BACP
Workplace
For therapists working with employees, employers and EAPs
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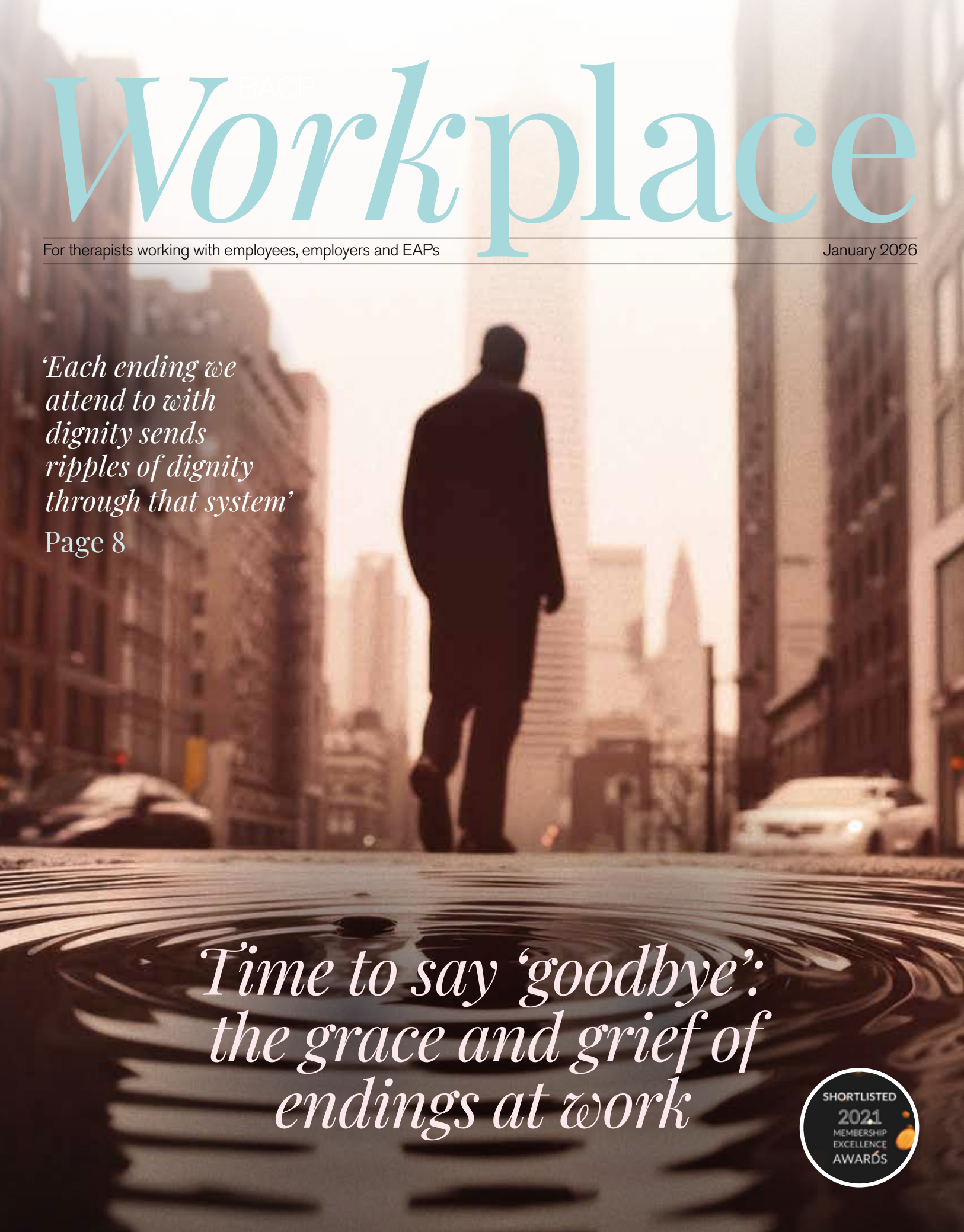

'Each ending we attend to with dignity sends ripples of dignity through that system'

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Time to say 'goodbye': the grace and grief of endings at work

SHORTLISTED 2021 MEMBERSHIP EXCELLENCE AWARDS

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All's well that ends well

I often wonder at how little attention is paid to teaching our society about the benefits of attending to endings. The first time I stopped to think about 'endings' was during counselling training. There, we learnt that if we are to stand a chance of ending well, we need to tend to the messy feelings associated with loss and grief. We looked at all kinds of endings – the big, the small and everything in between – and why, so often, we avoid saying 'goodbye' altogether.

Work is such a big part of our lives. And inevitably, it's full of beginnings and endings – for our clients, our organisations and ourselves. While new beginnings are positive, attracting attention, energy and investment, endings can be perceived as too difficult, or negative, and as a result are often missed, rushed or ignored – leaving long-lasting wounds, which therapists often bare witness to.

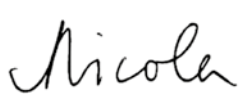
So, I'm delighted that the authors of an important new book, *Good Bye – Leading change better by attending to endings* have written this issue's lead article. In 'Time to say goodbye', executive coaches, Lizzie Bentley Bowers and Alison Lucas share their research, insights and offer practical steps for how to create better endings at work. Highlighting an organisational blind spot, the authors make a convincing case that leaders who can lead endings well will be better equipped to lead through anything. Attending to endings not only makes good business sense, it also restores trust, frees energy and clears the ground for new beginnings to take seed.

At the start of a new year, you may be thinking about your portfolio of work and your offering to organisations, and, if so, you'll find food for thought in my interview with Lucy Myers on page 16. We met at the annual Health and Wellbeing at Work conference last year, and here Lucy talks to me about her work, her role in organisations, and offers her best advice to therapists who are thinking about integrating coaching into their practice.

On page 21, we welcome back Rachel Stern and Cathy Sansom who've written previously on the topic of how employers can best support their working parents. This time, they turn their attention to the lesser-known concept of parental burnout – something their research shows is a workplace wellbeing challenge with both human and economic costs.

Listening to your feedback in the recent *BACP Workplace* Readers' Survey, Nat Clewley, our Workplace division Chair, and an EAP clinical director, continues her series, 'EAP matters', asking how EAP affiliates can work ethically in such competitive and challenging times. And, we hear news from Kris Ambler, BACP's Workforce Lead, who reports on his work on behalf of members and the opportunities for practitioners in the evolving world of workplace wellbeing.

Wherever you are with the infinite cycle of life's beginnings and endings, I hope you find nourishment in the January issue. ●



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Your BACP Workplace News

Notes from the Chair

On a mission

Nat Clewley
Chair, BACP Workplace

Well, here we go again, the start of a new year, a fresh beginning and time to look at what lies ahead for the Workplace division in 2026. And that's what I'd like to do here, keep focused on what we want to create together. I'm really heartened by the strong support that we're receiving from BACP in our endeavours for the workplace sector, and this can only enhance our intentions for 2026.

At our last Executive Committee meeting, a reflective and earnest energy was shared. It was clear that everyone is committed to a genuine desire to build the future of workplace counselling, to raise awareness, strengthen our collective voice and learn from the challenges that we have faced so far.

Reflections on the current climate

The publication of the *Keep Britain Working: final report* in November 2025 sparked much discussion, not to mention some controversy. It drew both attention and criticism, particularly around the idea of counselling being used primarily to keep people in work. BACP's Workforce Lead, Kris Ambler, expressed it well when he responded: 'We must move beyond treating mental health as a productivity problem. Counselling and psychotherapy must be embedded at the heart of any solution, not treated as an afterthought.'

I agree with this. However, in my own work, I see daily how leaders are struggling to support the mental health of their teams and often, their own too. Productivity is rarely their first concern. What I hear instead is: 'We don't know how to help,' or 'They're great at their job and we want to support them to recover.'

Of course, every workplace has targets – it's just the reality – and behind those targets are people doing their best in a fast-paced and demanding world. But we must accept that several things can be true at once – people need to be in work and to stay in work, there is a need for productivity, and there are people at all levels in workplaces who care deeply about one another's mental health needs.

A mission for 2026

As a division, I see that we have a responsibility to champion the value of counselling in workplaces and to challenge misconceptions. We can help shift the misconceived narrative from 'keeping people in work' to one that recognises that workplace counselling is already, and has been for some time, making great efforts to create environments where people who go to work have access to great support.

Our focus in 2026 will be to:

- Amplify and celebrate the work already being done in workplace counselling
- Strengthen our connections with leaders, such as Kris Ambler (BACP Workforce Lead) and other key partners
- Advocate for real investment and recognition of counselling in the workplace
- Ensure that counsellors feel supported and represented by the Workplace division
- Communicate with transparency and energy.

Looking ahead

I'm excited to be hosting the online event, 'Working with AI: does artificial intelligence mean artificial therapy?' on 11 February 2026, and we have a fantastic line up of speakers. The Executive Committee will also be attending the annual Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference, held in March at the NEC, Birmingham, representing the Workplace division, networking and using the time to refine our collective focus.

I'm also continuing conversations with other groups, including the Psychotherapy and Counselling Union, whose openness and insights have been invaluable in helping me to articulate the realities of EAP work and challenging some of the misconceptions that exist.

Finally, I'd love to hear from you, our members, to learn what you are facing in your professional lives. I'd welcome hearing what you think the Workplace division should be focusing on in 2026, and what would make a difference and support you and the profession.

Please do get in touch and share your thoughts.

Workplace Executive Committee
divisions@bacp.co.uk

Award-winning EAP provider recognised for innovative approach to workplace mental health

Congratulations to The Listening Centre, which recently won the Health and Wellbeing Award at Keele University's prestigious Breaking the Mould Awards, celebrating businesses that challenge convention and drive innovation across the region.

The Listening Centre is an independent EAP provider, engaging more than 30 affiliate counsellors across the Midlands, that strives to do things differently. The award recognises its distinctive approach to employee assistance programme (EAP) provision, which prioritises clinical autonomy, tailored therapeutic matching, and person-centred care over the rigid one-size-fits-all models that dominate the industry.

Sharon McCormick, Founder of The Listening Centre, said: 'This award validates everything we've built over 23 years. We've never agreed with the conveyor-belt approach to workplace mental health – strict session limits, standardised CBT regardless of individual need and poor outcomes. We've always believed people deserve better and our results prove it works.'

> 'This recognition means everything because it proves that prioritising clinical effectiveness over cost management delivers better outcomes for everyone'

The award validates outcomes that demonstrate what trauma-informed, person-centred EAP provision can achieve:

- 96% client retention rate (clients complete agreed therapy endpoints)
- 3% missed appointment rate (compared to 16–27% industry average)
- 99% client recommendation rate
- 94% of clients report that therapy goals were achieved
- 81% of clients report a direct impact on work attendance or return to work.

Sharon says: 'This recognition means everything because it proves that prioritising clinical effectiveness over cost management delivers better outcomes for everyone. Our counsellors have clinical autonomy to extend the number of sessions when necessary, integrate therapeutic approaches based on individual need, and work within a trauma-informed framework that recognises psychological safety as fundamental to recovery.'

Supporting counsellor wellbeing

The Listening Centre is proud to maintain zero staff turnover through comprehensive case management, responsive support, and fair remuneration that reflects counsellors' skills and qualifications. It makes a difference, as Sharon explains: 'We recognise that quality support for clients begins with valuing the counsellors who deliver it. Our affiliates have meaningful CPD opportunities, reflective practice support and clinical autonomy. They're trusted as professionals, not managed as a "resource" at arm's length.'

You can read Sharon McCormick's interview for 'My Workplace' about her business journey, which was published in the January 2025 issue of *BACP Workplace* (**https://tinyurl.com/34f9vyc6**).

If you have a good news story about your work or if you've been nominated for an award, the editor would love to hear from you: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Above from left to right: Sharon McCormick, Clinical Director at The Listening Centre, Sheema Mustahsin from Théa Pharmaceuticals Limited and Krysia Dziedzic, Associate PVC Research & Impact/ARUK Professor of Musculoskeletal Therapies

Are you working with the creative industries?

