

Healthcare Systems & Services Practice

COVID-19 and burnout are straining the mental health of employed parents

Employed parents cite apathy and fatigue in new survey.

by Erica Coe, Kana Enomoto, Brad Herbig, Ashish Kothari, and Jeris Stueland



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As COVID-19 cases oscillate in the United States, the impact of the pandemic continues to affect many workers. The COVID-19 crisis and the related levels of burnout that people are experiencing at work remain pervasive problems, especially among employed parents, according to a new McKinsey survey.¹

Burnout arises when individuals cannot access enough recovery between stressors.² Employed parents face higher numbers of and longer exposure to stressors from the multiple roles they play, compared with nonparents, and they have less ability to access periods of recovery as a result.³ Employed parents report several stressors in particular: a lack of work–life balance, increased responsibilities at both work and home, greater concern for safety at work around COVID-19 infection, a loss of social support and increased isolation, and recent organizational changes affecting their jobs. While the pandemic has had an impact on all employees, this article focuses on the experiences of employed parents in particular.

Compared with nonparents, employed parents are twice as likely to strongly agree that they:

- are worn out at the end of the day,
- used to find their work more interesting, and
- sometimes think their work is insignificant.

In addition to the pandemic-related challenges that people around the world are facing—including illness, financial worry, and isolation from friends and family—employed parents in the United States have had distinct challenges stemming from the COVID-19 crisis. As our survey of employed parents indicates, the compound pressure of working while parenting, including remote schooling and working, has left many citing feelings of apathy and fatigue, and as if they are failing to live up to their own expectations across their multiple social roles. These may include expectations related to not only being a parent, but as a spouse, friend, family member, or caregiver.

There are also indications that parents are not finding the help they need from their employers. For example, in our survey, parents reporting symptoms of burnout are 90 percent more likely to report that they believe senior management at their workplace considers productivity to be more important than mental health.

¹ Based on McKinsey survey data of employees in the United States. The survey was open for responses between July 7 and July 14, 2021; n = 3,007. Of those surveyed, 862 were employed parents. We use the term “employed parents” to refer to individuals who work outside the home and who are parents/caregivers of children aged 18 and younger who live at home.

² Burnout is defined by the World Health Organization, in its 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Burnout is characterized by three dimensions: (1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, (2) increased mental distance from one’s job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job, and (3) reduced professional efficacy.

³ When managed well, experiencing stress can serve a purpose—it can help us to solve problems and to learn and grow. However, when left unmanaged, stress can lead to burnout. For more, see Jan Ascher and Fleur Tonies, “How to turn everyday stress into ‘optimal stress,’” *McKinsey Quarterly*, February 18, 2021.

Populations of color have faced disproportionate job losses and are experiencing a death toll twice that of the White population from COVID-19.⁴ Less than a third of employed parents of color said, “I enjoy my work. I have no symptoms of burnout,” compared with almost half of White parents who said the same.

Beyond facing more health-specific concerns and health-related trauma in their communities, employed parents of color have also had more challenges around childcare. For example, families of color have been more likely than White families to experience pandemic-related childcare closures.⁵

While our survey analysis focused on US respondents, parents around the globe are experiencing fatigue and stress.⁶

“The stresses and pressures of being a parent mixed with the demands of work have made life nearly impossible.”

—Caregiver of two children, United Kingdom

Many employers are recognizing these challenges and are beginning to develop and implement strategies to support their employees in new and different ways. The research and perspectives presented here are offered to support employers as they define and refine their approaches. In the charts below, we highlight some of the meaningful findings from the research and identify actions that employers could consider.

⁴ For example, Black Americans; for more, see Aria Florant, Nick Noel, Shelley Stewart, and Jason Wright, “COVID-19: Investing in Black lives and livelihoods,” McKinsey, April 14, 2020. See also “The color of coronavirus: COVID-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.,” APM Research Lab, March 5, 2021; and Ella Koeze, “A year later, who is back to work and who is not?,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2021.

⁵ Claire Cain Miller, “Return to work? Not with child care still in limbo, some parents say,” *New York Times*, updated October 9, 2021.

⁶ Selected quotes from Dynata Survey conducted between September 15 and September 30, 2021. Survey sample size was 1,258; n = 421 employed parents who reported experiencing burnout. Countries surveyed included Australia (n = 50), Canada (n = 50), China (n = 59), Germany (n = 55), India (n = 50), Singapore (n = 50), the United Kingdom (n = 57), and the United States (n = 50).

Causes of burnout for employed parents stem from both the home and the workplace

Of the six main causes of burnout—an unsustainable workload, a general perceived lack of control, insufficient rewards for effort, the lack of a supportive community, absence of fairness, and mismatched values and skills—many are challenges that employed parents may be more likely to face, particularly in a pandemic.⁷

“It’s a lot. Having no break from kids or working at night. No time to switch off.”

