

Burnout – How to Recognize It and What to Do

Definition

- Burnout describes a severe stress condition that leads to severe physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. (a term coined by psychologist, Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970's.)¹
- Burnout is a work-related stress that can negatively affect your mental health.²
- Burnout describes the thoughts and feelings associated with feeling overwhelmed and fatigued by life circumstances. (R. O'Neill, PhD)³

Who gets burnout?

Anyone continually exposed to high levels of stress can experience burnout - helping professionals, such as first responders, doctors, and nurses are especially vulnerable. Along with career-induced burnout, people caring for children can also have this type of extreme exhaustion. A recent study found that, just like doctors and business executives, mothers and fathers can also burn out. Personality characteristics like needing to be in control, perfectionism, and being "Type A" can also increase your risk of burnout.⁴

Recognizing Burnout

The symptoms of burnout can mirror depression. Depression is a diagnosable mental health condition, burnout is not. Burnout tends to be a response to a specific environment or situation. Depression isn't necessarily a response to one specific trigger and the symptoms are more general. With burnout, once you detach from work or whatever is causing the burnout, you'll feel better; but not with depression.⁵

Burnout has many of the same symptoms as stress. These three symptoms are associated with burnout.

- Feeling tired or exhausted
- A lack of enthusiasm and increased negativity towards your job
- Decreased ability to perform your job

Often, burnout results in depressive symptoms, such as sadness or a lack of hope. It can also contribute to a wide range of negative emotions and even physical symptoms, such as:

- Frustration or anger
- Irritability or annoyance
- Anxiety, agitation, or restlessness

¹ [How to Identify and Prevent Burnout \(healthline.com\)](https://www.healthline.com/health/burnout). Retrieved 17 May 2022.

² [What is burnout? How to recognize the signs and recover from work-related stress - The American Institute of Stress](https://www.ami-institute.org/what-is-burnout-how-to-recognize-the-signs-and-recover-from-work-related-stress). Retrieved 17 May 2022.

³ Ibid. Retrieved 17 May 2022.

⁴ [How to Identify and Prevent Burnout \(healthline.com\)](https://www.healthline.com/health/burnout). Retrieved 18 May 2022.

⁵ [Burnout: 5 Signs and What to Do About It – Cleveland Clinic](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17223-burnout). Retrieved 18 May 2022.

- Physical feelings of stress, such as headaches, stomach issues, body pains, or fatigue⁶

Symptoms include frustration, sadness, lack of hope and fatigue – and it is often associated with both anxiety and depression.⁷

The symptoms can also be described as follows:

- **Exhaustion.** Feeling physically and emotionally depleted. Physical symptoms may include headaches, stomach aches, and appetite or sleeping changes.
- **Isolation.** People with burnout tend to feel overwhelmed. As a result, they may stop socializing and confiding in friends, family members, and co-workers.
- **Escape fantasies.** Dissatisfied with the never-ending demands of their jobs, people with burnout may fantasize about running away or going on a solo-vacation. In extreme cases, they may turn to drugs, alcohol, or food as a way to numb their emotional pain.
- **Irritability.** Burnout can cause people to lose their cool with friends, co-workers, and family members more easily. Coping with normal stressors like preparing for a work meeting, driving kids to school, and tending to household tasks also may start to feel insurmountable, especially when things don't go as planned.
- **Frequent illnesses.** Burnout, like other long-term stress, can lower your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds, the flu, and insomnia. Burnout can also lead to mental health concerns like depression and anxiety.⁸

Consequences of job burnout when ignored or unaddressed can lead to significant consequences, including:

- Excessive stress
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Sadness, anger or irritability
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Vulnerability to illnesses⁹

⁶ [What is burnout? How to recognize the signs and recover from work-related stress - The American Institute of Stress.](#) Retrieved 17, May 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [How to Identify and Prevent Burnout \(healthline.com\).](#) Retrieved 17, May 2022.

⁹ [Job burnout: How to spot it and take action - Mayo Clinic.](#) Retrieved 18, May 2022.

12 Phases of Stress (according to psychologists H. Freudenberger and G. North)

1. **Excessive drive/ambition.** Common for people starting a new job or undertaking a novel task, too much ambition can lead to burnout.
2. **Pushing yourself to work harder.** Ambition pushes you to work harder.
3. **Neglecting your own needs.** You begin to sacrifice self-care like sleep, exercise, and eating well.
4. **Displacement of conflict.** Instead of acknowledging that you're pushing yourself to the max, you blame your boss, the demands of your job, or colleagues for your troubles.
5. **No time for nonwork-related needs.** Your values are revised. Work becomes the sole focus at the expense of family, friends, and hobbies, which now seem irrelevant.
6. **Denial.** Impatience with those around you mounts. Instead of taking responsibility for your behaviors, you blame others, seeing them as incompetent, lazy, and overbearing.
7. **Withdrawal.** You begin to withdraw from family and friends. You lack direction and are cynical. Social invitations to parties, movies, and dinner dates start to feel burdensome instead of enjoyable.
8. **Behavioral changes.** Those on the road to burnout may become more aggressive and snap at loved ones for no reason.
9. **Depersonalization.** Feeling detached from your life and your ability to control your life.
10. **Inner emptiness or anxiety.** Feeling empty or anxious. You may turn to thrill seeking behaviors to cope with this emotion, such as substance use, gambling, or overeating.
11. **Depression.** Life loses its meaning and you begin to feel hopeless.
12. **Mental or physical collapse.** This can impact your ability to cope. Mental health or medical attention may be necessary.¹⁰

What to Do – Burnout is Preventable

Exercise - Not only is exercise good for our physical health, but it can also give us an emotional boost. Stretched for time? You don't need to spend hours at the gym to reap these benefits. Mini-workouts and short walks are convenient ways to make exercise a daily habit.

Eat a balanced diet - Eating a healthy diet filled with omega-3 fatty acids can be a natural antidepressant. Adding foods rich in omega-3s like flaxseed oil, walnuts, and fish may help give your mood a boost.

Practice good sleep habits - Our bodies need time to rest and reset, which is why healthy sleep habits are essential for our well-being. Avoiding caffeine before bedtime, establishing a relaxing bedtime ritual, and banning smartphones from the bedroom can help promote sound sleep hygiene.

¹⁰ [How to Identify and Prevent Burnout \(healthline.com\)](https://www.healthline.com/health/burnout). Retrieved 18, May 2022.

Ask for help - During stressful times, it's important to reach out for help. If asking for assistance feels difficult, consider developing a self-care "check-in" with close friends and family members so that you can take care of each other during trying times.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.