Calling all readers who are therapists, coaches and wellbeing leads working with creative employers. The UK is one of the world leaders in creative industries – the Government estimates that the creative industries generated £126 billion in gross value added to the economy and employed 2.4 million people in 2022. Despite this, the sector faces unique challenges and opportunities for the health of its workforce, especially given the physical toll of many roles, as well as managing insecure and transient employment, ageing in the creative industries and the threats from AI.

If you're involved in supporting this vital workforce, please get in touch with the editor at: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Free resources for working with trauma

Carolyn Spring is an author, trainer and trauma survivor who aims to bridge the gap between experts and survivors, making the complex simple so that people can find their own answers. Keen to share how we can reverse adversity, her website offers a rich source of articles, podcasts and downloadable resources to help both therapists and people needing to understand their responses to trauma.

The *Guide for Therapists: a three phase approach to trauma treatment* and the *Trauma Survivors' Resource Guide* are available to download for free at: **www.carolynspring.com**

Podcast

Low-wage growth, lifelong learning and 'green skills'

The CIPD's fortnightly podcast, *HR People Pod*, brings together top HR and business leaders to look behind the news headlines and consider what it means for business and HR.

What does loyalty at work look like? In a climate of low-wage growth, how can you keep employees motivated and engaged? As warnings come of retirement ages potentially rising above 70 years old, how can employers foster opportunities for skills development for older workers? And are organisations missing a vital growth opportunity by not investing enough in 'green skills'?

CIPD Reference Content Manager, Holly Ivins, is joined by Chief People Officer at Caxton, Jane-Emma Peerless; Head of People and Culture at Dowds Group, Rob Reeds; and Chief People Officer at the Bank of Ireland, Matt Elliott.

You can listen here: **https://tinyurl.com/2u7z475z**

Date for the diary

Birmingham

Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference

Date: 10 to 11 March 2026

The Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference returns to the NEC Birmingham for the UK's largest event dedicated to improving the health, wellbeing, safety, behaviour and culture of today's workforce.

BACP will have a stand in the exhibition hall and members of the Workplace Executive Committee will be present at the event. Kris Ambler, BACP's Workforce Lead, will be speaking on high-functioning anxiety at work and Nicola Neath, a former Workplace Chair, will be hosting a full day of talks on the topic of mental health and emotional wellbeing at work.

If you haven't yet attended, the annual Health and Wellbeing at Work conference is well worth a visit, with over 140 talks, a packed conference programme, an exhibition hall and networking opportunities. It aims to empower every employer with the inspiration, insights and contacts to drive their workplace wellbeing strategy forward. We hope to see you there!

Early bird tickets are available. To find out more, visit:
www.healthwellbeingwork.co.uk

Mental Health First Aid Standards for the workplace

On 10 October 2025, World Mental Health Day, MHFA England® announced the launch of a public consultation on the draft Workplace Mental Health First Aid Standards. The standards set out, for the first time, clear, evidence-based guidance on best practice in embedding Mental Health First Aid in the workplace, following engagement with external stakeholders across multiple sectors and with diverse lived experiences. The standards have been informed by the views and suggestions of stakeholders, including the voices of over 4,000 MHFAiders®, to help employers embed Mental Health First Aid effectively, consistently and sustainably across their organisations.

The public consultation on the draft standards sought views from employers, employees, MHFAiders, MHFA England Instructor Members, policy makers, unions, professional bodies, and anyone with an interest in workplace mental health.

The feedback will help MHFA refine and strengthen the standards before they're finalised. The consultation closed in December and the final Workplace Mental Health First Aid Standards will be published later this year.

Could you write an article for BACP Workplace?

If you've been pondering over an idea for a possible article for *BACP Workplace*, please don't keep it to yourself. The editor, Nicola Banning, is keen to hear from potential writers with knowledge about the following: AI in workplace counselling, trauma-informed therapy at work, male mental health at work, working online as a workplace counsellor, and supervision in the workplace sector.

In addition, Nicola is always interested in hearing from you about other issues that you think we should be covering, especially if it's your area of expertise. For example: Have you carried out some interesting research with your clients or in your workplace? Is there a topic that *BACP Workplace* hasn't covered and which you know a lot about? Or do you know someone in the workplace sector who inspires you, who you think might make an interesting interviewee?

You are welcome to contact Nicola at: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk** with a brief outline of your article idea, and explaining why it could be of interest to counsellors working with employees, employers and EAPs.

Feedback

We welcome readers' letters and comments. If you've read something in *BACP Workplace* you would like to comment on, please do get in touch: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Time to say *'goodbye'*

the grace and grief of endings at work

We don't like to talk about endings or goodbyes at work. But executive leadership coaches, **Lizzie Bentley Bowers** and **Alison Lucas** and authors of *Good Bye: leading change better by attending to endings*, think we need to get better at it. Having witnessed the harm – financial and psychological – of poorly managed endings, they share their research and offer tools and guidance for how to create better endings at work

Alison Lucas *of Randolph Partnership Ltd and* **Lizzie Bentley Bowers** *of The Causeway Coaching ltd, are professionally accredited coaches and facilitators, working predominantly at board level and across all three sectors. They are passionate about staying continually curious and paying attention to their clients' individual and commercial needs and outcomes. Collaboration, shared experience and learning are a hallmark of their practice, and they benefit from the support and challenge they offer each other. Holding the pursuit of the best outcomes for their clients lies at the heart of their collaborations. You can find out more at:* ***goodbyecoach.co.uk***

Their book Good Bye: leading change better by attending to endings *is published by Practical Inspiration Publishing.*

Our working lives are full of beginnings and endings. New beginnings offer hope and energy, not to mention budgets, which tend to flow into getting projects off to a strong start. And, even when a beginning feels daunting or uncertain, it still carries the appeal of being future-facing – igniting the energy that drives an organisation forward, offering visible moments where investment can be justified and celebrated by everyone.

In contrast, endings and goodbyes tend to be seen as a winding down of energy, motivation and connection, and a source of sadness and discomfort. Some are easy to spot – retirement, redundancies, restructures and office closures. Others, less so: a promotion that changes old loyalties, a rebrand that severs a sense of history, or the quiet disbanding of a project that once felt like 'home'.

And while endings at work rarely attract the same levels of attention or funding, they can offer equally powerful moments of transition and renewal. They may not appear to be an appealing investment opportunity, and yet mishandled endings carry their own, often hidden, costs. The quiet loss of knowledge when experienced people leave their workplace, the dip in morale as teams adjust, the time spent re-establishing trust or rebuilding cohesion all have financial and cultural consequences. Therapists will know all too well how unacknowledged endings can erode engagement, reduce productivity and delay the very new beginnings that organisations are so eager to invest in.

In our work as executive coaches, we too often see the very real impact of ignored or poorly managed endings on individuals, teams and organisations. We also found a gap on our leadership bookshelves on how leaders can navigate endings at work, which led us to write our book *Good Bye: leading change better by attending to endings* to support leaders with this often-overlooked aspect of their work. In this article, we share our observations on the impact of avoiding endings, as well as the reasons why it happens. We also offer ideas that can help everyone create brighter beginnings by attending to how things end at work.

When it didn't end well

Can you remember a time when a client or a colleague told you about a bad ending at work? Or can you remember a time in your own career when you experienced a bad ending that has stayed with you? We'd be surprised if the answer to either of these questions is 'no'. Indeed, when we told people we were writing a book on endings in organisations, it took little encouragement for stories of poorly managed endings to emerge – often months, even years, after the ending had taken place.

When someone leaves work in difficult circumstances, the practical gaps tend to be filled relatively quickly, such as by appointing a new person. However, the emotional and relational vacuum can take far longer to settle, leaving unanswered questions lingering in corridors and inboxes:

What happened? Did we do something wrong? Are we allowed to talk to them? Unanswered questions or hastily closed down conversations ripple through the system, eroding trust and leaving people wary of what might end next and what it might mean for them.

Everyday endings

Examples of poorly managed endings aren't restricted to how people leave roles. Pitches, projects, brands and product lines all end in organisations every day. Teams merge or are restructured. Office spaces are moved or reassigned. Directives shifting from one way of working to another are issued. It's likely the list of endings your clients are experiencing will be long and varied. But when those endings are ignored or poorly managed, the emotional impact lingers and continues to shape the culture beneath the surface. These ripples can be far-reaching in terms of time and how long the memory holds that pain or discomfort, often affecting future behaviour and decision making. You will no doubt have observed how serious those consequences can be for people, often leaving wounds.

For organisations, the financial cost can be high too – that might be in the form of hesitant decision making, absences, projects failing, or a team struggling to align and bond. It might be in repeated costly recruitment processes for a role that no one seems to quite be able to settle into, or, as we often encounter, the high emotional and financial cost of legal processes.

Endings are rarely neat and tidy. They are full of tricky and messy stuff – unfinished conversations, mixed emotions and human complexity that refuses to be wrapped up neatly with a bow. Given their importance, let's look at why we avoid them.

A blind spot

While therapists are no strangers to the landscapes of attachment and separation that shape our inner worlds, few of us outside the therapy profession are taught how to end well. Our education and professional training emphasise achievement and progress, not how to close or let go. Leadership theory too often focuses on vision and change, rather than closure. What people resist is rarely the change itself but the loss that accompanies it.

As William Bridges, whose seminal work on transitions in organisations is widely cited in leadership, observed: successful change begins not with a new beginning, but with an ending – the conscious process of letting the old situation be left behind.[1] Yet, the psychological work of endings, individually and collectively, is often missing from leadership development, leaving leaders ill-equipped to recognise and navigate it. Let's look at why that is.

Demand for positivity

Organisational cultures frequently reward optimism and discourage expressions of disappointment or grief.[2]

'Organisational cultures frequently reward optimism and discourage expressions of disappointment or grief'[2]

The 'brave face' is valued more than the honest one. While positivity has its place, suppressing emotion can get in the way of people naming and processing what has happened and learning from it. Avoidance may reduce discomfort in the short term, but it undermines trust, cohesion and mental health over time.[3]

Vulnerability and loss

To attend well to endings is to acknowledge vulnerability – our own and others'.[4] It requires an ability to sit with uncertainty, sadness and loss, without rushing to repair them. Many leaders find this difficult because endings touch something deeply human: our wish to avoid pain, and control outcomes and move quickly to the next certainty. Yet our attempts to bypass discomfort often amplify it. Honesty and compassion can coexist and when leaders model this emotional maturity, they create permission for others to do the same. In contrast, when vulnerability is seen as weakness, emotion can find its way out through gossip, resistance or quiet resentment.[5]

The impulse to fix

Leaders often equate care with problem-solving. Faced with loss or disappointment, the instinct is to smooth things over, reorganise or reframe.[6] However well-intentioned, this can leave people feeling unseen or unacknowledged. The unprocessed emotion doesn't vanish; it ripples outward, showing up later as mistrust, fatigue or disengagement.

Organisational conditions

Even where leaders wish to attend properly to endings, organisational structures and processes can get in the way. Legal constraints, confidentiality and the relentless pace of work often silence conversations. During periods of intense change, as seen during the pandemic, urgency became habitual, leaving little room for pause or ritual. The result is cumulative fatigue and diminished trust, as people absorb one unacknowledged ending after another without time to process what has gone.

However, when endings are handled with attention and honesty, when we name what's happening, acknowledge the emotion and what went before, and find a way of closing, there can be a release of energy and a renewed sense of stability and clarity.

Tending to the ripples

Attending to endings is not about sentimentality or grand gestures. It is about stewardship, tending to the unseen ripples that endings send through teams and organisations. When leaders face those moments with honesty and care, relationships repair more quickly, confidence in leadership strengthens and energy returns to the work that lies ahead. Retirement is an example of an ending loaded with personal significance – marking not only leaving a role, but also the end of

An endings scenario: When nobody said 'goodbye'

When Cholswell Health merged its Public Health and Community Wellbeing divisions, it was described as 'a natural alignment of purpose.' The new CEO spoke of synergy, efficiency and 'a single, unified team for a healthier future.' But beneath the optimism, something vital went unacknowledged; loss.

When the merger was announced, leaders reassured staff that 'no jobs were at risk'. Yet in the reorganisation that followed, roles were rapidly restructured and overnight, people's sense of identity within the organisation changed. Trust eroded, information-sharing dried up, and long-serving managers found themselves firefighting conflict rather than leading progress. No one had marked the ending. No one had said goodbye.