— Caregiver of two children, Australia

Employed parents report a range of stressors that have deteriorated their mental health. The level of household responsibilities is a particular problem. In our survey, parents experiencing symptoms of burnout are more often responsible for all household duties, compared with parents not experiencing symptoms of burnout (57 percent versus 41 percent).

In fact, the majority of parents responsible for all household duties report symptoms of burnout. These responsibilities, for example, including caring for older adult family members in addition to children, most often fall to women, who have also been more likely to cut back on paid work during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to provide childcare.⁸ For these women specifically, reduced paid time at work could also serve to further exacerbate the symptoms of burnout they are experiencing, if their responsibilities at work do not also decrease.

73%

of parents with symptoms of burnout report that the demands of their work interfere with their private and family life, compared to 38% of parents without

69%

of parents with symptoms of burnout report that recent organizational changes have significantly affected their job, compared to 49% of parents without

“Trying to balance work demands, running a household, paying bills, dealing with [the] issues of an elderly parent, as well as providing emotional support to my son has left me burnt out.”

— Caregiver of one child, Australia

⁷ Susan E. Jackson et al., “Making a significant difference with burnout interventions: Researcher and practitioner collaboration,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, February 2012, Volume 33, Number 2, pp. 296–300.

⁸ See Megan Brenan, “Women still handle main household tasks in U.S.,” Gallup, January 29, 2020; and Claire Cain Miller, “The pandemic created a child-care crisis. Mothers bore the burden,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2021.

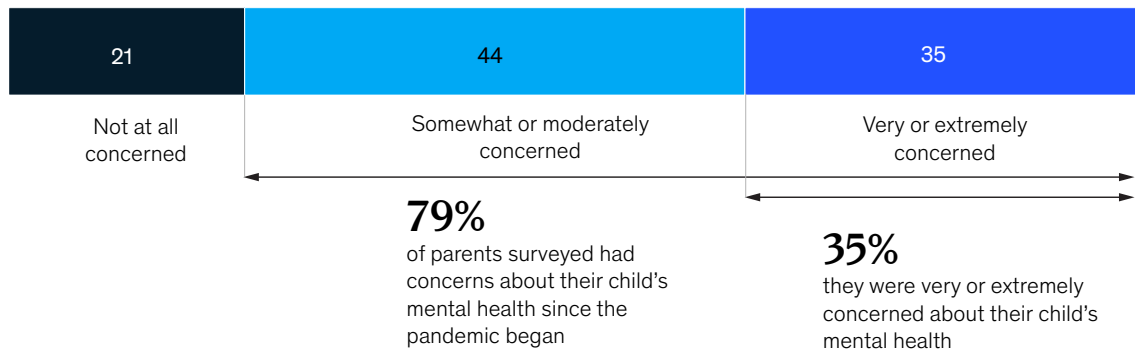
Rates of mental-health challenges among children have increased during the pandemic, acting as a critical stressor for employed parents

Parents are not the only ones facing mental-health challenges. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of in-person education, reduced social interaction, and widespread uncertainty have taken a toll on children as well. Even as many schools have returned to in-person classes, readapting to previously familiar academic and social circumstances is provoking anxiety and fear among some children and adolescents.

Parents seeking mental healthcare for their children are struggling to find help; for the approximately 15 million children in the United States, there are only 8,000 to 9,000 psychiatrists, and even fewer are in-network or financially accessible.⁹

Parents are understandably worried. Four in five employed parents say that they feel concerned about their child's mental health, and more than one-third rate this concern as extreme.¹⁰

Concern about child's mental health, %



“I cannot concentrate on my work and always worry about my child's health”

— Caregiver of one child, Canada

⁹ Alfred Lubrano, “The pandemic is exacerbating a shortage of child therapists,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 2, 2021.

¹⁰ Based on a McKinsey survey of 16,370 parents across all 50 US states. For more, see Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, “COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning,” McKinsey, July 27, 2021.

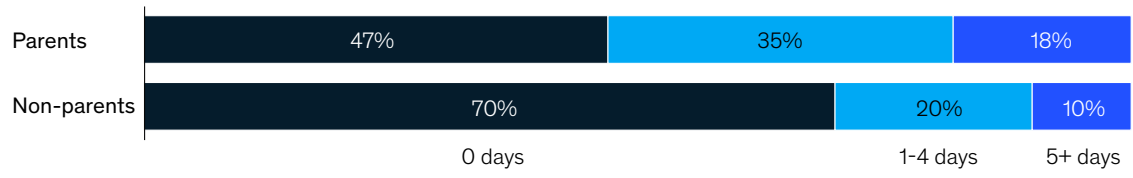
Parents' mental-health challenges correlate to their feelings about work

In our survey, parents are more likely than nonparents to report missing days of work because they are experiencing symptoms of burnout. They are also more likely to use leaves of absence and supported employment.

