

Burnout: Prevention & Treatment

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What is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Burnout reduces productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life—including your home, work, and social life. Burnout can also cause long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses like colds and flu. Because of its many consequences, it's important to deal with burnout right away.

Signs and Symptoms of Burnout

Burnout is a gradual process. It doesn't happen overnight, but it can creep up on you. The signs and symptoms are subtle at first, but become worse as time goes on. Think of the early symptoms as red flags that something is wrong that needs to be addressed. If you pay attention and actively reduce your stress, you can prevent a major breakdown. If you ignore them, you'll eventually burn out.

Physical signs and symptoms of burnout

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, frequent illnesses
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain
- Change in appetite or sleep habits

Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout

- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout

- Withdrawing from responsibilities
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
- Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope
- Taking out your frustrations on others
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early

The Difference between Stress and Burnout

Stress vs. Burnout

Stress

Burnout

Characterized by over-engagement

Characterized by disengagement

Emotions are over reactive

Emotions are blunted

Produces urgency and hyperactivity

Produces helplessness and hopelessness

Loss of energy

Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope

Leads to anxiety disorders

Leads to detachment and depression

Primary damage is physical

Primary damage is emotional

May kill you prematurely

May make life seem not worth living

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves too much: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and mentally. However, stressed people can still imagine that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better.

Burnout, on the other hand, is about not enough. Being burned out means feeling empty and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress feels like you're drowning in responsibilities, burnout is a sense of being all dried up. And while you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens.

Causes of Burnout

Work-related causes of burnout

- Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
- Lack of recognition or reward for good work
- Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
- Doing work that's monotonous or unchallenging
- Working in a chaotic or high-pressure environment

Lifestyle causes of burnout

- Working too much, without enough time for socializing or relaxing
- Lack of close, supportive relationships
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep

Personality traits can contribute to burnout

- Perfectionistic tendencies; nothing is ever good enough
- Pessimistic view of yourself and the world
- The need to be in control; reluctance to delegate to others
- High-achieving, Type A personality

Handling Burnout

Try to take action. To get started:

- **Evaluate your options.** Discuss specific concerns with your supervisor. Maybe you can work together to change expectations or reach compromises or solutions. Try to set goals for what must get done and what can wait.
- **Seek support.** Whether you reach out to co-workers, friends or loved ones, support and collaboration might help you cope. If you have access to an employee assistance program, take advantage of relevant services.
- **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore programs that can help with stress such as yoga, meditation or tai chi.
- **Get some exercise.** Regular physical activity can help you to better deal with stress. It can also take your mind off work.
- **Get some sleep.** Sleep restores well-being and helps protect your health.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is the act of focusing on your breath flow and being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling at every moment, without interpretation or judgment. In a job setting, this practice involves facing situations with openness and patience, and without judgment.

Keep an open mind as you consider the options. Try not to let a demanding or unrewarding job undermine your health.