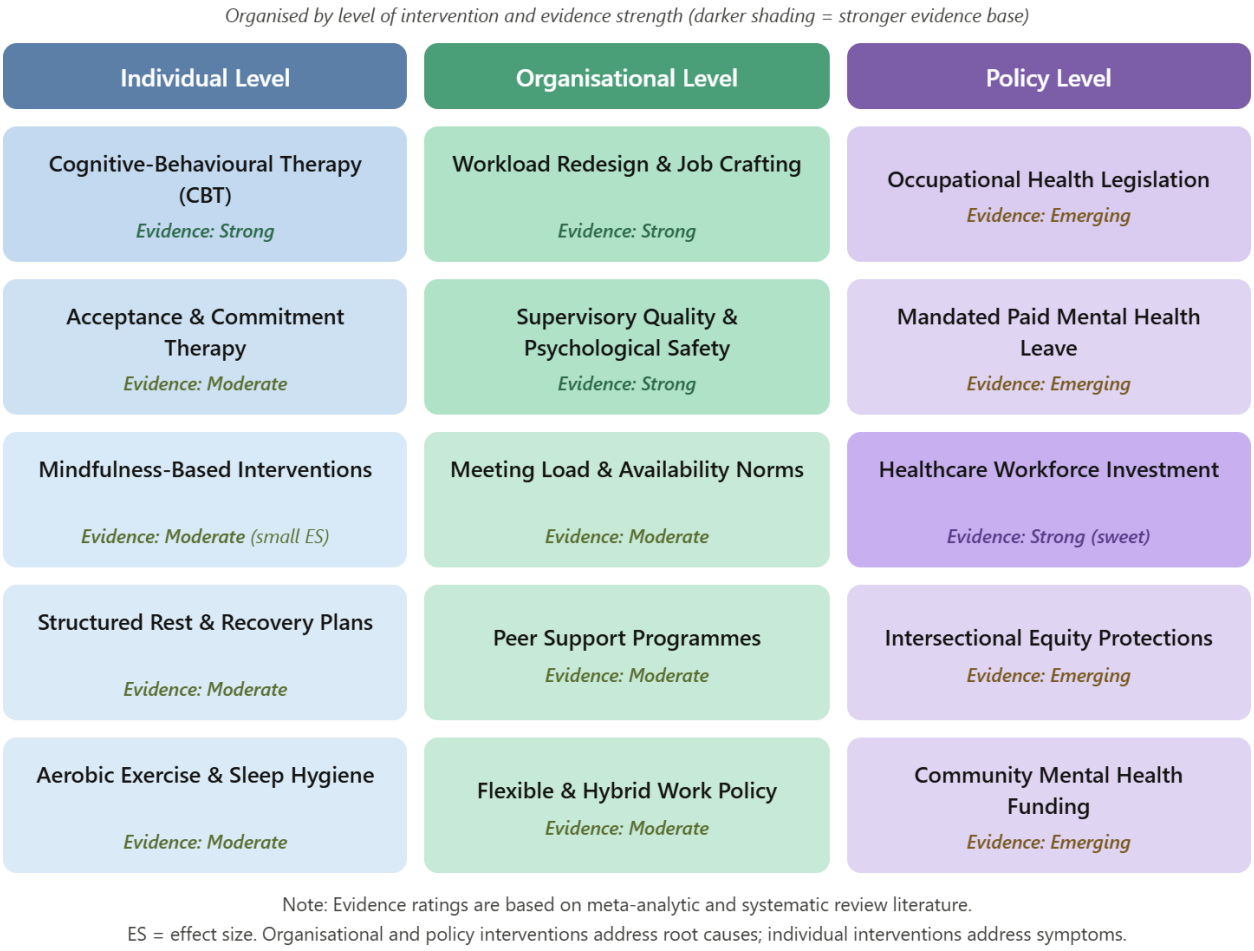

Figure 2. Multi-Level Framework for Post-Pandemic Burnout Intervention. Darker shading indicates stronger evidence base. Organisational and policy interventions address structural root causes; individual interventions address symptom-level processes. ES = effect size.

Organizational Dimensions: Culture, Leadership, and Structural Conditions

Individual burnout does not occur in an organizational vacuum. The conditions that produce it excessive workload, inadequate control over work processes, insufficient reward, a sense of unfairness, conflicting values are features of organizational design and culture. Leiter and Maslach (2014) described these as the "six areas of worklife" that predict burnout when mismatched against worker needs. The post-pandemic literature has both confirmed this model and identified ways in which pandemic conditions exacerbated each of these mismatches. Leadership quality is among the most consequential organizational variables. Leaders who provide autonomy, communicate transparently during uncertainty, and respond to distress signals in their teams buffer their reports against burnout. Leaders who impose additional demands during periods of stress, who treat mental health disclosure as weakness, or who model the very overwork they nominally discourage, amplify it. The organizations that fared worst in terms of staff mental health were frequently those where leadership communicated poorly, underestimated stress, or expected business-as-usual performance in abnormal conditions (Shanafelt et al., 2020). Remote and hybrid work, now a permanent feature of many sectors' landscapes, has introduced new organizational challenges around burnout. The monitoring intensification that accompanied mass remote work surveillance software, constant availability expectations, meeting overload created conditions that were in some ways more exhausting than

office environments. Microsoft's 2022 Work Trend Index reported that the number of meetings had increased by 153% since February 2020, a finding that aligns with burnout research linking meeting load and interruption frequency to emotional exhaustion. The "Great Resignation" of 2021-2022, in which millions of workers voluntarily left their jobs, was in part a burnout-driven phenomenon. Surveys during that period consistently identified burnout, lack of flexibility, and feeling undervalued as primary drivers of departure (Sull et al., 2022). Organizations that treated the Great Resignation as a recruitment problem rather than a retention and well-being problem largely failed to understand what had driven it.