Vivienne's story

Vivienne had led one of the two merging teams. In the new structure, her role was declared redundant despite earlier reassurances. Vivienne decided to leave quietly. There were no goodbyes, no acknowledgement of her contribution, just awkward silences, half-finished conversations, and the sense that everyone was waiting for the situation to pass. The message was clear: endings were best not spoken about.

Four years later, working in a different organisation, Vivienne found herself near burnout, low in confidence, struggling to delegate and feeling haunted by an invisible tension she couldn't quite name. In a meeting with her line manager, concern was expressed about her exhaustion.

What followed was a flood of unspoken grief. The old story poured out; the disappointment, resentment and hurt of that unattended ending, still reverberating years later. Through therapy, Vivienne began to process what had happened. In doing so, she understood how the unresolved ending was showing up unhelpfully in her current leadership.

The systemic ripples

But what happened to Vivienne was mirrored at every level of the organisation. An internal audit later noted delivery delays, 18% higher sickness rates and a 23% turnover in the first 18 months. Middle managers reported spending up to 40% of their time mediating interpersonal tensions. Morale dropped; productivity followed. Consultants were hired to 'reset culture', costing over £1 million in the first year. Yet the real cost was harder to measure: the erosion of trust, the quiet loss of talent, the collective depletion of energy.

Endings stir powerful emotions: sadness, fear, anger and relief. When leaders bypass that terrain, organisations carry unprocessed repercussions. Resentment, confusion and disengagement can re-emerge later as burnout, cynicism or resistance. Rushing past the discomfort of the ending may feel efficient, but it is a false economy. What is avoided in the short term accumulates in human cost, cultural instability and financial waste.

working life as it has been known, and signalling transitions in identity, relationships, how time is marked and used, and much more besides.

People often assume they'll slip easily into retirement, imagining new routines and freedom from deadlines. Yet when the day finally arrives, it can feel unexpectedly flat. Without genuine acknowledgment, even those eager for change can be left with a quiet ache, and a sense that their work and identity no longer matter. In our conversations with retirees, this sense of disconnection can often be traced back to missed opportunities, where important aspects of an ending are ignored or rushed. In our book, we devised The REAR Four Steps, an acronym for Reality, Emotions, Accomplishments and Ritual, and each of these steps needs to be worked through. When they are not, a retirement can be experienced like this:

- **Reality:** The true impact of the new rhythm of life on themselves and their closest relationships was not fully considered.
- **Emotion:** Feelings were contained, for fear of upsetting others or seeming overly sentimental.
- **Accomplishment:** Pride in achievements went unspoken, and the farewell speeches felt impersonal, as though they could have been for anyone.
- **Ritual:** Busy workplaces defaulted to quick drinks and standard speeches, overlooking the deeper need for personal and collective closure.

When these four steps are not tended to, the effects of feeling uncertain, unappreciated, perhaps unexpectedly low in energy, ripple out beyond the retiree. Their families, too, may feel resentment that years of hard work and contribution ended with little recognition. Retirement, when not properly marked, risks becoming not a celebration of a career well-lived, but a quiet, painful, fading out.[6]

Some of the stories of leaving workplaces that we shared in our book resonated so deeply with readers that many people have asked if the stories were 'their stories'. The answer was no, but these experiences are so common in terms of the frequency and the feelings felt that they are, in that sense, stories that belong to many of us.

When it ends well

However, when endings are done well, there are positive ripples and repercussions, which echo on. When farewells are personal and heartfelt, the impact can be profound. One retiring leader who loved hiking was honoured with a walk along Hadrian's Wall. His colleagues joined him at different stages along the route, from those he'd known many years to more recent team members. As they walked, they shared memories, turning the journey into a living tribute to his

accomplishments and the relationships he had built, as well as ensuring he felt genuinely seen and valued for his contribution. He now looks back on his time with the organisation with appreciation and is fully engaged with his new life. We can see how a retirement being handled this way could strengthen trust across the company. His colleagues can feel their own contributions matter, reflected in higher engagement scores. And he and his former colleagues continue to speak positively about the organisation, boosting its reputation, attracting strong candidates and supporting high retention.

What difference does a good ending make?

A good ending, or one that, however unwanted, is met with honesty, attention, dignity and compassion, frees energy, restores trust and clears the ground for new beginnings to take root.[7] It allows people to leave well and others to stay well. It builds trust and connection. The ripple effect is still widely felt, but now in individual wellbeing, in stronger team relationships and positively across the organisation.

Leaders who can lead endings well are better equipped to lead through anything. They create space for truth-telling, for emotion to be acknowledged and for lessons to be learned. It allows people to step forward lighter, rather than burdened by confusion, resentment or regret, that they might not realise they are carrying. The system feels calmer; people can trust that when endings come, as they always do, they will be handled with care.

Teams that pause to name what's ended, reflect on what was achieved, and mark the moment are more creative, resilient and connected. They're less likely to repeat mistakes and more likely to retain talent. Energy once lost to speculation or rumination is redirected into learning and possibility. Good endings also create opportunities for greater equity. When we make time to attend to what is closing, we also notice whose contributions have gone unseen, whose experiences were overlooked, and which patterns are no longer serving everyone well or equitably. Endings, done well, can help redistribute power and open space for fairer, more intentional beginnings.

Towards better endings at work

If we want to have better endings, we can start by teaching it. Most of us were never taught how to end well. There is an opportunity to incorporate thinking about endings and learning to navigate them well, into learning about leadership.

We also need to slow the pace down. When everything is urgent, the quieter work of acknowledging what's ending, and who is affected, gets lost.

As practitioners, we value simple models that have rigour behind them. In our book, we offer leaders a practical framework to help them work more confidently and safely through the emotional work of endings. (For further information about the REAR Four Steps, visit **www.goodbyecoach.co.uk**).

> 'Leaders who can lead endings well are better equipped to lead through anything'

Closing thoughts

When we attend to endings with care, we step into the role of steward. In doing so, rather than attending only to the task or person immediately in front of us, we hold the wider systems of teams and relationships. Each ending we attend to with dignity sends ripples of integrity through that system.[9] When we neglect them, those ripples can turn into undercurrents of confusion or loss that others must navigate later. A well-managed ending allows the investment that has been made in new beginnings to have even greater energy, trust and confidence, increasing the likelihood of their success.

The skills of leading endings well are transferrable to other aspects of leadership, with positive ripples on organisational outcomes, culture and wellbeing. To lead endings well is to recognise that we are part of something bigger than ourselves – a web of human experience that reaches far beyond one team, one project or one moment. Far from being a point of disconnection from someone or something, the ending cements the connection. By naming what is real, making room for emotion, acknowledging accomplishment and marking the transition with intention, we can create brighter beginnings for all. ●

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If you have an idea for a possible article for *BACP Workplace*, the editor would like to hear from you. Please write to: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Workplace matters

Is the four-day working week better for our mental health?

Sandi Mann

A friend recently revealed that they had been offered a four-day working week as part of a new job package and I was chuffed for them – a three-day weekend; what's not to like? But there was, naturally, a catch – the number of working hours remained the same. They were just being offered the chance to squeeze them across four days rather than five. So, while it might sound appealing, I couldn't help but wonder if the four very long working days were worth the payoff.

According to recent findings, nearly 11% of us now work just four days a week,[1] with more than 100,000 workers in the UK having switched to a full-time four-day week since the pandemic.[1] It seems that the changing working patterns allowed us a glimpse of a better work-life balance that many Brits have been keen to emulate post-pandemic via a four-day working week. The 4 Day Week Foundation (**www.4dayweek.co.uk**) advocates for the shorter week and claims that around 420 companies, employing more than 12,000 workers, have adopted a four-day week since the pandemic.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of a shorter working week are well-documented, with many advocating that a longer weekend is better for our mental health. The 4 Day Week Foundation claims that after trying a four-day week, 71% of workers experienced less burnout and 39% reported less stress.[2] They claim that 'the five-day working week is outdated and no longer suits the realities of modern life.'[2] They point out that the five-day week began life as a welcome relief from the 16-hour workdays, six days a week, during the Industrial Revolution; and that a longer weekend allows us time to rest, take care of life admin and engage in more leisure activities. They argue that the employer benefits too, and in a 27-month trial, South Cambridgeshire District Council became the first council in the UK to adopt the four-day week in 2025.[1] This was echoed by the Mental Health Foundation UK, which in August 2025, concluded their own pilot study into the four-day week.[3] They found that staff participating in the study reported:

- 69% less work-related stress
- 68% improved mental wellbeing
- 64% a greater sense of life satisfaction
- 79% a better work-life balance.

Too good to be true?

It all sounds fantastic – but before you all rush to show this article to your employer, it is worth noting that there are some downsides too. The biggest one being, of course, extra-long working days, endured four days a week. This could mean working between 9am and 7pm instead of 9am to 5pm, which could mean getting home from work at 8pm four nights a week. By the time food is prepped, eaten and basic chores done, there's not much time before bed and starting again.

> 'Research into the effectiveness or not of the four-day week is still in its infancy'

Not only that, but the research is unclear whether it is healthier to binge-work than binge-rest, rather than adopt the steady pace of the traditional working week. The findings from the Mental Health Foundation suggest that there are individual differences in how people manage their working week.[3] After all, almost a third of people did **not** report a reduction in stress or an increase in mental wellbeing when following a four-day week. It could be that for some people, longer days mean more stress, which is not countered by three days off; such people may include parents or carers whose out-of-work responsibilities still need to be slotted in each day, whatever time they finish work.

Of course, four-day weeks do not automatically mean longer working days – in fact, the 4 Day Week Foundation advocates for 32-hour working weeks compressed into four days. But squeezing 40 hours of work into 32 hours brings its own strains that might not work for everyone, including some employers who still need staff every day.

Research into the effectiveness or not of the four-day week is still in its infancy, and one of the few papers that has examined the issue is a 2023 systematic review of the literature on four-day working weeks.[4] Although benefits, such as improvement in job satisfaction, were reported, a note of caution was sounded when the author observed that the benefits often seem to fade with time. The 'honeymoon period' of the four-day week may soon wear off as the realities of a more stressful work week kick in.

The future of the working week may lie in more flexible working hours, so that employees can tailor their working week to suit their needs – a benefit, of course, that many of us in the counselling and therapy profession have until now had to go self-employed to enjoy.

Dr Sandi Mann *is a senior psychology lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. She is an accredited CBT therapist and an accredited EMDR practitioner.*

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EAP *matters*

How can EAP affiliates work ethically in a demanding and rapidly changing environment?

Nat Clewley shares her insights on the changing EAP landscape

***Nat Clewley** is a counsellor, supervisor and clinical director at Wellbeing Solutions, and is committed to supporting counsellors and delivering meaningful, successful services to those in need. She is passionate about ethical care, reflective growth and hopeful practices in therapy, at work and in her own life.*

If you're an EAP affiliate, you'll probably be managing your caseloads via a system that is complex, extremely competitive and increasingly cost-driven. An article in *Therapy Today* in March 2024 identified the growing number of therapists who are now portfolio workers,[1] and highlighted how multidimensional portfolio working can lead therapists to feel conflicted about how it is possible to deliver their EAP caseload and work ethically.

This concerns me, not only as a fellow therapist but also in my role as Clinical Director at Wellbeing Solutions, where affiliates are indirectly telling me that they, too, are feeling under strain when it comes to delivering ethical practice. I've written this article to share what I know about how EAPs can best support their affiliates and also to encourage us to think about ethics in relation to EAP work.

Pause for thought

Of course, ethics and knowledge are the backbone of our profession, and yet, I wonder, how often we stop and reflect on this in our day-to-day working lives? The challenge for EAP affiliates is to deliver counselling ethically, while also working with the paradox of EAPs – which are driven to ensure counselling remains a viable and accessible form of mental health support in an often-constrained workplace context.

My challenge and that of all clinical leaders in the EAP world, is to provide clear and relevant guidance and behave considerately as a leader in my field within these constraints. While I do my best as a clinical director, my professional judgment is often challenged both internally and externally by competing pressures and forces, leading me to reflect on how those pressures impact the decisions I make in my role, and how, in turn, my decisions may affect EAP affiliates and even the client's experience.

