

# **Burnout**

## **1. What is burnout?**

Burnout can feel like the whole world is crashing down on you, like you have no way out and can't cope. You might feel like you're unable to grasp reality and everything around you is blurry, like there's a dense fog in your brain. The mental and physical exhaustion makes it difficult to do anything and you might feel like giving up. But you're not alone – according to the statistics, more than 50% of Americans are affected by burnout. So what exactly is it and where does it come from?

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is an 'occupational phenomenon' meaning it relates only to an occupational (workplace/job) context. It can be described as a form of job-related depression, distinct from classical depression. Burnout is specific to work, whereas depression is more general and doesn't have a specific cause. So if you think you may have depression, it could in fact be burnout. And even though it's triggered by occupational factors, it affects a person's personal life, relationships, and general well-being.

Burnout is a response to prolonged, unmanageable stress at work and has been found to result from a mismatch between a person's resources, needs, or values and the job demands. It has three key components:

- Overwhelming exhaustion
- Cynicism and detachment from work
- Feeling ineffective and lacking a sense of accomplishment

Important to remember is that burnout isn't your body and mind punishing you, but rather a way for it to try and protect you. The symptoms of burnout are a sign that intervention is needed and as such, they're an adaptive mechanism aimed at helping you. It's entirely possible to recover from burnout and to grow stronger and more resilient from it. Throughout this series, we're going to explore burnout in more detail and provide ways to deal with it.

Sources:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sustainable-life-satisfaction/202110/burnout-work-is-affecting-52-americans>

## **2. The stages of burnout**

People don't wake up with burnout one morning. It manifests over time and symptoms tend to get worse if left unmanaged. Noticing when signs of burnout appear is helpful so you can intervene early and take action.

### **Stage 1: Honeymoon**

This stage is usually at the beginning of a new job or task and means you're full of energy, commitment, creativity and have high job satisfaction. At this stage, it's important to know what coping strategies you have to deal with the inevitable stresses of your job. Finding ways to cope with stress that suit you can increase the longevity of the 'honeymoon feeling' at work.

Something to look out for during the honeymoon period is a compulsion to prove yourself, a need to take on all and any tasks (not saying no), and viewing everything through 'rose-tinted glasses' (unchecked optimism). These habits can lead to feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and stressed.

### **Stage 2: Finding balance**

At this stage, you notice that some days are easier than others and fatigue starts to creep in more often. You might notice symptoms of stress such as headaches, changes in sleep, lack of social interaction, heart palpitations, and feeling irritable and unable to focus. You might feel the need to use avoidance strategies such as over-eating, drinking more alcohol, smoking, watching TV, etc.

### **Stage 3: Chronic Stress**

This is the chronic stress stage when the bad days become more frequent than the good days and you start to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with stress. You may experience:

- Anger or aggression
- View the world in a more cynical way
- Feeling tired and exhausted most of the time
- Physical illness or many physical ailments
- Procrastination, missing deadlines, lateness for work
- Social withdrawal
- Increase in avoidance strategies (alcohol, drugs, etc.)

#### **Stage 4: Burnout**

This stage means the symptoms have become critical and ignoring them is no longer possible. It becomes increasingly difficult to cope with work and life and you experience the three components of burnout: overwhelming exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, and feeling ineffective and unable to cope. Other symptoms include:

- Chronic physical symptoms e.g. headaches or gastrointestinal problems
- A desire to 'drop out' of work and/ or society
- Social isolation
- Obsession with problems at work or in life
- Intense self-doubt
- Avoidance strategies

#### **Stage 5: Chronic burnout or 'enmeshment'**

At this stage, burnout is so entrenched into your life that you might believe you're suffering from a psychiatric or serious physical condition rather than burnout. Symptoms include chronic mental and physical fatigue, detachment, depression, and/ or chronic sadness.

Sources:

<https://www.winona.edu/stress/bntstages.htm>

### **3. Why is burnout so exhausting?**

A hallmark of burnout is feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. It can be further defined as feeling worn out and weak, lacking energy, and having chronic fatigue.

Stress is interpreted by the brain as a threat and when this happens, your mind and body go into survival mode. Stress hormones (e.g. cortisol and adrenalin) are released from your brain and your autonomic nervous system is engaged, which means your heart rate increases and your breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. Your body and mind are trying to protect you by engaging your fight/flight response in the face of a threat, but if this continues over a long period of time, you experience chronic exhaustion – emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Some symptoms of exhaustion include lacking motivation, feeling irritable, being unable to concentrate, headaches, and physical fatigue. When it comes to work, you begin to miss deadlines, call in sick or turn up late more often and maybe even want to quit, find another job, or feel like you no longer care.

There's a lot of pressure in society to perform, work long hours and at weekends, and have infinite amounts of energy and time for your job. This and your ambition might drive you to push through the early burnout symptoms, find coaches or training that help you to work more, drink a lot of coffee or energy drinks, and push yourself to the limit mentally. But this is only going to make things worse.

