

# Caring for the Caregivers: Understanding Burnout in Healthcare

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# Defining Burnout

Disengagement. Compassion fatigue. Exhaustion. Burnout.

After a temporary positive uptick in employee perceptions of pride, commitment, motivation, and advocacy at the beginning of the pandemic, engagement quickly began sliding, falling below pre-pandemic levels. While these sentiments are beginning to climb in many industries, healthcare continues to struggle with engagement and well-being, leading to the inevitable burnout of many highly skilled, highly sought-after employees.

Organizations that care about employees have an altruistic reason to care about burnout. Outside of that, important questions remain. **What are the significant drivers of burnout? What is the larger impact of burnout on important outcomes? Where can healthcare organizations focus their efforts today to reduce burnout in the future?**

**burnout** *verb*

**burn·out** | \ 'bərn-,əüt \

to cause to fail, wear out, or become exhausted especially from overwork or overuse

To answer these questions and more, Perceptyx conducted a comprehensive analysis of several datasets, including:

- Perceptyx benchmark database of more than 17 million respondents across 183 countries and all major industries
- Healthcare benchmark database of more than 3.25 million respondents across 480 systems
- Multiple panel research studies, including one panel of more than 1300 healthcare workers about challenges unique to their industry.

According to the data, employees who are burned out suffer personally in a variety of ways, and organizations with a culture of burnout run additional risks. Retention, patient care, and referral behavior all suffer when burnout is high. Furthermore, a shortage of employees creates high burnout, leading to future attrition, creating a negative flywheel that must be interrupted if we are to improve the health and well-being of employees, patients, and communities.

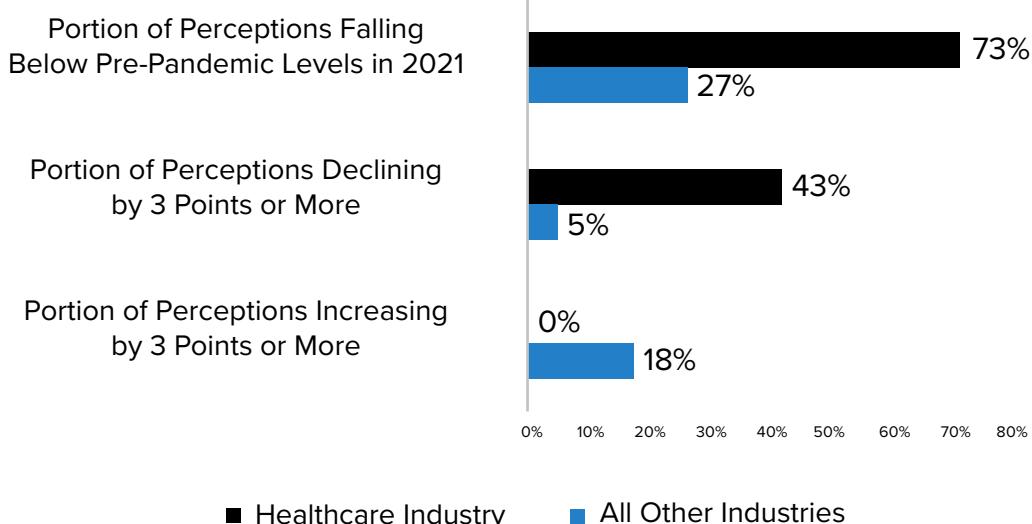


# Healthcare Worker Engagement Continues to Decline

To provide evidence-based insights into how employee sentiment in the healthcare industry has changed, along with the unique challenges faced by healthcare, Perceptyx completed a comprehensive review of our [healthcare benchmark database](#).

Engagement – one's psychological attachment to their organization – is measured by four components: pride in the company, intrinsic motivation, commitment to the organization, and organizational advocacy. The healthcare industry saw a rise in employee engagement at the start of the pandemic, with measures returning to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020. There was a particular decline in intent to stay with the organization throughout 2021.

## Change in Employee Perceptions 2019 to 2021



While all industries in the Perceptyx Benchmark Database experienced this trend, the decline leveled off in most industries. Healthcare didn't follow this course. Across 220 different aspects of the employee experience — including engagement, well-being, manager effectiveness, leader effectiveness, and many more that were measured in the benchmark database — healthcare saw an outsized percentage continue to decline, while other industries did not have the same experience.



