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Burnout Is Not a Diagnosis

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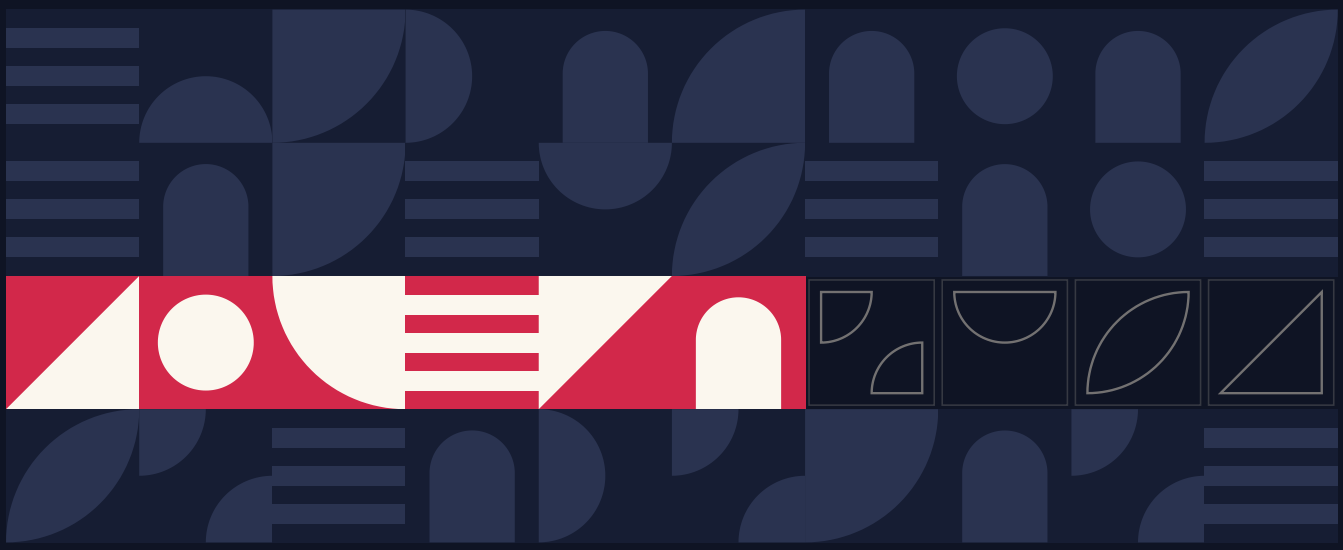

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01 Executive summary

Past ten at night, a team lead in Pune answers one more message. She is not ill. She is spent. Fifty-nine per cent of employees in India report burnout symptoms — the highest share among 30 countries in the McKinsey Health Institute's 2023 survey of more than 30,000 workers. An occupational phenomenon, in the WHO ICD-11 QD85 sense, is exhaustion, increased mental distance or cynicism toward the job, and reduced professional efficacy, from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

Burnout is not a medical condition. That is why burnout India employees, including burnout in IT industry India, need a workplace skills programme rather than a clinical referral. Deloitte India's 2022 survey of 3,995 workers found 55 per cent emotionally exhausted or burnt-out, and only nine per cent willing to use an employee-assistance programme. Person-only reviews find small effects when the job is left untouched.

This paper sets out a 12-week team protocol of countable daily reps — Breathe & Settle and Savour, then Reframe and Strengths, then Meaning and Connect — plus a manager rep of the week and a dashboard that holds no clinical data. Line managers run the skills. People and culture own the six drivers: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Anyone beyond the wellness lane is handed to a clinician. The workplace keeps the phenomenon that belongs to it.

02 The problem in India

A founder who treats a cash-flow hole as a character flaw will keep hiring motivational speakers. The hole is in the unit economics. Burnout among Indian employees is the same error, written in people rather than rupees. Burnout in IT industry India is the clearest version of it: a workload and recovery problem, not a private frailty.

McKinsey Health Institute measured burnout symptoms across 30 countries in April–June 2023. India sat at the top of that table: 59 per cent of respondents reported burnout symptoms, against a global figure of 22 per cent and a low of nine per cent in Cameroon. That is not a mood. It is the three-part

occupational phenomenon the WHO wrote into ICD-11 in 2019: energy depletion or exhaustion; mental distance or cynicism toward the job; reduced professional efficacy.