I'm assuming that you are familiar with BACP's *Ethical Framework*,[2] the Workplace Counselling Competence Framework[3] and that you are aware of UK EAPA, its remit and that you've read their guide for counsellors working with EAPs,[4] all of which exist to support us to work ethically and congruently in the workplace context.

Defining ethics in workplace counselling

Ethics in workplace counselling is not a fixed set of predetermined parameters. It is, instead, a dynamic collection of interconnected guidelines, principles and professional opinions, designed to protect the safety and integrity of key stakeholders: clients, workplaces and employers, and of course, therapists. This matters because workplace counselling operates within a unique tripartite relationship. The therapist is working with the individual client whose employer has contracted and funded the service, and this can fundamentally shape our practice. Working in this context requires that, as workplace counsellors, we can navigate this.

Let's just consider a single referral, which comes loaded with considerations that all have an ethical basis, including:

- Specific terms of engagement between you, the workplace counsellor and the workplace that you support
- The EAP provider you agree to take referrals from, and the requirements of those who have purchased the EAP for their organisation
- Particular employment relationship and organisational dynamics in the workplace
- Nature of the presenting issues and client circumstances
- Relevant employment legislation and organisational policies
- Professional standards from recognised counselling bodies such as BACP.

So, perhaps ethical practice in an EAP context means being willing to understand all of this from the outset, all parties being able to maintain and clarify boundaries, and being clear about the conditions under which sessions will be facilitated. And, of course, we need to acknowledge that different EAP providers, employers and contexts may operate with different protocols and requirements.[2,3,4] And, while BACP's *Ethical Framework* provides core principles that remain constant, the application of these principles must be flexible and context sensitive.

For example, when an EAP affiliate chooses to accept a referral for a client for three sessions and halfway through the second session, the client describes their sleepless nights and the growing pressure to keep up with workplace demands, we may ask whether the nature of the brief support the client can access is sufficient, given the impact on the client and their presentation. We may feel frustrated or conflicted with the client's employer or the EAP's lack of support for only providing three sessions. And, we might be tempted to say that the client hasn't been provided with enough support, rather than focusing on what we can achieve.

However, taking a step back, we need to acknowledge that the very presence of the EAP reflects an employer's commitment to staff wellbeing. As counsellors, we need to hold a balance, planning for what we can achieve in three sessions, how we can focus support and empower our clients in this brief intervention (that we agreed to deliver), as this supports us to maintain ethical boundaries and creates space where the client's experience can be explored with care, while acknowledging the broader context of an organisation striving to support its workforce via an EAP.

Safeguarding ethical practice

Safeguarding ethically in workplace counselling operates through interconnected safeguards for the client, the counsellor and the workplace. While different EAP providers will have different approaches, you can expect guidance on what is expected of you. The reality is that your EAP work will, in all likelihood, have additional parameters, which are different from your private practice or other therapy work.

For clients: Ensuring that clients have informed consent about the limits of confidentiality wherever possible, clarity about who has access to information, and their right to understand the tripartite relationship and how safeguarding may be applied.

> 'Of course, ethics and knowledge are the backbone of our profession, and yet, I wonder, how often we stop and reflect on this in our day-to-day working lives?'

For EAP affiliates: Receiving access to case management support, clinical guidance, risk management, advice, and accessible support when managing safeguarding scenarios. One of the many benefits of working as an EAP affiliate counsellor is that if safeguarding needs arise, you should be able to receive clinical support from the EAP provider through a dedicated and qualified/experienced clinical team. Affiliates need to feel confident in sharing and engaging with the clinical support available via their EAP. As I have highlighted, remember that your EAP may have additional context that can support you with safeguarding decision making, while you should also be able to work with autonomy, as an experienced professional.

For workplaces: It's unlikely that an EAP affiliate will have any direct contact with the client's employer, as this is typically managed by the EAP case manager and clinical teams. However, it is important to understand that workplaces will have collaborated with their EAP when contracting, and will also be revisiting clear protocols around safeguarding, confidentiality boundaries and information sharing.

The role of ethical consultation

The clinical support offered by your EAP provides you with an avenue to be supported and navigate circumstances when ethical issues arise (and you can be assured they will!). This is particularly important when managing potential conflicts of interest, such as being approached to work outside your EAP agreement, or extending sessions without authorisation, working outside of defined delivery model, or being approached for case notes by a third party. Your EAP provider(s) should have clear guidelines as to how these situations, and others, are managed and how they can support you.

Balancing competing principles

Workplace counselling ethics requires therapists to navigate situations where established principles may pull us in different directions, such as:

- Client autonomy versus employer accountability
- Individual confidentiality versus organisational safety concerns
- Short-term containment versus long-term therapeutic need
- The client's presenting issue versus what the employer considers the 'real' problem to be.

In the context of time-limited work, managing competing principles can become acute. Our role as an EAP affiliate is to support the client effectively within set session limits while maintaining ethical practice. We need to think about how to set clear expectations with the client at the outset about what support is available and what is possible. Therefore, we need to be comfortable with this and agree with our EAP's delivery models if we are accepting referrals. Affiliates are tasked with working with the client's needs while also operating within the remit of the EAP's delivery models – it's challenging work and it's also the reality of this most important work.

Ethical decision making

I think that EAP affiliates are among the most adept, flexible and widely experienced counsellors in the counselling industry – seeing a myriad of different needs, issues and experiences coming via EAP referrals. EAP affiliates make decisions with every client, and each decision is rooted in ethics, even when we are not consciously applying the language of 'ethics' to those decisions. For example, even choosing to accept a short-term referral is the starting point for an ethical decision. So, it's worth reminding ourselves of the ethical decisions and processes that we go through every day as an EAP therapist, including:

- How we engage collaboratively with our EAP, with our clients (where possible and appropriate)
- How we develop a clear rationale for decisions made in how we provide counselling interventions
- How we consider both internal factors (individual circumstances, contract, therapeutic context) and external factors (organisational requirements, legal obligations)
- How we document notes, interventions and treatment decisions, and how we are accountable for them
- How we choose the EAP we accept referrals from
- How we reflect on outcomes and learning from our practice, and how we might share these with our EAP.

Closing thoughts

Workplace counselling ethics is best understood not as a fixed set of rules but as a responsive, relational framework. It provides affiliates and workplace counsellors with the essential core principles and values to guide our practice, while allowing for contextual adaptation and professional judgment. Ultimately, it helps to create an environment of trust and safety where therapeutic work can occur effectively within the unique constraints and opportunities of the workplace setting, while maintaining the integrity of all stakeholders involved.

Of all the sectors in the counselling industry, EAP counsellors see a tremendously wide range of clients and needs, often working short-term and with incredible constraints. This means the considerations of ethics do require careful application and understanding by affiliates. I believe your work is crucial, important and that it directly impacts the wellbeing of our nation's workforce. And for this reason, I think all affiliates should expect timely and considered clinical support with any ethical dilemma they may face, and feel able to confidently reach out to their EAP, and find positive and useful support whenever they do. ●

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I'd like to know more about the ethical dilemmas you experience as a workplace counsellor and EAP affiliate. What is working well? What isn't working? What would you like to be different? You can email Nat via the editor, at: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

My workplace

Lucy Myers is a psychotherapist, executive coach, and the founder and CEO of the Therapeutic Coaching Consultancy, leading a team of specialists who work with individuals, teams and leaders in business. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about how she got here and the value of offering therapeutic coaching to organisations

Lucy Myers *is a senior practitioner executive coach (EMCC Accred), psychotherapist (BACP Reg), and certified systemic team coach and supervisor. She is also the former Chair of BACP's Coaching division, a trainer, published author, experienced conference speaker, and founder and CEO of the Therapeutic Coaching Consultancy.*
www.therapeuticcoachingconsultancy.co.uk

NB: Before becoming a psychotherapist, you worked in the media industry; how did this experience inform your interest in our psychological health at work?

LM: I was fortunate to work in a range of leadership roles for some major TV channels in the 'heyday' of TV during the early 2000s. It was a time of creative growth and financial investment, and it allowed me to experience all the highs and lows that go with climbing the corporate ladder. Working in high-pressure, competitive environments alongside big personalities, I saw inspirational leadership and empowering cultures, but sadly, I also experienced the impact of psychologically unsafe environments and how it was possible to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms just to 'keep going'. In hindsight, I realised that despite being a highly creative and outwardly diverse industry, the media is still steeped in structures of power and privilege, with senior leadership roles being disproportionately occupied by white, privately educated, middle-class men, and imposter syndrome can certainly thrive for those of us who don't fit the mould!

I became fascinated with what helps us to succeed and thrive in life, but also what makes us struggle emotionally or hit a psychological wall. I've since been on my own journey of self-awareness and self-compassion, and I know that with the right conditions and support, people really can reach their full potential, and I'm passionate about bringing all my lived experience into helping clients to do so.

NB: How did you make the transition out of one career and into another?

LM: Ultimately, it took a dramatic mindset shift and a good dose of luck! I was approaching 40, commuting into London five days a week for a director of programming role, and finding it harder to ignore a creeping sense of disconnection from my career, and feeling sad and guilty about the hours I was spending away from my young family. But, as the main breadwinner for my family, I felt trapped by the financial security, which is rarely a good place to be. Burnout might have beckoned, but thankfully, an opportunity to take voluntary redundancy gave me the push to make the leap and retrain as both an integrative psychotherapist and an executive coach. I should say, retraining in both at once is not generally recommended! But needs must, and it worked for me, and perhaps juggling both mindsets paved the way for what has followed.

The launch of my executive coaching private practice came first, and following the completion of my MA, I added integrative psychotherapy to my practice. The crucial journey towards integrating my skillsets and creating my therapeutic coaching approach was fuelled by my time as Chair of BACP's Coaching division. I was so inspired by working with colleagues who shared stories of the powerful impact of their therapeutic coaching work. It was this, combined with everything I was hearing from my clients about how and why they chose me, because I could bring both skillsets, that felt like the final piece in the puzzle.

NB: How do you explain therapeutic coaching to the layperson?

LM: I describe my therapeutic coaching approach as combining the solutions-focused energy, focus, and structure of executive coaching with the healing empowerment and psychological insight of

psychotherapy. It's rooted in my lived experience and belief that we all, as human beings, exist somewhere along the spectrum of 'wellbeing' across our lives, and that we may move up and down it from high functioning, flourishing resilience, through to emotionally distressed and overwhelmed.

I also believe it's possible to be in two places on the spectrum at the same time, outwardly smashing work goals and gaining promotions, while silently living with high stress and anxiety, or relying on unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol, drugs, overworking or excessive exercise, to maintain the illusion of 'coping' to the outside world. Using all my skills, experience and qualifications, I'm able to stay closely attuned to the client and their needs, flexibly drawing on counselling skills or coaching techniques, depending on what is most helpful from moment to moment and from session to session.

NB: I know you're an advocate for the benefits that therapeutic coaching can offer individuals at work; can you explain what they are and how this differs from a conventional workplace counselling offering?

LM: Of course, workplace counselling plays a huge role in supporting employees, and I would never say otherwise. But even the Employee Assistance Professionals Association UK, acknowledges that EAPs were never intended to be the whole solution. My peers and I believe the benefits of therapeutic coaching are multifaceted, and that the breadth and depth of our skillsets and experience mean that our services are more flexible, adaptable and accessible to the diverse needs of individual employees, teams and groups. The feedback we receive from our clients tells us that the organisational benefits are deeper and stronger than traditional coaching interventions, with the impact being more transformational and sustainable.

Sadly, while much progress has been made in trying to normalise mental health difficulties, the stigma remains and prevents many people from accessing the support they need. Two-thirds of people are reluctant to tell their employer that they are struggling for fear of this impacting their career progression.[1] Therapeutic coaching does not suffer from the same stigma and is generally perceived as positive, developmental and goal-oriented in nature, and so free from the fear of peer or employer judgment. This is particularly true for certain groups, for example, men are 'significantly more likely to access coaching than therapy,'[2] according to the British Psychological Society.

NB: What can you tell me about your business, the Therapeutic Coaching Consultancy (TCC)?

