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Burnout: What is it and How to Cope

We live in a high-speed world driven by the urge to instantly respond to every 'ping' from our devices. This, coupled with increasing work-from-home options in today's market, can blur the lines between our professional and personal worlds.

Over time, our need to meet increasing expectations can do significant damage. Many people feel worn out yet press on, ignoring the physical and psychological signs our bodies produce in response to stress. These are the first signs of burnout, a condition that can be debilitating and have far-reaching effects.

Burnout and stress are connected. In this article, we'll look at burnout as a syndrome both individuals and groups can experience at work and in relationships. We'll examine the relationship between them, look at some common causes, and discuss ways to approach recovery. Developing healthy coping skills can help you recognize and mitigate burnout. The goal here is to avoid entering a cycle that creates it, thus creating a more balanced approach to work and life.

What is Burnout?

When people have been living with high volumes of stress for a prolonged time, there is a higher-than-average likelihood that they are experiencing burnout.

Burnout feels like you need more direction

Have you ever felt like you're losing yourself? Do you feel like you may have a sense of reduced personal accomplishments and resources to cope? When you begin to have these thoughts and feel like you don't have much control over your life, you might be experiencing burnout. These feelings often creep in when we place a lot of pressure on ourselves. For example, we might face financial difficulties or feel like we're not progressing in our careers. Sometimes, we can trigger burnout when we fixate on the success of others- real or perceived.

Pushing through at all costs

We can also experience burnout when we encounter difficulty in the critical roles we play. Being a parent, a partner, or a caregiver can sometimes be an overwhelming balancing act. We are driven to fulfill the needs and expectations of others. Without heeding the 'warning signs,' the results can be catastrophic.

How is burnout related to stress?

Aren't they the same?

Stress and burnout are related but different. Stress arises when people overreact or become hyperactive in response to what they are experiencing, but this is temporary. Burnout "can creep up at times, especially during busy periods" and stick around, producing "a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, with loss of motivation and hope."¹ Dr. Lotte Dyrbye, a research physician with the Mayo Clinic, studies burnout. She has determined that it is not a medical condition but "a manifestation of chronic unmitigated stress."² And while our bodies use stress to "power through difficult situations," when these pressures are prolonged, it causes harm.³

Unmanaged stress often results in psycho-social and physical health changes. For example, poor sleep can trigger anxiety and stress, which can lead to an unending cycle of sleep deprivation. Here's a list that provides a closer look at the psycho-social and physical changes that arise from unmanaged stress:

Psycho-social changes⁴

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Concentration difficulties
- Memory lapses
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Lack of confidence, feelings of failure
- Turning to, or relying on, unhealthy coping mechanisms such as:
 - Increased alcohol consumption
 - Over/undereating
- Avoiding the need to take breaks (often self-imposed):
 - No lunch breaks
 - Working late
 - Not taking vacation time

Physical changes

- High production of stress hormones such as:
 - Cortisol
 - Adrenaline
 - Epinephrine
 - Norepinephrine

- Changes in eating habits and other gastrointestinal problems such as:
 - Indigestion
 - Nausea
- Headaches
- Body aches
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid heartbeat
- Hypertension
- Reduced immunity and more frequent sickness
- Changes in sleep patterns

What causes burnout?

Many people accept stress as a normal part of life and push through their exhaustion rather than take periodic breaks. If that sounds familiar, then you may have normalized some of the causes of burnout. While there are several models that address the causes of burnout, they all tend to focus on similar things:

- the relationship between the volume of tasks and accountabilities,
- the strain you experience to meet those demands, and
- the "changes in attitudes and behavior" that result from imbalances and are used as a coping mechanism.⁵

In the first stages of burnout, we neglect our own discomfort. When our workloads intensify, we commit our already exhausted bodies and minds to more responsibilities. We somehow hope that our dedicated efforts and extra hours will remedy the situation and things will return to "normal."