Two years earlier the same institute had already flagged Asia. In its 2022 paper on employee mental health and burnout in Asia, roughly one employee in four worldwide reported burnout symptoms; in Asia the figure neared one in three. For India, around four in ten respondents reported symptoms on each of burnout, distress, anxiety and depression. Toxic workplace behaviour accounted for most of the explained variance. Intent to leave ran about 60 per cent above the global average.

Deloitte India's 2022 workspace survey put a local number on exhaustion. Of 3,995 employees across 12 industries, 55 per cent reported being emotionally exhausted or burnt-out. Eighty per cent reported at least one adverse mental-health symptom. Forty-seven per cent named workplace-related stress as the biggest factor. Poor mental health was costing Indian firms about US$14 billion a year in absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover.

The Live Love Laugh Foundation's 2025 corporate roadmap did not originate the 59 per cent figure. It compiled McKinsey 2023 and Deloitte 2022 for Indian boards, and used them to argue that mental health is a business system, not a poster.

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace tells a different, useful story. On the 2026 India page (data collected in 2025), 28 per cent of Indian employees said they felt stress a lot of the previous day, below the global 40 per cent. That is not a clean bill of health. The same employees reported daily anger at 31 per cent against a global 22 per cent, daily sadness at 36 per cent against 23 per cent, and a thriving rate of 17 per cent against a global 34 per cent. South Asia's thriving rate, at 16 per cent, is the lowest of any region Gallup publishes. Daily stress and burnout symptoms are not the same construct. India can look calmer on yesterday's affect and still lead a 30-country table on occupational exhaustion.

Long hours, after-hours obligation and thin recovery sit on the first of Maslach and Leiter's six organisational drivers. A skills programme that ignores those drivers is a pep talk delivered to a calendar.

Table 1. What the primary sources actually measured

Source	Year	Sample	India figure	Construct
McKinsey Health Institute	2023	>30,000 employees, 30 countries	59%	Burnout symptoms
McKinsey Health Institute, Asia	2022	~15,000 employees, 15 countries	~4 in 10	Burnout, distress, anxiety or depression, each
Deloitte India	2022	3,995 employees, 12 industries	55%	Emotionally exhausted or burnt-out
Gallup State of the Global Workplace	2026 (2025 data)	Nationally representative employees	28%	Stress a lot of the previous day
Live Love Laugh Foundation	2025	Corporate India synthesis	Restates 59%	Roadmap compiling McKinsey and Deloitte

The honest reading is simple. A large share of Indian employees meet the occupational description of burnout. A smaller share report high daily stress on Gallup's item. Life evaluation is poor. The workplace is named, again and again, as the source. That is why the WHO label matters. If burnout is an occupational phenomenon, the problem starts on the org chart, not in the employee — and the organisation owns the programme.

03 Why current approaches fail

Most Indian firms still route burnout to counselling. The person is sent out of the line. The line is not examined. Three things follow: stigma, low uptake, and an untouched cause.

Deloitte's 2022 sample is the plainest evidence. Only nine per cent of respondents were willing to use an employee-assistance programme. Thirty-nine per cent of those affected took no action. Twenty-two per cent would prefer not to open up about mental-health challenges at work. Thirty-four per cent of those affected sought professional help. Twenty per cent resigned. A referral pathway that nine per cent will touch is not a workplace response. It is a brochure.

Picture the quarterly review in a Gurugram office. One slide is about one analyst: tired, cynical, output down. No slide is about the job she sits in: load without recovery, accountability without control, reward that never lands, a

community that is only a stand-up, fairness that is a rumour, values that live on the wall. The organisation studies the small flaw in the person and leaves the large one in the job.

The intervention literature is sober about what person-only programmes can do. Maricuțoiu, Sava and Butta's 2016 meta-analysis of controlled interventions found a small effect on general burnout (d = 0.22) and on exhaustion (d = 0.17). Effects on depersonalisation and on personal accomplishment were not statistically significant. Cognitive-behavioural work and relaxation moved exhaustion. They did not move the other two dimensions. The exhaustion effect held at follow-up beyond six months. That is not nothing. It is also not a fix for an occupational phenomenon.

Dreison and colleagues' 2018 meta-analysis of 35 years of burnout-intervention research among mental-health workers found a still smaller overall effect (Hedges' g = 0.13) across 27 samples and 1,894 people. Person-directed work beat organisation-directed work on exhaustion in that sample. Job training was the strongest organisational subtype. Cynicism and efficacy barely moved. The authors asked for programmes tailored to the setting, with longer follow-up. They did not ask for more of the same referral leaflet.