LM: Our team at TCC formally came together in 2023, after we felt compelled to provide a collaborative solution to the problems we were seeing in the workplace. Following the pandemic, my dual-qualified peers and I were finding ourselves increasingly in demand, both in private practice and in organisations. We kept exchanging stories about how more 'high-functioning' executive clients were living with distressing symptoms of anxiety, depression, compulsive behaviours and burnout. Those clients who'd had counselling and coaching separately often shared how they found our ability to navigate both realms far more impactful than previous experiences. As the anecdotal evidence stacked up, the media was also reporting a workplace mental health crisis, and we realised there was a problem that required a bigger solution than any of us working in silos could deliver – one that recognised the complexity and nuance of workplace challenges, and the limitations of what was currently available to most employees.

> 'We kept exchanging stories about how more "high-functioning" executive clients were living with distressing symptoms of anxiety, depression, compulsive behaviours and burnout'

I became convinced that joining together as a consultancy to provide affordable solutions suitable for all employees, that could provide support across the spectrum of high performance and mental wellbeing, could have a hugely positive impact on individual wellbeing **and** organisational success. Our mission was born: to deliver the powerful benefits of therapeutic coaching to a wide audience at an accessible price point, and to help people to flourish and thrive in all areas of their professional and personal lives.

Our current team of highly qualified, registered and accredited practitioners of psychotherapy and coaching integrate traditional executive coaching techniques and strengths-based assessments including person-centred, psychodynamic, somatic, existential, CBT, TA and Gestalt modalities. We also require our TCC associates to have corporate senior leadership experience in a wide range of industries and sectors. Above all, our team values are at the heart of what we do, and how we work with each other and our clients – including warmth, empathy, common sense and pragmatism, curiosity and collaboration, offering diverse and systemic perspectives, creativity and humour, and kindness. We believe that our combined skills and qualities give us the necessary psychological and corporate insights to understand what makes people struggle **and** succeed in the workplace.

NB: What types of organisations engage your services?

LM: The industries and sectors are wide and varied, but all the companies that have engaged with us have smart, forward-thinking leaders in HR, learning and development, EDI and wellbeing, who really have their fingers on the pulse of their organisations and what is going on for their people. They also have an interest in understanding 'best practice', and they've found us at mental health and wellbeing conferences, while

researching the approaches that will meet their complex people challenges. They also usually have a good understanding of what coaching and counselling services should look like, and the barriers that can prevent certain sections of the workforce from asking for help when they need it. This means they see the value of a coaching approach that can also safely hold any mental health concerns that might emerge.

NB: Typically, what are employers looking for and what do you provide?

LM: With budgets under pressure, companies are increasingly asking: How do we know our investment in wellbeing is really paying off? That's why our approach is designed with return on investment in mind. Our business philosophy is backed by research that shows the greatest return comes when support happens at every level – with individuals, specific teams and across the wider organisation.[3] Our services are designed to deliver value through the full spectrum of need: from prevention and early intervention, right through to restorative work that helps people re-engage and thrive. While the content of our coaching work is always confidential, we also take a systemic approach. That means involving stakeholders where appropriate in setting goals and reviewing progress – ensuring that outcomes align with both personal growth and organisational objectives.

When it comes to individual therapeutic coaching, it addresses themes – including developing authentic leadership, tackling imposter feelings, improving communication and influence, building confidence, managing stress and preventing burnout. Conflict resolution coaching provides focused support that helps people understand the emotions behind tension, learn how to process it healthily, and move forward with clarity and confidence. And, neurodiversity coaching is an area that is growing in demand, and neurodivergent employees benefit from tailored coaching that works with their unique strengths and challenges, alongside wider psychoeducational workshops for all employees.

NB: What are the current challenges that you are witnessing so far this year?

LM: We're seeing that workplaces are changing faster than ever due to new technology, global uncertainty and shifting workforce demographics. While the impact of such changes is often tangible, their emotional and relational impact can be harder to identify and often, more disruptive. We're consistently hearing that leaders are being challenged to keep people engaged, inspired and connected in times of constant, visible and invisible change. This often needs to go beyond just individuals who might either be obviously struggling or identified as 'top talent', and engage with all people right across the wider organisation.

> 'Therapeutic coaching does not suffer from the same stigma and is generally perceived as positive, developmental and goal-oriented in nature, and so free from the fear of peer or employer judgment'

NB: You're offering team coaching – can you tell me about how this works?

LM: Again, our team coaching services were created in response to what our organisations are asking us for. At the heart of our approach with teams and groups is a simple truth: change is both inevitable and emotional. We believe teams don't just need clear goals or performance feedback – they need safe, supported spaces to process what change brings up for them. We know that teams move along a spectrum of high performance and dysfunction, just as individuals do, and we're qualified to meet teams wherever they are on their journey.

Compared to traditional team coaching, our integrated approach makes a real difference in three key situations – high-performing teams facing major change; dysfunctional teams that need repair or realignment; and teams dealing with interpersonal tension or conflict. Clients often tell us that the depth of therapeutic coaching helps them reach levels of honesty, understanding and emotional regulation that traditional coaching doesn't always unlock. Our dual-qualified coaches bring psychological insight and practical tools, helping teams recognise how emotions, group dynamics and stress show up in their work – and transform them into positive action.

NB: Are there any myths about therapeutic coaching you'd like to bust?

LM: I was recently asked how I feel about non-psychotherapeutically qualified coaches describing their approach as 'therapeutic coaching', and whether it is problematic for the industry or for clients. I take the view that as long as practitioners describe their training and qualifications transparently and accurately, explaining how they equip them to work with particular challenges or difficulties, we need to trust one another, and also trust the client's agency to choose the support that's right for them. I think it's really important for us as a community of practitioners to work collaboratively and supportively with one another, and remember to keep the needs of our clients at the heart of what we do. Of course, working ethically and safely within our scope of competence is vital, and I agree that there is perhaps more work to be done to support a wider 'helping' industry that is evolving to meet the mental health needs we're facing – but I believe there is space for us all.

I worry that the focus on the 'label' of what we call ourselves can distract us from focusing on creating the best client outcomes, and, dare I say it, it is a bit navel-gazing. For me, the term 'therapeutic coaching' implies a seamless way of working that continually blends elements of both worlds, which I think most accurately describes the way I integrate my skills and experience in the service of each unique client.

At TCC, we often receive feedback from our corporate clients that 'therapeutic coaching' immediately makes sense because 'it does what it says on the tin'.

NB: What advice would you give to workplace therapists interested in integrating therapeutic coaching into their practice?

LM: In my view, before you integrate anything, the practitioner first needs to learn robust coaching skills, and experience the different 'lean in' energy, tools and techniques that coaching requires of us as practitioners. Integration of therapy and coaching into a holistic therapeutic coaching practice is then possible as an evolution of this. To do it well, it requires the development of your own theoretical, philosophical and practical foundations where you are supported by others who have also lived this journey. I recommend consulting BACP's Coaching Competence Framework[4] and the accompanying user guide, which is a comprehensive and helpful outline of the skills and competences needed to add coaching to your practice as a separate way of working. It also outlines the additional areas of complexity you need to consider before you start actively integrating all of your skillsets into one service and offering it to your clients.

There are so many training providers out there with different theoretical underpinnings delivered by companies with varied values and vibes, but I'd recommend that the best investment of your hard-earned cash will be a training that most closely maps the skills and confidence gaps you've identified for yourself, and which will most likely lead you to the work you want to do. I'd advise thinking about the kind of client groups you'd ideally want to work with, as this will provide an important training filter. And to help you think this through, I'd seek an experienced dual-qualified supervisor who transparently markets an integrated approach with their clients – they will be an invaluable source of support from both clinical and practical perspectives. I now really enjoy supporting my supervisees to identify their own unique way of combining their life skillsets, and launching their own therapeutic coaching practices with purpose, freedom and authenticity.

NB: What does it take to be a successful therapeutic coach?

LM: It's a great question – hard to answer! I was chatting with a group of therapeutic coaching colleagues recently, and I realised we all have something in common, and it's the sense that integration chooses **you**, rather than the other way round. And, by that I mean we would find it impossible not to bring all ourselves, and all of our training and experience, into supporting clients to overcome their personal challenges **and** achieve professional fulfilment. Perhaps it's a result of years of personal therapy during our initial training, which means we've fully integrated ourselves, and so 'splitting' our skillsets, to use a psychoanalytic term, would feel completely incongruent. And, maybe it's something else too; I think great therapeutic coaches have a certain energy and sense of joy for leaning into the client space with personal qualities that include curiosity, creativity, a tolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity, and openness to flexibly evolving to the unfolding client process. This flexibility needs to be supported by strong theoretical, ethical and practical foundations, which hold the frame for safe, contained, 'solutions-focused' work, in service of the goals the client has outlined for themselves. And, having regular supervision with an experienced integrated practitioner is an integral part of doing this well.

> 'With budgets under pressure, companies are increasingly asking: How do we know our investment in wellbeing is really paying off?'

NB: You've made a significant contribution to your profession, serving as Chair of BACP's Coaching division, speaking at national events and setting up a successful business. What's next?

LM: I'm in the final stages of editing a book with some incredible colleagues entitled: *Integrating Therapy and Coaching: expanding the compass of practice*, which will be published in the autumn of 2026. I'm also launching a series of training programmes in response to requests from our community for ethical, practical, and client-focused coaching that is therapeutically informed and integrated. I'm excited to see what 2026 brings, who I will meet and be inspired by next, and I'm feeling lucky to be a part of this world.

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Tell us about your workplace

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this interview or would like to talk to the editor about your workplace, we would like to hear from you. Please email Nicola Banning: **workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

Parental burnout at work

Occupational burnout is a familiar presenting issue for workplace therapists – but the less well-recognised concept of parental burnout is still a taboo and shrouded in stigma. **Rachel Stern** and **Cathy Sansom** explain what makes parental burnout distinct and why it's a workplace wellbeing challenge, with human and economic consequences

Cathy Sansom *holds a doctorate in psychotherapy from the Metanoia Institute (Middlesex University), is a BACP accredited counsellor, psychotherapist and supervisor, and an EMCC-accredited practitioner coach. Her business background includes over 30 years working in the banking and insurance industries, as a Fellow of the Chartered Association of Certified Accountants and with an Executive MBA from the London Business School.*

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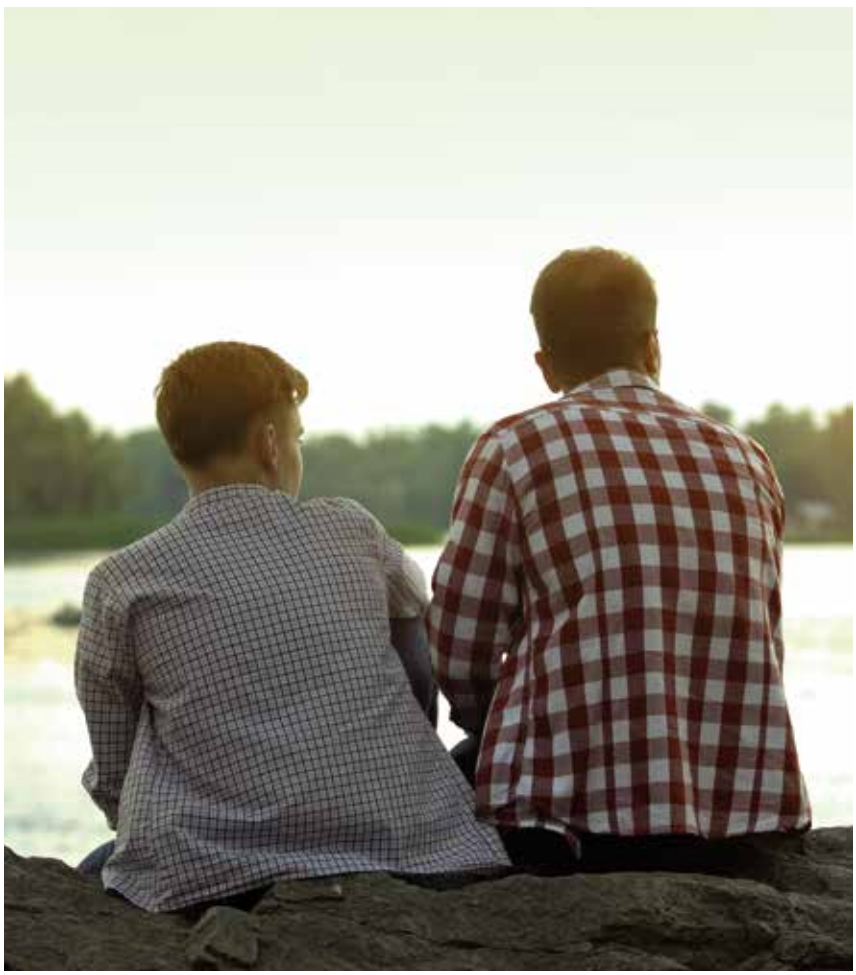
Rachel Stern *is a parent, a trustee of The Parent Village charity and a certified coach. She is trained in parental burnout diagnostic and treatment (Training Institute for Psychology & Health) and is on a mission to raise awareness of parental burnout, reduce the taboo, and support parents and their employers with prevention and recovery tools. As The Parental Burnout Coach, Rachel delivers corporate talks, manager training, and one-to-one coaching helping individuals and organisations.*

www.theparentalburnoutcoach.com



Parenting has always come with its challenges, but in the 21st century, the pressures on mothers, fathers and caregivers have reached unprecedented levels. Balancing the relentless demands of modern work with the expectations of 'perfect parenting' has created fertile ground for what researchers are now recognising as a distinct condition: parental burnout. Unlike workplace burnout, parental burnout is rooted in the specific demands of raising children – demands which, unlike a job, cannot simply be paused, delegated or walked away from. For organisations committed to workplace wellbeing, recognising and responding to parental burnout is both a moral and a commercial imperative.