Once these patterns become normalized, people experience stress and unconsciously begin to project it. They may display uncharacteristic behavioural changes, which are often explained away as simply "being tired." While many people still attempt to push through, eventually, their bodies can present them with severe and chronic conditions that force them to pause and address burnout.⁶ These changes can see the gradual or sudden introduction of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

Could you be experiencing burnout?

Here are questions you can ask yourself to help you determine if you are experiencing burnout⁷:

- Have you become more cynical or critical of people?
- Do you reluctantly get out of bed every day?

- Have you become irritable or impatient with people?
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Do you lack a sense of satisfaction when you complete a task?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your life?
- Are you using food, drugs, or alcohol to feel better or not feel anything?
- Have your sleep habits changed?
- Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints?

How to cope and recover from burnout

Everyone experiences burnout differently. It's essential to understand that recovery will require a combination of remedies depending on one's unique needs. Whatever your situation, we need to make conscious changes to cope and recover from burnout. It should include a "recharge [of their] resources...tak[ing] a break...and participat[ing] in other activities" that:

- "have beneficial consequences"
- "promote good health and habits" and
- "foster supportive relationships."⁸

Work on it a little bit every day

It's important to commit to taking steps to recover every day. With regular effort, people become more attuned to their bodies and minds and start to pay attention to the signs of stress that burnout creates. They can reflect and re-establish priorities. Studies show that it's more beneficial to start taking small actions daily rather than waiting for weekends or vacations.⁹ With this approach, recovery happens faster, because it's more consistent.

You can try the following:

- **Assessing exactly how you are spending your time.**
Track what you are doing, with whom, your feelings and rate how valuable the activity is. You can also note what you'd rather be doing and what makes you feel content or happy.¹⁰
- **Learning what you like and don't like.**
You'll gain insight into people that energize or drain you and discover what affects your mood and energy.
- **Thinking about what you would say to a friend in the same position.** It can inspire you to realize that you need to be more self-compassionate and treat yourself more kindly.

- **Disconnect from pressures.**
Leave work at work. Don't feel obligated to check work emails or respond to text messages outside of working hours. It creates "interference" that impedes recovery.
- **Relax, guilt-free.**
 - Focus on spending time with friends and family and participating in social activities. It can be especially important for people who spend their days at home.
 - Remember that doing nothing is entirely okay. Take a nap, watch TV, or lie on the couch. Your brain and body also need to rest.
- **Make time for creativity with focused time on a hobby.**
Listen to music, knit, make art, read, or write. (At the Homewood Health Centre and Homewood Ravensview, we incorporate artistic modes of therapy and we do witness positive outcomes among our patients!)
- **Commit to movement/exercise daily.**
Finding 20 minutes a day to walk, dance, stretch, and do yoga can help. Double up and listen to music or an audiobook while you move.
- **Begin mindfulness practices.**
Try focusing on the sensations you feel while breathing for a few minutes.
- **Eat well every day.**
A healthy, balanced diet can reduce stress and fatigue by nourishing your body.

Once you've regained strength from these daily activities, you can focus on addressing other root causes of burnout and create boundaries. One article on recovery strategies suggested that "opening up to people about the distress you're experiencing can take some courage, especially when you worry they'll see you as incapable or lazy."¹¹ It does take a lot of effort and patience.

At work, this can mean having conversations with your supervisor and management about your workload and deadlines, the environment and workplace toxicity, and opportunities for recognition and reward. Try to focus on these three things:

1. What can be prioritized?
2. Can you delegate some tasks?
3. Can you avoid people/situations that create stress?

At home, recovery means having conversations with your family and friends to articulate the kind of support you need to prevent burnout from occurring again.

During the recovery process, you'll assess what is fixed and what can be changed. Doing this helps you better understand what you can do to shift your perspective. You'll also be able to explore alternative ways to accomplish things that don't always have you taking charge to get them done.


You may also get to a point where you feel that reaching out to a professional for guidance could be very helpful. Coaching and therapy can help you reduce stress levels, give you tools to improve your mental health and act as solid support as you navigate your way back from burnout.

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