In machine-learning terms, the firm is fine-tuning the model and leaving the training data dirty. The job is the training data. A person can learn a breathing rep in ninety seconds. A person cannot breathe their way out of a seven-day sprint with no authority over the backlog.

There is a second failure mode, quieter and more dangerous. When burnout is handled as if it were an illness, people who are simply exhausted by a badly designed job learn to hide. People who have stepped beyond the wellness lane — persistent hopelessness, thoughts of self-harm, a collapse of function outside work — also hide, because the same door is marked "wellness". Both groups lose. The first group needed a skills programme and a change in the six drivers. The second group needed a clinician, yesterday.

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness platform. It is not a substitute for clinical care. The protocol in this paper stays in the wellness lane on purpose. The hand-off line is not a footnote. It is part of the design.

04 The emotional-fitness model applied

PULL QUOTE

South Asia’s thriving rate is 16 per cent, the lowest of any region Gallup publishes.

Emotional fitness is a training problem. You do not wait to feel resilient and then practise. You practise, in small countable reps, until the skill is available under load. A sales manager between two hard calls takes one slow breath, logs it, and does it again tomorrow, ready or not. That is closer to a gym than to a seminar or a pep talk.

Pick one tool. Do one rep. Ninety seconds. That is the unit.

A 12-week team protocol gives the unit a calendar, a manager and a dashboard. It does not replace the six organisational drivers. It gives the team a shared language while those drivers are being moved.

Weeks 1–4. Breathe & Settle and Savour

The first month is physiological and attentional. Exhaustion is the dimension most responsive to short, repeated practice. Maricuțoiu’s review is clear on that point.

Breathe & Settle reps

- The Big Sigh Reset. A double inhale and one long exhale. The body’s brake. Counted as resets and a streak.
- Just Move the Body. Ten minutes of walking, stairs or stretching, logged as mood-minutes, not as fitness.

Savour reps

- Marinate the Moment. Sixty to ninety seconds of sensory attention on something that is already going well.
- Spark Spotting. One tiny cue of warmth, named and logged.
- Name It to Frame It. A precisely named feeling. Finer emotional vocabulary travels with steadier self-regulation. This is the seed of the vocabulary metric on the dashboard.
- Good-Stuff Radar. A close-of-day sweep of what went right.

The move here is modest. A thought is a thought, not a fact. A named state is data. A vague fog is not. Savour works against the pull. Late at night the thumb wants to keep scrolling. The rep is to put the phone down and stay with one good detail from the day for a minute.

Manager rep of the week, month one: close one meeting with a sixty-second Good-Stuff Radar. Model the skill in public. Do not outsource it to a slide.

Weeks 5–8. Reframe and Strengths

The second month is cognitive. Cynicism is the dimension person-only programmes hardly move. The team still trains the skill, because a shared reframe language is cheap and useful. The organisation still has to touch fairness, reward and control, or the reframe will rot.

Reframe reps

- Half-Won Is Still Won. Score the week on a 0–10 dial. A partial win stays visible. All-or-nothing thinking is a reliable way to turn a decent sprint into a story of failure.

Strengths reps

- Call Out Your Strength. Name one strength used that day, in one sentence, to one colleague or in the team channel. Named strengths get reused. Unnamed ones stay accidental.

Manager rep of the week, month two: in one 1:1, name a strength you actually saw. Specific, behavioural, recent. Not “great energy”.

Weeks 9–12. Meaning and Connect

The third month is relational and directional. Reduced professional efficacy is the third ICD-11 dimension. Meaning work does not invent purpose. It traces the work back to a person.

Meaning reps

- Follow the Thread. Take one routine task and write the name of the human it serves or protects.
- Future You, Fully Loaded. One short session describing a competent next-year self in enough sensory detail to pull a present action.

Connect reps

- Match the Firecracker. When a colleague shares good news, match the energy and ask two genuine follow-up questions before talking about yourself.
- Thank-You Ambush. One specific thank-you, sent, not stored.
- Warm-Wishes Rounds. Two minutes of rehearsed goodwill, from self outward.

Manager rep of the week, month three: send one Thank-You Ambush that a junior person could not have expected. Reward is the third organisational driver. Recognition is the part that fails first.