# Identifying Burnout in Healthcare Organizations

Perceptyx researchers studied several established symptoms of burnout, including exhaustion, positive anticipation of the workday, and connection with colleagues. The tipping point for negative outcomes was the consistent experience of three or more symptoms – these employees are considered “burned out.” More than half of all employees surveyed in healthcare were in this category. Burnout was especially high for those working in long-term care facilities, with more than 6 in 10 considered burned out. Nursing was the most exhausting clinical position in healthcare, with nearly 2 in 3 experiencing burnout. Even non-clinical staff are feeling the impact of the pandemic, the increased levels of violence towards healthcare workers, and the stress, with nearly 4 in 10 registering as burned out.

Another issue is that burnout can sneak up on employees. Employees can be asked directly if they experience burnout, but by the time they acknowledge there is an issue, they are often highly symptomatic. Of those reporting feelings of burnout, 86% have three or more consistent symptoms, but among those denying burnout, nearly 1 in 3 are already feeling the negative effects of three or more symptoms.



# The Impact of Burnout

The personal implications of employee exhaustion and negativity have long been known.

In May 2019, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an “occupational phenomenon,” meaning that it is not a diagnosis that applies to all areas of life. Instead, it refers specifically to a reaction to a situation occurring within the workplace. However, while burnout is not an illness or a disease, the WHO acknowledges that burnout influences health status and often leads people to seek out health services.

But further research in this area demonstrates that there are also broad organizational ramifications for a culture in which employees are burnt out. In this specific study, burnout had an impact on three key areas of concern for healthcare organizations:

## 1) Patient and Employee Safety

Employees who are burned out are less likely to say patient safety is a high priority for their department and they are less than half as likely to say they would strongly recommend their facility as a safe place to receive care. Employees becoming concerned enough about the environment within their facility to stop referring their friends and family for care can have a significant impact on the finances of a hospital. However, should their fears about patient safety come to fruition, the impact will be in lives and not dollars.

Employee safety is also of grave concern for healthcare organizations. A recent study by Perceptyx found that [92% of all healthcare workers](#) had been exposed to violence at work in the past month. Violence against public-facing employees is an increasing problem, but healthcare providers face the unique legal obligation of providing care to patients who need it, even when they are unpleasant or dangerous towards employees. Organizations must find a balance for keeping their employees safe from harm. When employees do not feel their organization is doing enough to keep them safe at work, more than 4 in 5 report being burned out.

## 2) Retention of Top Talent

In the healthcare field, burnout continues to be one of the top drivers of attrition.

Throughout the past year, employee turnover has dominated the news cycle.

Whether it is “The Great Resignation,” “The Great Reshuffling,” or just the return of talent mobility since the pandemic, there is no question that employees are changing jobs more now than they have historically. However, much of that movement can be predicted.

For employees who are not experiencing symptoms of burnout, 2 out of 3 haven’t even considered leaving their job since the beginning of the pandemic. Contrast that with those experiencing three or more symptoms of burnout. They are more than twice as likely to have considered leaving their job for another healthcare position and, alarmingly, more than 3.5 times as likely to have considered leaving the industry entirely.

Perhaps the good news for the health of communities is that the tide is ebbing somewhat. Anticipation of a move in the next 12 months is lower for all groups, regardless of burnout status, than it was for the past 24 months. However, the gaps between those in a burned-out state and those whose stress levels are manageable are wider, with more than 2.5 times the number of struggling employees planning to leave their jobs and 4 times the number considering leaving the industry in the next year than their counterparts.

For those planning to leave the profession, the reason was clear. Burnout was the number one most frequently stated reason for that plan. For those in the “burned-out” category, more than 9 in 10 confirmed that burnout is the reason for looking at other industries. Among those who are looking at other industries, 1 in 4 have learned a new skill in the past two years to help facilitate that career change.

