


Moderate exercise may reduce job burnout, help curb 'quiet quitting' among employees

June 25 2024, by Laura Bailey

What is the relationship between employee physical activity and workplace burnout?

This study investigated the association between **physical activity** and **workplace burnout** in a sample of **520 employees**.






Employees who engaged in **moderate levels of PA** had **lower emotional exhaustion** scores than employees who engaged in low levels of PA.

Employees who engaged in **low levels of PA** had **lower personal accomplishment** scores than employees who engaged in moderate or high-level PA.

As organizations seek to foster healthier and more productive work environments, recognizing and leveraging the impact of physical activity is crucial to achieving these goals.

The Relationship Between Employee Physical Activity Intensity and Workplace Burnout
Brandon Albedry, Michele W. Marenus, Weiyun Chen

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Credit: *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* (2024). DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000003043

Employees who exercise moderately feel less emotionally exhausted and more personally satisfied at work than their less active co-workers, a new University of Michigan study found.

Researchers at the U-M School of Kinesiology wanted to understand the

relationship between [physical activity](#) and workplace burnout, says Michele Marenus, a former doctoral student whose adviser was the study's principal investigator, Weiyun Chen.

Chen is an associate professor of applied [exercise science](#) and director of the Physical Activity & Health Laboratory, where the research was conducted. The [study](#), published in the *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, was part of a major research project led by Marenus at the PAHL.

The study's implications extend to workplace dynamics such as team engagement, turnover, morale and the "subtler yet impactful phenomenon called 'quiet quitting,'" the researchers wrote. Their research did not directly examine quiet quitting, a term that was recently coined to describe employees who put in the minimum required effort at work, but do not resign.

The root cause is thought to be burnout, which is characterized by three primary symptoms: extreme fatigue, a sense of doubt and disengagement toward work, and feelings of inadequacy and unproductiveness.

The researchers surveyed 520 full-time employees about their physical activity and workplace burnout. They divided the sample into low-, medium- and high-activity groups, then looked at differences across the three subscales of the burnout inventory: emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment and depersonalization to understand the ways in which employees felt job burnout.

Among participants, 23% reported low activity, 60% moderate activity and 25% high levels of activity.

"The findings illuminate the positive impact of physical activity on workplace outlook and personal satisfaction. Employees are aware that

burnout is an enormous problem for their workforce," said Marenus, now a research scientist at Personify Health and an adjunct faculty member at George Mason University.

Findings include:

- The moderate-activity group was less emotionally exhausted than the low-activity group.
- The low-activity group felt more personal accomplishment than both the high and moderate groups.
- There was no significant difference in depersonalization (when employees no longer see customers as human beings) scores among the three groups.
- High-intensity activity did not reduce emotional exhaustion or enhance personal accomplishment more than moderate activity.

"Employees experiencing low physical activity may feel less engaged and motivated, gradually disengaging from their roles without formally resigning, resulting in reduced productivity and a lack of enthusiasm for their work," said study first author Brandon Albedry, a former research assistant at the PAHL laboratory who is now a client solutions analyst at Addepar.

The fact that the high-intensity exercise group did not see greater benefits than the moderate activity group challenges the notion that more is better, the researchers say.

"We don't need to engage in crazy amounts of activity to see benefits," Marenus said. "Feeling the pressure to do so may actually cause a negative impact."

The takeaway for employers is that promoting exercise can lead to happier, healthier workers, as well as lower employee turnover, higher

productivity and cost reductions. Accommodations like walking desks, onsite workout facilities, gym subsidies and flexible schedules can help.

Employees should remember that they don't need high-intensity exercise to feel better—moderate activities like brisk walking or cycling can reduce [burnout](#) symptoms, the researchers say. Intensity of physical activity is important because [moderate activity](#) is more sustainable and has less risk of injury.

"Moderate to vigorous physical activity (also) promotes an increase in a level of protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor," Marenus said. "BDNF improves important things like brain health, cognitive function and mental health. This protein stays high in the brain even for a period after MVPA, which can benefit an individuals' overall health."

More information: Brandon Albedry et al, The Relationship Between Employee Physical Activity Intensity and Workplace Burnout, *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000003043](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Moderate exercise may reduce job burnout, help curb 'quiet quitting' among employees (2024, June 25) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-moderate-job-burnout-curb-quiet.html>

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