The team participation dashboard

The dashboard is a training log, not a file. It shows:

- rep counts by person and by team
- streaks

- emotional-vocabulary breadth (distinct feeling words used in Name It to Frame It)
- participation rate
- manager-rep completion

It does not show mood scores as a clinical proxy. It does not show free-text journals to the employer. It does not show anyone's conversation with the AI coach or with a human coach.

Twelve weeks is long enough to build a habit loop and short enough to finish before the next planning cycle. Entrepreneurship has a name for this: a defined sprint with a visible board, not a standing "culture initiative" that nobody owns.

05 The two levers

An analyst on the morning local in Mumbai can learn to breathe steadily in the crush. Only the railway can run more trains. Burnout work has the same split. The individual can train a skill. Only the organisation can redesign the job.

Maslach and Leiter, writing in 1999, grouped the organisational context of burnout into six areas of worklife: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. A mismatch in any one raises the odds of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. Workload is the mismatch everyone names. It is not the only one, and it is often not the strongest.

McKinsey's 2023 analysis is blunt about where the variance sits. Demands such as toxic behaviour, role ambiguity and role conflict are seven times more predictive of burnout symptoms than enablers. In the same model, job-level factors predict 62 per cent of the differences between employees on burnout symptoms, team-level factors 32 per cent, individual-level factors three per cent, and organisation-level factors one per cent. Ninety-four per cent of the explained variance sits at job and team level. A breathing practice cannot veto a culture that punishes recovery.

Table 2. Two levers, two owners

Lever	What it is	Who owns it	What "done" looks like
Breathe & Settle reps	Down-shift and movement under load	Individual, modelled by the manager	Daily resets logged; manager closes one meeting with a reset
Savour and vocabulary reps	Attention and naming	Individual, coached on the team	Rising vocabulary breadth; Good-Stuff Radar at week's end
Reframe and Strengths reps	Partial-win scoring; named strengths	Individual and manager	0–10 weekly score visible; one strength call-out per person per week
Meaning and Connect reps	Thread to a human; delivered gratitude	Individual and team	Threads written; thank-yous sent, not stored

Lever	What it is	Who owns it	What "done" looks like
Workload	Demand versus recovery	Organisation: manager + P&C	Recovery is scheduled, not requested; after-hours expectation written down and reduced
Control	Discretion over method, timing, inputs	Organisation: manager + P&C	Accountability matched to authority; one decision right returned to the line
Reward	Pay, recognition, the feeling that the work counted	Organisation: manager + P&C	Recognition is specific and recent; invisible work is named
Community	Belonging, respect, usable help	Organisation: manager + team	Conflict is handled; isolation is treated as a design fault
Fairness	Process, voice, even-handedness	Organisation: leadership + P&C	Decisions can be explained; favouritism is expensive
Values	Fit between what the firm says and what the day requires	Organisation: leadership	One hypocrisy removed per quarter beats a new values poster

The individual lever is real. It is also the smaller lever. Use it. Do not pretend it is the job.

The person can choose a next step that fits what they value. The organisation decides whether that step is punished. A tester in Chennai logs off on time; at the next stand-up her lead asks, in front of everyone, where she was. Absorbing that calmly is not a wellness win. It is unpaid overtime of the mind.

06 Measurement

If the dashboard holds clinical data, the programme has already failed the trust test. People will game it or leave it. Either way you will measure theatre.

The employer sees four things.

1. **Rep counts.** How many Breathe, Savour, Reframe, Strengths, Meaning and Connect reps the team completed this week.
2. **Streaks.** How many people kept a three-day or seven-day chain. Streaks measure consistency, not virtue.
3. **Emotional-vocabulary breadth.** How many distinct feeling words the team used in Name It to Frame It. A team that can only say "fine" and "stressed" is flying without instruments.
4. **Participation.** Share of the team that completed at least one rep. Share of managers who completed the manager rep of the week.

The employer never sees:

- journal text
- chat with the AI coach

- chat with the human coach
- any score that could be read as a clinical screen
- individual “red flags” dressed up as wellness analytics

India-resident data, DPDP compliance, and a non-clinical purpose are not decoration. They are why a CHRO can run this without building a shadow health record. EmotionApp is built under ISO 9001 and ISO 13485, delivers in 23 Indian languages, and is WhatsApp-first because that is where Indian professionals already are. The AI coach has a human hand-off. That hand-off is the safety valve, not a premium feature.

What gets counted gets done. What gets clinicalised gets hidden. Count the reps.

07 Implementation

A 90-day plan is a container. Without owners and metrics it is a wish: a kick-off slide nobody opens again.