### 3) Attraction and Referral of Top Talent

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) places healthcare as the fastest growing industry at a rate of 16% from 2020 to 2030, adding a total of about 2.6 million jobs to the industry's already-existing positions. The number of vacancies within the industry was about 2 million in May 2022, up nearly 400,000 from the prior year. At the same time, separations for the month increased over 10% from May 2021. If this trend continues, the gap will become insurmountable. Due to already-existing staff shortages and increased attrition due to burnout, filling open positions will take on heightened importance.

Those surveyed by Perceptyx concurred. Two-thirds of all employees in healthcare say their organization is understaffed and half of the employees point to staffing in their departments, as they report not having enough staff to keep up with the current workload. Only about 1 in 6 say they do not have staffing concerns for the next six months. Of additional concern is that these positions are getting harder to staff. More than two-thirds of those surveyed say it is more difficult to fill the open roles on their team than it was one year ago.

Often, the best future employees are those recommended by current or former employees. When employees are burned out, they are less than half as likely to feel a sense of pride in their organization or recommend the organization as a great place to work.





A vicious cycle is being created because of an inability to attract talent to fill open positions. Those whose roles or organizations are understaffed are twice as likely to be burnt out as those in roles or organizations where staffing levels are of little concern. In these understaffed organizations, employees who have chosen to stay now find themselves supported by even fewer colleagues as they struggle to complete their workloads.

# Actions You Can Take Today

Burnout is a major problem with far-reaching effects. So how can healthcare organizations address it before it spirals out of control? The biggest drivers of burnout across the healthcare space are manageable stress levels at work, connection to the future of the organization, and a culture of safety. The good news is that organizations have tools at their disposal to deal with each of these.

## Workplace Stress

Healthcare is a notoriously stressful work environment. When asked if the stress levels at work are manageable, healthcare continues to have the lowest levels of favorability and significantly higher levels of unfavorability than other industries in the benchmark, even among organizations that are consistently working on improving these levels. The responses of recently surveyed employees in the healthcare industry highlight these concerns. One out of 5 disagree with the statement “I can manage my workplace stress well,” and only about the same percentage strongly agree.

Not all stress can be removed, particularly in an environment where matters of life and death are a daily reality. However, organizations can combat the effects of stress by [building resilience](#) within the organization. Employees report that when organizations provide them with helpful resources aimed specifically at reducing workplace stress, they are more effective at managing it. In addition, employees report that high-quality management – which encompasses the proper systems and processes to get the job done effectively, empowering employees to make decisions close to the action, and cooperation between team members – is essential to minimizing workplace stress.

## Culture of Safety

While sentiments of unsafe conditions for patients and employees are downstream impacts of employee burnout, one tactic for combatting that burnout is to [build a safety culture](#) within the organization. For healthcare organizations, a culture of safety relies on strong teamwork, noticing when others are struggling, and most importantly speaking up to correct any issues before those issues become major problems.

In this study, employees who believe their team takes ownership of issues until resolved were less than half as likely to be burned out than those who didn't report the same, and organizations reached that level of team ownership through their culture of safety. More than 9 in 10 employees in a strong safety culture were favorable to this item, compared with only about 1 in 4 who work in an organization with a weaker safety culture.



## Connection to the Future of the Organization

The working world has changed in the past 20 years, and what was once seen merely as a perk is now becoming essential to building an organization for which people love to work. One of the new factors driving the employee experience is a personal connection with the broader mission and vision of the organization.

Employees are increasingly more likely to retain their working energy when they feel a connection to the overall future of the organization. This includes understanding the clear vision of the organization, feeling like they are a part of that vision, and having leaders who will help them realize that vision.

Addressing the [new factors](#) influencing the employee experience, working together to create a culture of safety, and working with employees to manage their workplace stress will lead to many positive organizational outcomes, including retention, advocacy, and – most critically for our purposes here – burnout.



The graphic features the Perceptyx logo at the top left. Below it, a large blue section contains the text: "What does research reveal about the current Healthcare EX and how perceptions have changed since 2019?". At the bottom left of this section is a pink button with the text "Download Now". To the right, a white section displays the report cover for "The Healthcare Employee Experience in 2022: A Data-Driven Perspective" by Lauren Beechly, Ph.D., dated May 2022. The cover shows a photograph of three healthcare professionals (two men and one woman) in a meeting.

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