This article explores what parental burnout is, how it differs from other conditions and its impact on the workplace, before considering what employers can do to support their workforce. We draw on our professional backgrounds in coaching, counselling and workplace wellbeing, as well as research, case studies and lived experience.

What is parental burnout?

The concept of parental burnout was first defined by psychologists Professor Isabelle Roskam and Professor Moïra Mikolajczak at the University of Louvain in Belgium, and they developed the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) in 2018.[1] It is distinct from everyday parental stress, and their research identifies three core dimensions that make it so:

1. Overwhelming exhaustion linked specifically to the parenting role.
2. Emotional distancing from children.
3. A sense of ineffectiveness or loss of fulfilment in parenting.

While stress fluctuates with circumstances and can be relieved with rest, burnout represents a chronic and entrenched state that undermines wellbeing, relationships and functioning. At the core of parental burnout, there is a chronic imbalance: between demands (factors that increase stress) and the resources you have to deal with those demands; between parenting ideals and expectations and the reality of parenting; and finally, an imbalance or conflict in a parent's identity or sense of self.

Of course, every parental burnout journey is different and the factors that contribute to this imbalance (the demands and resources) will be different for different people. However, some parents are at greater risk of experiencing parental burnout, and it's relevant for therapists to be aware

that it's more prevalent in those with perfectionist tendencies[2] or caregiver personality types.

Why is it on the rise?

Unsurprisingly, there's no single reason for the increase in parental burnout and it's thought that several factors in modern Western society seem to be fuelling it, including: changing gender roles, the 'always on' culture, individualistic societies and economic pressures.

Dual-career households often mean both parents are juggling professional and domestic pressures simultaneously. Compared to past generations, women are subject to societal (and internalised expectations) that they can have and/or do it all. According to the Office for National Statistics, three in four mothers with dependent children (75.6%) are in work in the UK, reaching its highest level in the equivalent quarter over the last 20 years.[3]

Belinda Jane Batt, author of *Challenge Your Guilt: how to flourish in motherhood, work and life*, says: 'What I see with my coaching clients is that guilt is a key contributor to parental burnout. Nowhere is this more evident than the lived experience of working parents, as they are desperately trying to meet society's impossible standards at home and in the workplace – trying not to drop balls in either sphere, but inevitably doing so (and often burning out as a result of trying so hard).'

At the same time, men are more involved in caregiving than ever (87% of fathers are involved in day-to-day childcare responsibilities),[4] making them ever more susceptible to also experiencing parental burnout. Father of two, John Stacey, a marketing manager and mental health advocate, explains how he felt after the birth of his second child: 'I felt very trapped, that I had no option and time to do anything for me and my health, as the only way I could feel helpful was to help with our eldest while my wife dealt with our youngest. I rarely felt the love or connection in the early months.'

We live in a digital world and an 'always on' culture where social media platforms can exacerbate unrealistic expectations, promoting a notion of 'perfect parenting' that increases guilt and comparison. Studies show parental burnout is more common in individualistic cultures like the UK, where parents feel pressure to be 'perfect' while raising children largely without extended family or community support, creating a gap between expectations and available help that leads to exhaustion.[5] Rising childcare costs, stagnant wages and the cost-of-living crisis intensify the strain on parents who may already feel stretched to breaking point.

How does parental burnout present?

Burnout doesn't happen immediately. It's a gradual process that builds over time. Signs and symptoms can be subtle at first but the longer they go unaddressed, the worse they can become, which can lead to a breakdown. However, parents who are suffering may often not recognise burnout in themselves and/or could be experiencing feelings of guilt, shame or fear of judgment that limits their ability to speak up or ask for help.

'...men are more involved in caregiving than ever (87% of fathers are involved in day-to-day childcare responsibilities),[4] making them ever more susceptible to also experiencing parental burnout'

From an employer's perspective, parental burnout may manifest as:

- Increased absenteeism or presenteeism
- Reduced concentration and productivity
- Emotional volatility or withdrawal
- Masking: employees may overcompensate at work, hiding struggles at home, making the problem harder to detect.

The invisible nature of parental burnout means it is often misinterpreted as disengagement, poor time management or lack of ambition. For some parents, work offers a sense of distraction from home life, although over-investing in work comes with its own risks. Ella Hutchings, mum of two and now a life-balance and career coach says: 'Work gave me a place I felt I could escape, finish a cup of tea but also be listened to, have some control over what I did when, and a sense of purpose that I couldn't quite get to grips with at home. Later, that then turned into burnout at work as I ploughed too much into it.'

Anecdotal feedback from parents with lived experience, and the professionals who support them, agree that it is difficult to compartmentalise, and the lines are blurred. Even where being a parent is a primary driver of reaching burnout, the concept of being overextended and overwhelmed is compounded by all areas of their life and the strain of balancing competing demands. The 2025 Working Families Index[6] found that almost half (46%) of parents reported finding it hard to maintain boundaries between work and home life. One mum of two and a programme manager explains: 'What makes burnout harder is that it doesn't stay in one box. It isn't "just" parental burnout or "just" workplace burnout. It seeps into everything. There are days I feel trapped – in the routines, in the responsibilities, in the feeling that no matter what I do, it's never enough. Even the things that are supposed to help, like work, can sometimes make it worse, because instead of being an escape, it becomes another place where I feel like I'm not measuring up.'

Therefore, managers, health professionals and workplace therapists all need awareness to be able to see beyond the surface.

The business cost

Beyond the human impact, there is a compelling business case for addressing parental burnout.

Parents are not a minority, and according to the ONS, there will be seven million new parents in the UK between now and 2033, and 74% of families in the UK require two working parents to survive. Being a family-friendly employer is key for talent attraction and retention, with 93% of working mums and dads saying that when considering a prospective employer, being family-friendly is an important factor.[7]

The Royal Foundation's Centre for Early Childhood estimates that inadequate support for working parents costs the UK economy a staggering £17.2bn annually in lost productivity, retention and participation.[8] And one source cites that 40% of parents have considered leaving their job because they couldn't handle their work and parenting responsibilities.[9] That's why Joanne Waterworth, Head of Employer Services at Working Families, believes that 'cultivating the right kind of culture, where the demands of family life are understood and appreciated, is critical to creating environments where parents and carers can thrive and, crucially, for attracting new talent.'[10]

A movement to build world-class employers of working parents is led by Jessica Heagren, the founder of Careers After Babies, who is working in collaboration with other experts in the space and partnering with employers. She has defined seven success themes across three pillars (policy, process and practice) to provide a framework for the Careers After Babies accreditation programme, to assess and guide organisations aiming to become genuinely supportive employers of working parents. Building and embedding these into the workplace is key, both in terms of prevention and recovery from parental burnout.

1 Equitable and family-friendly policies
Offering fair, inclusive policies that support all parents and carers, covering: maternity, paternity, adoption, shared parental leave, and related benefits around caring for dependants.

2 Flexible working environment
Flexibility is the number-one need of parents. Seventy-three per cent of parents said working flexibly has increased their loyalty to their current employer.[6] Offering hybrid or flexible working arrangements that genuinely reduce stress, to help parents balance work and family demands.

3 Consistent nurture and support
Offering support that spans the whole parenting journey from pre-pregnancy through to parenting older children, and even becoming an empty-nester parent. This should be delivered consistently across the organisation, not just for the first six months after an employee's return from parental leave.

'Studies show parental burnout is more common in individualistic cultures like the UK, where parents feel pressure to be "perfect" while raising children largely without extended family or community support'

4 Empathetic and inclusive line management
While policies and values at the top-level matter, it's line managers who bring these commitments to life. Training managers to understand parental pressures, demonstrate empathy, and actively support employees returning or juggling parenting will help to create a culture of psychological safety, so parents feel comfortable discussing challenges without fear of judgment.

5 Parenting is valued
Building an organisational culture that recognises, respects and celebrates parenting, such as scheduling all staff events with school holidays in mind.

6 Role models parenting loudly
Ensuring leaders, especially men, serve as role models – parenting loudly and showing that career progression and active parenting can coexist.

7 Parents are progressing
Fostering career growth through ongoing career development conversations, recognising the new skills gained through parenting, and ensuring that parents continue to be promoted and included in talent and succession plans.

As a society, there is still a way to go when it comes to the prevalence of truly family-friendly workplaces. Research by Deloitte found that only 26% of parents feel the support provided by their employer is adequate for themselves and their children.[9] However, according to Jessica Heagren, there are positive signs that employers are recognising the importance of supporting their working parents but, 'there are still only a handful who have really embedded the practices right across the business and have the data to evidence the return on investment. That's the next stage we need to see.'

Best practice for employers

Westminster Students' Union (WSU) is the first organisation to be formally certified by Careers After Babies and demonstrates how a small, service-based organisation can strongly support working parents by offering flexibility as the norm (including a summer four-day working week between June and August), cultivating an open, transparent, nurturing and empathetic culture by having senior leaders who 'parent loudly', providing line management training and toolkits, maintaining career-progression conversations for parents, and providing consistent support before, during and after parental leave. WSU is the only Students' Union in the country to score a 100% positive employee engagement score in the NUS Employee Engagement Survey and has recently achieved Gold Investors in People.

In addition to these success themes, Rachel Stern (author) has seen first-hand the positive impact of fostering peer connection among parents through building family, parent and carer networks, or employee resource groups that provide safe spaces to share experiences and reduce isolation.

A good example of this is BNP Paribas' award-winning Parents & Carers Network,[10] offering peer connection, practical workshops and influence on HR policy. It sits within its broader diversity and inclusivity framework, ensuring parental needs are considered at senior levels, and demonstrating that employee-led networks can combine grassroots support with top-level policy change.

When employers are aware that parenting is a 24/7 role with no off-switch, they may be able to provide a space for an employee with parental burnout to recover, as even if work isn't the source of parental burnout, time away from work can be part of the solution. Considering offering career breaks, reduced workloads or sabbaticals, as well as recognising that sometimes stepping back is necessary for long-term sustainability, can all be helpful.

Finally, employers can invest in targeted support, including EAPs offering counselling tailored to parents (including couples counselling where relationship strain is a factor) and coaching, to help parents maintain professional identity and boundaries. Counselling provides therapeutic support to process emotions, heal from trauma and address relational challenges, and it can be particularly effective when burnout is at a crisis point or is presenting alongside anxiety, depression or relational breakdown. Coaching is future-focused, goal-oriented and structured, and it can help parents set boundaries, challenge perfectionist standards and maintain their professional identity. It's especially useful for those at risk of burnout or navigating transitions (e.g. return from parental leave) rather than those in crisis. And, couples counselling can help to address the relational dimension, where parental burnout has ripple effects on partnerships.