Table 3. Ninety-day plan

Week	Owner	Action	Metric
1	CHRO / P&C	Name the programme as occupational, not clinical. Write the hand-off rule. Brief legal on DPDP and data residency.	One-page charter signed
1	L&D	Load the 12-week rep calendar. Train managers on the manager rep of the week.	100% of pilot managers briefed
1–2	Line managers	Launch Weeks 1–4 with the team. First Big Sigh Reset done in a live meeting.	Pilot participation ≥60%
2	P&C + managers	Score the six drivers for the pilot team. Pick one driver to move in 90 days.	One driver chosen, owner named
3–4	Team	Daily Breathe & Settle and Savour reps. Vocabulary logging starts.	Median ≥4 reps/person/week
5	L&D	Open Weeks 5–8. Teach Half-Won and Call Out Your Strength.	Manager-rep completion ≥80%
5–8	Managers	One strength call-out in each 1:1. One workload or control change on the chosen driver.	Driver action logged
9	L&D	Open Weeks 9–12. Teach Follow the Thread and Match the Firecracker.	Participation holds ≥60%
9–12	Team	Meaning and Connect reps. Thank-yous sent.	Thank-yous delivered > stored
12	CHRO	Review dashboard and the one driver. Decide scale or stop.	Written go/no-go
13	P&C	If scaling: next two teams. If stopping: say why, in writing.	Decision dated

Ninety days is three months of reps plus one week to decide. That is enough time to see whether the team will practise and whether the organisation will touch a driver. If the team logs its reps every morning and the late-night release still lands on the same few people, you have a skills programme sitting on a broken job. Do not call that a people problem.

08 One-page checklist the reader can run this week

Print this. Run it before Friday.

- ☐ Say out loud, in a managers' meeting: burnout is an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. Quote the three ICD-11 dimensions.
- ☐ Write the hand-off line in the team channel: if someone is beyond the wellness lane, we do not keep them in a rep programme. We connect them to a clinician. Tele-MANAS is 14416.
- ☐ Pick one pilot team. Not the whole company.
- ☐ Name the manager who will do the manager rep of the week. If no name, there is no programme.
- ☐ Score the six drivers for that team, 1–5: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, values. Circle the lowest score. That is the organisational lever for the next 90 days.
- ☐ Start Weeks 1–4 on Monday: Big Sigh Reset in the first meeting; Name It to Frame It once a day; Good-Stuff Radar on Friday.
- ☐ Switch on a dashboard that shows reps, streaks, vocabulary breadth and participation. Switch off anything that looks like a clinical file.
- ☐ Book the week-12 go/no-go in the CHRO calendar now.
- ☐ Tell the pilot team what the employer will never see.
- ☐ Do your own first rep today. Unmodelled programmes die of embarrassment.

A checklist is a humble object. So is a rep. The firms that get this right will look boring from the outside: a calendar, a board, a manager who practises in public. The firms that get it wrong will still be buying webinars.

09 FAQ

Q1 Is burnout a medical condition according to the WHO?

No. ICD-11 lists burn-out as an occupational phenomenon under factors influencing health status, not as a medical condition. The 2019 definition has three dimensions: exhaustion, mental distance or cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. That is why the workplace owns the response.

Q2 What share of burnout India employees actually report symptoms?

Fifty-nine per cent in McKinsey Health Institute's 2023 30-country survey — the highest national figure in that study. Deloitte India in 2022 found 55 per cent emotionally exhausted or burnt-out among 3,995 employees. Gallup's 2025 India data put daily stress at 28 per cent, a different construct.

Q3 Why do employee-assistance programmes miss burnout?

Because nine per cent of Deloitte's 2022 sample were willing to use one, and because a referral does not change workload, control, reward, community, fairness or values. Person-only interventions move general burnout by about d = 0.22 and leave cynicism and efficacy largely untouched.

Q4 What can a line manager do this week?

Run one manager rep of the week. Name one of the six drivers you own. Log participation, not moods. McKinsey's 2023 model found job- and team-level factors explain 94 per cent of workplace variance in burnout symptoms. The manager is the unit of change.

Q5 What does the company see, and what does it never see?

The company sees rep counts, streaks, emotional-vocabulary breadth and participation. It never sees journals, coach chats, or any score that could be read as a clinical screen. A dashboard with four numbers beats a file with a thousand secrets.

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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

SAFETY NOTE

If you are in distress, please contact a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS on 14416.