Emerging Frameworks and Research Directions

The pandemic has created a natural experiment one that no researcher would have designed, but one whose data will take years to fully analyze. Several emerging research directions appear particularly promising for advancing understanding of post-pandemic burnout. Longitudinal studies tracking burnout trajectories from the pandemic's acute phase through recovery are providing, for the first time, detailed pictures of who recovers, at what pace, and under what conditions. Recovery is neither linear nor universal. Some individuals who showed high burnout during the pandemic acute phase have recovered fully; others appear to have consolidated into chronic burnout that shows little movement even with intervention; still others show a delayed-onset pattern where burnout deepened after restrictions lifted possibly reflecting a "let-down" effect analogous to post-traumatic symptom intensification after perceived safety (Bonanno et al., 2011). The intersection of burnout with Long COVID is an emerging area that requires attention. Long COVID's symptoms fatigue, cognitive impairment, exercise intolerance, mood disturbance overlap substantially with burnout's presentation. Some researchers have raised the possibility that Long COVID may trigger or worsen burnout through neuroinflammatory pathways, and that some proportion of what is being assessed as psychological burnout in post-pandemic workers may involve a partially biological substrate from COVID-19 itself (Davis et al., 2021). Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) the use of repeated real-time measures captured through smartphones or wearable devices offers methodological advances over the cross-sectional snapshot studies that dominate the burnout literature. EMA can track daily fluctuations in exhaustion, emotional state, and social context, capturing the within-person dynamics of burnout in ways that retrospective self-report instruments cannot (Taris et al., 1998). The question of measurement deserves continued attention. The MBI was developed on samples from specific occupational and cultural contexts; its validity across the diverse global populations affected by pandemic burnout has not been systematically established. Developing measurement tools that are both psychometrically robust and cross-culturally valid is not glamorous research, but it is necessary.

Policy Implications

Burnout at population scale is not a problem that clinical psychology alone can solve. The conditions that generated post-pandemic burnout underresourced healthcare systems, inadequate care infrastructure, poor pandemic labor protections, normalized overwork culture are policy problems as much as psychological ones. Occupational health policy in many jurisdictions remains inadequately equipped for burnout. Several European countries have moved further than others: Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands have legal frameworks that recognize burnout as a work-related condition requiring employer response. In the United States and many other countries, burnout is neither legally defined nor typically employer-compensable, which means that costs are externalized onto individuals and public health systems rather than internalized by the organizations that created the conditions. Paid sick leave and mental health leave provisions

matter. Workers without paid leave cannot afford recovery even when they recognize they need it. The intersectional vulnerabilities noted above race, gender, class mean that the workers most likely to be severely burned out are also the workers most likely to lack leave protection, a convergence of disadvantage that institutional and policy responses need to specifically address. Investment in the healthcare and social care workforce is among the most direct policy levers. These workers were the most severely affected by pandemic burnout. Healthcare system investment staffing ratios, supervision quality, protected rest time, mental health support is not simply an ethical obligation to the workforce; it is a functional requirement for systems that communities depend upon.

Conclusion

Burnout in the post-pandemic world is real, widespread, and in many respects poorly addressed by the responses currently on offer. It has neurobiological signatures, structural causes, population-specific concentrations, and a phenomenology that has been complicated by the specific conditions the pandemic imposed. It is not simply tiredness that more sleep will fix, nor purely a psychological state that more positive thinking will address. It sits at the intersection of biology, psychology, organizational structure, and social policy and responses that address only one of those levels are, in most cases, insufficient. The research reviewed here supports several conclusions. First, the pandemic amplified and reshaped burnout through mechanisms that included moral injury, isolation, boundary collapse, grief, and structural inequality and many of these mechanisms remain active in the post-pandemic period even where the acute danger has passed. Second, the neurobiology of burnout means that recovery is often slower and more effortful than intuition suggests, and that interventions that ignore the body are missing part of the picture. Third, individual interventions, while valuable, show modest effect sizes when deployed without corresponding organizational change; the literature is quite clear that burnout's primary causes are conditions, not characters. What the literature does not yet offer is a fully satisfying account of post-pandemic burnout as its own distinct phenomenon, with its own longitudinal trajectories and specific intervention requirements. That research is in progress. What clinicians, organizational leaders, and policymakers must do in the meantime is take the problem seriously at the scale it operates which is considerably larger than pre-pandemic frameworks were built to handle and resist the temptation to frame recovery as the individual's responsibility when the conditions that burned people out were neither individual in origin nor individual in scale. The pandemic is not over in the ways that matter most for burnout. The exhaustion it deposited in millions of people is still there, shaped now into chronic patterns that are harder to name and easier to ignore than the acute crisis was. Naming it honestly, measuring it carefully, and addressing it at multiple levels simultaneously is the work that remains.

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