While employed parents are more likely than nonparents to see themselves staying at their employer in two years' time (79 percent versus 64 percent), burnout correlates to employed parents' likelihood of not recommending their place of work to others. Their perspective on senior management's attitude toward the importance of mental health, as well as the level of supportiveness their employer shows toward colleagues with mental illness, also declines.

What's more, stress and burnout, both of which employed parents experience disproportionately more than nonparents, are the main reasons that cause people to consider leaving their jobs.¹¹

Percent of respondents reporting missed days of work due to burnout



Parents experiencing burnout are:

90%

more likely to say that senior management at their workplace considers productivity more important than mental health

78%

more likely to report using supported employment where people with disabilities are assisted with and maintain employment than parents not experiencing burnout

60%

more likely to see their workplace as unsupportive of colleagues with mental illness than parents without symptoms of burnout

47%

more likely to report using family or medical leaves of absence than parents not experiencing burnout

“[My employer could better support me through allowing me] to work flexibly . . . [so that] when I need to take care of my family, I can work remotely . . . [and by] providing more health support, such as childcare services and mental-health consultations.”

— Caregiver of two children, China

¹¹ Liz Fosslien, “What you’re getting wrong about burnout,” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, August 26, 2021.

Employers can consider taking a preventative approach toward burnout

Measures that support flexibility and resiliency can help ensure that all employees are engaged in their mental wellness.

Flexible working policies can be a critical tool for both parent and nonparent employees. Parents with access to flexible working policies are substantially less likely to show symptoms of burnout. Conversely, parents reporting symptoms of burnout who are unaware of flexible policies at work are more likely to request similar policies and to believe that these options would benefit them.

It is important for employers to realize that flexible working policies can come in many forms, going beyond remote-work options and including options such as reducing an individual's work responsibilities and offering part-time work.

Parents who reported being offered flexible working schedules were

31%

more likely than parents without access to flexible working schedules to not be exhibiting any strong signs of burnout.

The following are the top policies and benefits that parents were most likely to request to support their mental health:

- flexible work schedule
- remote-work options (independent of the COVID-19 pandemic)
- family-support services (eg, childcare or dependent-care stipends, backup care)
- skill-building programs (eg, sleep improvement, stress-management programs)
- family or medical leave for mental-health conditions

“[Employers should] allow more flexibility in terms of working in the office and from home so that employees can better take care of both their work and family matters.”

— Caregiver of three children, Singapore

Employers can consider certain initiatives to better support employed parents experiencing burnout

Employers taking steps to address their employees' mental health—including helping them to feel included and valued—can begin this journey by actively listening to their employees to better understand the challenges they face and by acting on what they hear.

For employers, actively supporting parents' mental health can lead to many forms of positive impact. By taking steps to prevent burnout and stress, an employer can help enable both employees and their families to thrive. Additionally, by acting to prevent and reduce burnout among employed parents, employers are not only supporting a population that, in turn, is more likely to remain in the workforce down the line and to endorse the organization to others, but also creating a more supportive organization overall.

Subsequent steps may include the following:

— Make parents feel heard

- Managers can lead with compassion, working with their teams on promoting well-being, addressing stress, exhaustion, and burnout, and encouraging open discussion on topics of mental health by sharing their own stories.
- Involve parents in conversations around how they would most appreciate employer support, particularly in times of uncertainty (for example, on topics such as return to in-person working and organizational changes). Consider affinity groups to help foster connectivity.
- Refine organizational support plans for parents by addressing uncovered pain points and needs.

— Build a work culture that supports mental health

- Establish flexibility around remote working (for example, flexibility to work from home as needed, or flexible hours) and communicate expectations early. Establish formal boundaries to help prevent employees from feeling that they need to be “always on” (for example, policies that make it clear that employees are not expected to respond to nonurgent requests outside of traditional working hours). Allow managers to work with direct reports in defining their responsibilities.
- Allow employees to adjust their workload as needed to tend to caregiving responsibilities, with ability to transition between full and part time as is feasible. When possible, allow employees to transition to more time-flexible roles (for example, from an inbound to an outbound call center, or from a direct customer-facing role to one involving document review).
- Structure performance reviews to reemphasize that employees are evaluated on results over simply where or what hours they work. Ensure in day-to-day and formal communications that leaders are not inadvertently signaling that long hours and face time are measures of performance.

— Provide critical resources aligned with employees' priorities

- Offer clear guidance on navigating the healthcare landscape for employed parents to support their or their children's mental-health needs (for example, by creating a central internal landing page highlighting in-network child therapists).

- Consider providing more options for childcare support (for example, subsidized, on-site, or back-up childcare), nursing services, and other home- and family-focused benefits, showing value and support of employees as people juggling multiple roles.
- Ensure that benefits and other programs supporting mental health (for example, digital wellness apps) include access for close family members, such as employees' children.

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