These modalities can work in tandem, often sequentially, and some practitioners are trained in more than one, offering a flexible approach. For parents in burnout, this blended support can be particularly powerful: addressing both emotional depletion and the desire to reimagine future possibilities.

Conclusion

Parental burnout is not a fringe issue: it is a workplace wellbeing challenge with real human and economic consequences. Yet, with awareness, empathy and proactive support, employers can play a powerful role in helping parents not just survive, but thrive. Workplace therapists have an important role to play in shedding light on this issue, as by breaking the silence and fostering environments where parents feel safe, supported and valued, employers can unlock the full potential of their people, both at work and at home. ●

> 'Research by Deloitte found that only 26% of parents feel the support provided by their employer is adequate for themselves and their children'[9]

Resources

Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA):
https://en.burnoutparental.com/test-pba-en

Centre for Parental Burnout Research (UCLouvain):
www.burnoutparental.com

Working Families UK:
www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Careers After Babies:
www.careersafterbabies.org

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Shaping the future of work

What are the opportunities for counsellors in the evolving world of workplace wellbeing? **Kris Ambler**, BACP's Workforce Lead, shares positive news of the different projects he's been involved with on behalf of BACP members

The last 12 months have seen extraordinary momentum in workplace wellbeing. Across government, business and civil society, there's growing recognition that mental health isn't just a moral concern – it's a central pillar of economic growth and workforce sustainability.

At BACP, this has been a year of shaping, influencing and connecting – ensuring that counselling and psychotherapy are seen as essential to a healthier, more productive world of work. From welfare reform to rural mental health, from employer engagement to AI and research, the work we've done is helping to build new opportunities for our members, while strengthening the case for psychological therapies as a national workforce priority.

Policy and reform: putting therapy at the heart of work and welfare

A major strand of my work has been to ensure workplace counselling is more clearly embedded within the UK Government's evolving employment and welfare reforms. The *Pathways to Work: reforming benefits and support to get Britain working* Green Paper,[1] alongside Sir Charlie Mayfield's *Keep Britain Working Review*,[2] signals a policy environment increasingly focused on health and work, and one that values prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation.

Through BACP's consultation submissions and meetings with policy makers, we've made a clear argument: if the Government wants to reduce long-term sickness absence and get people back into sustainable employment, counselling and psychotherapy must be part of the solution. Our evidence is drawn from a range of sources, including two of BACP's reports, *Bridging the Gaps*[3] and *Understanding the Cost of Living Crisis*,[4] as well as the Public Perceptions Survey,[5] which demonstrate that timely access to therapy not only improves wellbeing but can also yield strong economic returns through reduced absence, improved retention and enhanced productivity.

This work directly connects to the national WorkWell pilots, new integrated health and employment schemes being tested across England, which are designed to help people with long-term health conditions stay in or return to work by joining up occupational health, mental health and employment support services. Mapping these pilots, we've identified multiple entry points for members – from primary care partnerships to community employment schemes. These initiatives will, over time, create new employment routes for counsellors, expanding their presence across public, private and voluntary sectors.

A health creation approach to workplace sickness

In March last year, I presented at the Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference in Birmingham, one of the largest conferences of its kind in the UK. My session, 'A health creation approach to tackling workplace sickness absence', explored how counselling, psychotherapy and therapeutic coaching can help employers move beyond reactively managing illness to actively creating healthier lives within the workplace.

Drawing on data showing that UK sickness absence has reached its highest level in over a decade, I argued that the current policy focus on occupational health reforms and changes to the fit note misses a crucial opportunity. Rather than concentrating solely on sickness management, we need to create the conditions for wellbeing to thrive, embedding health creation within organisational culture and policy.

The message resonated strongly: prevention, not reaction, is where the true value lies. For counsellors and psychotherapists, this shift presents a growing opportunity to work with employers as partners in system-level wellbeing, helping to design healthier workplaces, not just respond to unhealthy ones.

Creating access and equity through rural mental health

Equally significant this year has been the development of a bold, UK-wide programme aimed at improving access to psychological therapies in rural and remote communities. Working with BACP's organisational member Red Umbrella and Care Coins, as well as stakeholders, we've built on the success of an

existing rural counselling service to create a scalable model of outreach and support for those living and working in farming communities across the UK.

The model blends face-to-face counselling with innovative outreach and digital access, targeting communities where stigma, isolation and geography have too often stood in the way of help. As the project progresses, it will generate new paid roles for BACP members and offer the opportunity to support vulnerable people in rural and remote communities.

Employer engagement

Employers continue to face complex challenges, from exposure to trauma and burnout, to workplace bullying and cultural toxicity. This year, much of my focus has been on strengthening engagement with employers and employee assistance programme (EAP) providers to raise standards, rebuild trust and champion best practice.

BACP's ongoing dialogue with several EAP providers has centred on improving quality, transparency, and the relationship between affiliate therapists and providers. This work, coupled with our involvement in discussions on trauma-informed practice and post-incident support, is positioning counsellors as key partners in organisational resilience and recovery.

The 'trauma pandemic' remains one of the defining features of the modern workplace, and it demands both skill and sensitivity from practitioners. Counsellors who can bridge the clinical and organisational worlds are increasingly sought after, and BACP's policy work is ensuring that their expertise is recognised and valued.

Evidence and impact: the BACP International Research Conference

In May 2025, I joined a policy panel at the 31st Annual BACP International Research Conference, held in Manchester, which included BACP's Chair, Professor Lynne Gabriel OBE; Dr Wolfgang Seidl, a partner at Mercer; Jo Yarker, Professor in Occupational Psychology at Birkbeck; and Miriam Mintz of Able Futures. Our session, 'Improving the evidence base for investment in workplace psychological therapies: maximising impact through collaboration', brought together leaders from research, policy and practice to discuss how we can build the data and develop partnerships that are needed to strengthen the case for workplace counselling.

The discussion explored how improved data collection, shared outcome measures and collaborative research can transform understanding of therapy's impact – not just on individual wellbeing, but on organisational and economic performance. The breadth of experience on the panel also reflected the collaborative ethos now driving BACP's approach, with research, policy and practice working hand in hand to influence national decision making. It was particularly encouraging to see so many delegates – practitioners, academics and employers eager to engage with the challenge of building a stronger evidence base for our profession.

Innovation and collaboration

Looking ahead, much of my ongoing work is focused on collaboration and innovation. I continue to work with the Council for Work and Health, contributing to cross-sector discussions that inform government policy on workforce wellbeing and occupational health integration. Alongside this, I have supported Affinity Health at Work, an occupational health psychology consultancy and research organisation that specialises in improving employee health, wellbeing and leadership, as a steering group member for two major research projects. These include Project OSCAR, a UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) funded initiative that aims to provide evidence to inform policy and guidance on preventing and reducing work-related stress, and a project to create a Wellbeing Framework for the UK, designed to help employers structure and evaluate their health and wellbeing strategies.

> 'BACP's ongoing dialogue with several EAP providers has centred on improving quality, transparency, and the relationship between affiliate therapists and providers'

These initiatives demonstrate a growing appetite across research, business and policy to move beyond rhetoric toward actionable frameworks – evidence that can help drive investment in counselling and embed it more prominently within organisational systems.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and the future of workplace wellbeing

In February, I spoke at the CIPD Wellbeing at Work Conference in London, as part of a knowledge exchange panel alongside Dhavani Bishop, Matt Hatcher, and Rachel Suff from CIPD. Our session explored, 'Strategies to elevate wellbeing throughout the employee lifecycle' including how AI is beginning to shape the future of workplace wellbeing. I emphasised that AI, while powerful, can never replace the human connection at the heart of counselling. Instead, it should be harnessed to enhance access, support reflective practice and inform better decision making – helping counsellors and employers alike to create environments that are both data-informed and deeply human.

Looking ahead: opportunity, alignment and growth

Taken together, this year's work has been about alignment – connecting research, policy and practice in ways that create tangible opportunities for members. From influencing national welfare reform and expanding rural access, to strengthening employer relationships and advancing evidence through research and innovation, the trajectory is clear: workplace counselling is moving from the margins to the mainstream.

In the coming year, BACP will continue to champion this agenda – advocating for a more preventive, inclusive and evidence-informed approach to workforce wellbeing. For counsellors and psychotherapists, the opportunities are expanding across every sector and geography. The challenge, and the invitation, is to step confidently into these spaces as practitioners, partners and pioneers in creating the healthier world of work that the UK so urgently needs. ●

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Title: *Alcohol at Work: tackling workplace drinking to improve wellbeing*
Author: Lauren Booker
Published by: CRC Press

Lauren Booker *has worked for over 20 years in the alcohol sector, and specialises in supporting organisations to reduce alcohol-related harm and promote employee wellbeing. She also regularly advises firms on the development and implementation of effective policies and practices around alcohol. She is a qualified alcohol recovery practitioner and has extensive experience as an alcohol counsellor and coach. Lauren is also one of the founders of the Dry January movement and author of* Try Dry: your official guide to a month off booze.

Books

Alcohol consumption can have a major impact on the workplace. Lost productivity alone costs the UK economy more than £7 billion annually, and the impact of alcohol abuse on the employee and those around them is a wellbeing issue that all employers need to be alert to. **Lauren Booker** is the author of a new book *Alcohol at Work: tackling workplace drinking to improve wellbeing* and she talks to **Nicola Banning** about why everyone needs to think differently about alcohol

NB: Congratulations on your book. How prevalent is drinking alcohol among the UK workforce?
LB: It's more common than you might think. A recent report published by the Institute for Public Policy and Research[1] identifies that almost a quarter of UK adults drink at levels that put them at risk of harm. This harm can extend into the workplace, with 35% of survey respondents believing that workplace drinking increased the risks of harmful behaviour, and more than one in five linked alcohol use to workplace sexual harassment, bullying or intimidation. And, according to the Office for National Statistics,[2] over half of workplace violence involves alcohol, too. People in employment are more likely to drink regularly than those who are economically inactive, so alcohol can have a profound impact on the workforce in terms of absenteeism, performance and wellbeing.

NB: Are there any myths about drinking alcohol in the workplace that you'd like to dispel?
LB: Yes, there are many. Firstly, employers often think that it is none of their business if their staff drink outside work, that it won't impact the workplace or that it is prying to intervene, but excessive alcohol use is a wellbeing issue, just like any other – employers are perfectly situated to offer support for anyone wishing to change their relationship with alcohol – by running a workplace Dry January campaign, for example, or holding awareness-raising events. Some organisations think that drinking is necessary as a team-bonding exercise or a way to unwind in a stressful work environment. This has been very prevalent in the Armed Forces, for example, but research shows that a pro-alcohol work environment increases the risk of alcohol problems among employees. What's more, there's a belief that it's only presenteeism and absenteeism caused by drinking that affect the workplace, but poor mental and physical health, strained relationships and accidents all contribute to the more than £7 billion cost to UK commerce and industry.

Contrary to popular belief, white-collar employees are more likely to regularly drink to excess than those in manual or unskilled positions. But alcohol problems can affect anyone, from any walk of life; no one is immune.

NB: What can you tell our readers about the professions that are most at risk from alcohol-related mortality?
LB: Unsurprisingly, workers in the hospitality industry head the list of those most at risk, followed by seafarers and labourers, with the clergy and farmers coming at the bottom. What's interesting is the disparity of heavy drinking by occupation – managers, directors and senior officials are most likely to engage in heavy drinking, then machine operatives and skilled trades, while professional and customer service occupations see the lowest levels of excessive consumption. There's also plenty of research to suggest that working away from home for long periods, shift work or unsociable hours, and working in dangerous or uncomfortable physical environments are also risk factors.

NB: And why is this the case?

LB: A pro-alcohol culture and being around alcohol as part of the job will increase vulnerability to daily and excessive drinking, so for bar workers, publicans and servers, the risks are clear. Among managers, participation in corporate hospitality, a stressful work environment and high disposable income are key factors in the development of alcohol problems. In situations where alcohol use is normalised, it can be hard to recognise when drinking becomes a problem, so information and awareness of alcohol-related risk can help to redress the balance.

NB: There's a chapter in your book about developing an alcohol policy and what best practice looks like for employers. What role do you think EAPs or in-house counselling and psychological support services should have in creating such a policy?

LB: These services are vital. They bring clinical and behavioural expertise that enables the organisation to audit existing problems so that the policy can be tailored to employee needs. They also help to shift the focus from a purely disciplinary or compliance-based response to a supportive, compassionate ethos. Counselling services can also advise on referral procedures and confidential support routes. As over 60% of employees cite workplace stress as a reason for drinking, EAPs have a central role in helping employees develop more positive coping strategies.

Alcohol issues don't happen in a vacuum – volatile relationships, unresolved trauma and emotional overwhelm all contribute, so psychological services are essential to support employees who are struggling with alcohol. And, let's not forget that around one in three UK adults is affected by a loved one's drinking, so EAPs and counsellors can be helpful to staff who are caring for someone close to them whose drinking is problematic.

NB: You write about how employers can support staff with their treatment and recovery from alcohol abuse, including their obligations under the Equality Act 2010. Can you explain what these obligations are?

LB: Alcohol dependence is not considered to be a disability under the Act, but any physical or mental impairment **caused** by an alcohol use disorder **is** covered by the Act. If an employee's alcohol use has caused or is linked to, for example, liver disease, depression or anxiety, a stomach ulcer or psychosis, then that condition is deemed to be covered by the Act. In these cases, the employer has a duty not to discriminate against the employee, to make reasonable workplace adjustments and ensure fair treatment in performance management or disciplinary procedures. Employers are also obliged to safeguard employee wellbeing, including offering support such as signposting to EAPs.

NB: Which staff should be involved or help to form a group to tackle harm from alcohol and improve wellbeing in the workplace?

LB: Tackling alcohol harm starts at the top. If the senior leadership team is committed to an alcohol-safe workplace, then employees will follow their lead. That said, employee resources groups, occupational health, human resources, counsellors and anyone involved in workplace wellbeing can make a valuable contribution. Several campaigns exist in the wellbeing calendar which can be harnessed to promote moderation or awareness messages, such as Mental Health Awareness Week and National Menopause Month – alcohol harm comes in many forms, so wellbeing initiatives can include alcohol throughout the year.

'I know it can be daunting to talk to colleagues about their alcohol use, but it's important to tackle the issue early'

NB: If a therapist or health professional was concerned about alcohol in the workplace and the effect on employee wellbeing, what first steps would you suggest they might take?

LB: It's important to clarify whether the concern is about an individual employee or the wider impact of the organisation's alcohol culture. If the problem is widespread, health professionals should first document any worrying patterns, such as frequent absenteeism, interpersonal conflict or widespread hangovers, and try to determine what the underlying causes might be. Job insecurity, seasonal increases in workload or changes in management structure can all contribute to increased alcohol use as a coping strategy or for stress relief. Alternatively, social drinking norms and pressure to drink at events may be the problem. In either case, it's appropriate to raise this issue with management without breaching personal confidentiality.

If a problem is identified with an individual employee, such as significant distress or impaired performance, the professional must not share identifiable information without consent unless, of course, there is a serious and imminent risk to safety – for example, if the employee is intoxicated at work. Although there may be a work-related trigger for an alcohol problem, excessive and problematic drinking may be completely unrelated to employment and rooted in difficulties at home or mental health problems. Encouraging the employee to seek additional help where necessary and supporting them through the process increase the chances of better outcomes. Across the UK, there are statutory and voluntary sector services that help people recover from alcohol use disorders, so in-house services can provide a vital conduit to support in the community and can oversee the process of reintegrating the employee into the workplace.

I know it can be daunting to talk to colleagues about their alcohol use, but it's important to tackle the issue early. Alcohol dependence is a chronically relapsing condition, so responding promptly can prevent further harm. A good alcohol policy should outline the process for confidential reporting and what help is available, and this should guide professionals in their response.

NB: What additional help could in-house counsellors or EAPs signpost employees to?

LB: Most people who have an alcohol use disorder will benefit from CBT-based support or other talking therapies, which may be delivered in-house. If there is a more entrenched or severe addiction, particularly where the employee is physically dependent on alcohol and experiences withdrawal symptoms, a medical detox under controlled conditions, preceded and followed by psychological support, is the best option. Rarely, inpatient rehabilitation will be recommended. Peer support organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and SMART Recovery can also be beneficial. Employees should be encouraged to try different approaches, as there's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to recovery – but a therapist can certainly be instrumental in helping their client to explore and evaluate different options. ●

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Q&A

Do you have a query or issue about your work that you'd like some help with? Please email the editor: **workplace editor@bacp.co.uk**

My client recently received a late diagnosis of autism and is at risk of burning out from excessive people-pleasing at work. How can I best support her to hold her boundaries?

I'm an EAP therapist supporting a woman in her late-30s who recently learned she is autistic. She describes years of overworking, masking and trying to please everyone at work to avoid conflict or disappointing others. Since her diagnosis, she's begun to recognise how often she suppresses her own needs. However, attempts to assert boundaries leave her feeling guilty and fearful of being seen as 'difficult'. She's exhausted, tearful and unsure how to change long-established habits without jeopardising her job or relationships. How can I help?

Dr Cloie Parfitt *is a former registered nurse and integrative humanistic therapist, specialising in working with neurodivergent young people and adults. Alongside her psychotherapy practice, Cloie works as a consultant and professional trainer within schools and other organisations to promote the inclusion and emotional wellbeing of neurodivergent individuals.*
www.diversemindstherapy.org

Cloie Parfitt responds:

Your client's experience will resonate with many therapists. Late-identified autistic adults, particularly women, often come to therapy depleted after years of masking, overextending and striving to meet the expectations of others. These patterns are not fixed aspects of personality but deeply ingrained survival strategies, shaped by long histories of invalidation and by social environments that reward compliance over authenticity.

Understanding the roots of people-pleasing

In trauma literature, extreme people-pleasing is known as the 'fawn response,'[1,2] a form of self-protection developed when asserting needs previously felt unsafe. Autistic girls are often socialised to be 'good', agreeable and accommodating. These gendered expectations, combined with being misinterpreted or dismissed in childhood, can leave lasting marks. This pattern, reinforced by systemic sexism and ableism, sets the stage for over-compliance at work.[3]

People-pleasing also appears to have a sensory and relational dimension for many autistic individuals. In conversation with the autism expert, Professor Tony Attwood, for my doctorate, he explained how some autistic women are extraordinarily sensitive to others' negative moods and experience them almost viscerally. They may rush to repair tension, not out of manipulation, but because others' distress feels intolerable to their nervous system. This heightened empathy can make boundary-setting emotionally fraught.[4]

From self-abandonment to self-respect

In therapy, the work is not simply about teaching assertiveness but about understanding why saying 'no' feels unsafe. Before any practical shifts can take root, there must be a foundation of emotional safety and self-connection. You could invite gentle exploration of the origins of people-pleasing, such as: 'When did you first learn that agreeing felt safer than being yourself?' Recognising these patterns as protective adaptations rather than faults can help clients to reframe self-protection as wisdom that once ensured survival.

From this place of compassion, clients can begin to notice moments when they honour their own needs – taking a pause, asking for clarity or expressing a preference – and notice how these small acts of self-respect feel in the body. Each moment of self-attunement gently rewrites old relational templates, showing the nervous system that authenticity and safety can coexist.

The autistic nervous system

Autistic burnout is not only emotional but also physiological. It often develops after years of masking, overextending and striving to meet others' expectations at the expense of personal needs. Many autistic adults describe a gradual

depletion of energy and capacity following prolonged social effort, sensory overload and internalised pressure to perform or please.[5]

From a neurobiological perspective, autistic brains tend to retain more synaptic connections than non-autistic brains, a difference linked to reduced 'synaptic pruning' in early development. In a world not designed for that level of sensitivity, cumulative overload can tip into exhaustion and shutdown.

You could encourage your client to notice the early signs of autistic burnout – headaches, emotional flatness, sensory overwhelm or mental fog – and to view rest and recovery as essential boundaries rather than indulgences. Supporting clients to attune to their energy levels and capacity for stimulation can also help prevent relapse into the cycle of people-pleasing and overcommitment that so often precedes burnout.

Self-advocacy in the workplace

EAP therapists often hold both an emotional and a practical role. Supporting your client to translate insight into workplace advocacy is crucial, particularly if chronic people-pleasing has left her unsure how to ask for what she needs. You might begin by exploring whether her organisation offers reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.[6] Adjustments might include quieter workspaces, written rather than verbal communication, or flexible hours to manage sensory and cognitive load. As before, remind her that adjustments are not 'special treatment' but a legal right to equitable working conditions.[7]

Practical tools such as the Health Adjustment Passport[8] can help her clarify her needs in writing and communicate them confidently. Some autistic clients find it easier to express themselves through email rather than face-to-face meetings, which is worth validating and normalising.

Inviting your client to notice the stories that arise when she begins to assert herself – thoughts such as 'I'm being selfish' or 'They'll think I'm lazy' – are not personality flaws but echoes of systemic messages equating worth with productivity. Gently reframing boundaries as expressions of integrity rather than acts of rebellion can be deeply healing. Each time a client honours her own limits, she reinforces the felt sense that authenticity and safety can coexist.

Broader systemic factors

While your client's experience is distinctly autistic, people-pleasing and burnout also intersect with race, gender, class, and other axes of marginalisation. For example, racialised employees may face additional scrutiny when asserting needs, and women, autistic or not, are often penalised for boundary-setting behaviour that is celebrated in men. Recognising these structural dynamics prevents pathologising individuals for systemic inequalities.

When clients are part of multiple marginalised groups, therapy must hold space for both personal history and the wider context. As BACP's Workplace Counselling Competence Framework reminds us, our role includes understanding organisational systems and advocating for equity as well as empathy.[9]

Therapeutic tools and approaches

Therapy can also offer a range of gentle, creative ways to support clients in loosening patterns of people-pleasing and self-abandonment. For some, exploring the younger parts of self who learned to stay quiet or accommodating can bring profound compassion. These parts often carry memories of being misunderstood, punished or dismissed when expressing needs. Through parts work or inner-child dialogue, clients can begin to meet these younger selves with warmth and validation, acknowledging that their people-pleasing once served a vital purpose: to keep them connected, safe or loved. Over time, this process can soften self-criticism and nurture a more integrated sense of self, where care for others no longer requires self-abandonment.

> 'Beneath each act of over-giving is a history of unmet needs'

Therapy can help support clients in reconnecting with their values, helping them to move from a life shaped by external expectations towards one that feels internally guided. Inviting reflection on questions such as, 'What truly matters to me?' or 'What do I want to put my energy into?' might help your client reorient herself away from obligation towards authenticity. This shift can become a compass for decision making, fostering a greater sense of integrity and self-trust.

Finally, connecting with the community can be deeply reparative. Whether through peer groups, online communities or social networks grounded in shared understanding, these connections reinforce the message that their needs and ways of being are valid. In spaces where reciprocity replaces performance, clients can experience belonging without self-erasure, a vital step towards healing from both trauma and chronic people-pleasing.

Boundaries within EAP work

Working as an EAP affiliate, time is often limited, so consider how to make early sessions both validating and practical. Even brief interventions can plant seeds of self-understanding and empowerment. Providing psychoeducational handouts, recommending peer-support networks or offering a brief letter to HR, can all extend support beyond the counselling room.

It can also help to acknowledge the tension between organisational pace and the client's need for gradual change. Encourage self-compassion: it takes time to unlearn decades of self-silencing. Our role is to hold that process gently, reminding clients that recovery from people-pleasing is not rebellion but reclamation.

Supporting autistic and other neurodivergent employees who struggle with boundaries requires more than assertiveness training. It calls for trauma awareness, cultural humility and systemic understanding. Beneath each act of over-giving is a history of unmet needs. When therapy helps clients reconnect to their own signals – to know when to rest, to say 'no', to ask for help – they begin not only to prevent burnout but reclaim agency and dignity in a world that has too often required their silence. ●

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