Burnout is the result of the demands of the job (and other stressors) being out of balance with the rewards, recognition, and time for relaxation you receive. It's better to listen to your body and mind. If you notice symptoms of burnout, it's a sign that something needs to change, and you need to make adjustments to your lifestyle and working conditions rather than pushing through.

### **4. Detaching mentally as a way to cope with burnout**

A common sign of burnout is feeling disconnected from your environment, from other people, and from work. You stop caring about everything and everyone and this further isolates you from the support you actually need to overcome burnout.

It's a coping mechanism that helps you to manage stressful events and situations. You're not consciously doing it but your mind and body are responding to stress, which is perceived as a threat. If the work environment is highly demanding, there are difficult relationships or even bullying, and little time for rest, this can lead to mentally distancing yourself as a way to cope. It usually happens over a longer period of time, rather than instantly, and is a result of prolonged stress.

Some symptoms include feeling cynical and pessimistic about work, people, and the world, lacking motivation, and feeling indifferent. Physically you might feel fatigued, lose your appetite and have headaches and/ or muscle tension. At work, you miss deadlines and call in sick more often, feel less committed to the workplace and perform your duties slowly or do just about the minimum that's required of you. You might turn to drugs, alcohol, or other avoidance strategies to further numb yourself and not feel the underlying painful emotions.

Mental distance is your body and mind's way of communicating to you that something is wrong. If left unchecked, it can leave you in a state of depression and disconnection, which leads to unhealthy behaviors. The best thing to do is to get in touch with yourself and what you want; and to experience the painful emotions and accept that your current situation needs to change as this will push you to find a more suitable job and a more rewarding environment.

## **5. Emotional effects of burnout**

Burnout can sometimes be confused with depression and anxiety because the symptoms of these conditions overlap. Both depression and burnout are characterized by the loss of interest and pleasure, feeling tearful and sad, worthless and guilty, fatigue, and having impaired concentration. Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and feeling ineffective at work are

characteristics of burnout but are also associated with a higher risk of experiencing anxiety. Nevertheless, these conditions are distinct.

Burnout is an occupational-specific condition with a heavy emotional impact. When faced with stress, the mind and body go into survival mode as a way to protect us. This is an automatic, adaptive response.

Humans, like other animals, have what's called the limbic system; an integral part of the brain that activates the fight/flight response –the alarm system. It's hypervigilant and pessimistic, meaning it sees things from the worst possible perspective to ensure we fight or flee and don't stick around in the face of danger. Humans also have a large and advanced prefrontal cortex that is extremely intelligent and solution-focused, and therefore positive. When we face a threat (in this case work-related), the alarm system goes off and our limbic system takes over while our prefrontal cortex takes a back seat. This might be adaptive in the short term but if the stress (threat) goes on for a long time, we're constantly in survival mode and this is detrimental to our wellbeing.

Being in survival mode means experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety, and when it's work-related, it's called burnout. Some of these are feeling like a failure, doubting your ability, choices and professionalism. You feel hopeless, trapped, and defeated, like you're alone in the world and nothing matters. Your outlook on life, yourself, and work becomes increasingly cynical and you might feel irritable and angry a lot of the time.

Remember that these emotions are a response to prolonged stress and rather than being an enemy, they're a sign of your mind trying to cope. It might feel terrible but eventually, it will push you to make the necessary changes in your life, come out of survival mode, and back to operating from the prefrontal cortex where you have a much more balanced view of yourself and life.

Source:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00284/full>

## **6. Cognitive effects of burnout**

The effects of prolonged stress on the brain include cognitive impairment. Cognitions are related to the prefrontal cortex and include processes and structures related to thinking, perceiving, attention, language, reasoning, and so forth. These are all important when it comes to being able to perform well at work.

When we're faced with a threat, we go into survival mode and operate from the limbic system while the prefrontal cortex is 'shut down' (as discussed in the previous article). This not only impacts your emotions but your cognitive functions as well. Research has found burnout disrupts people's creativity, and problem-solving ability, and results in poor concentration (lack of attention) and impairments to memory.

Some people might describe this as 'brain fog' – you can't seem to gather your thoughts, can't focus, and things don't seem to make sense. This is because your brain is trying to 'survive' in the face of threat, and higher cognitive functions are reduced. Operating in this way is exhausting – your mind and body are telling you to slow down and take rest, like a nurse that has your best interest at heart.

Instead of hating yourself and beating yourself up for not being able to perform as well as you used to or feeling like you just can't get it right, you should listen to the nurse and make adjustments in your life that will allow you to come out of survival mode. Once you start to feel better, your cognitive functions will also return to normal.

## **7. Burnout is not your enemy**

Burnout might feel like a punishment or like your mind and body are 'failing' but the symptoms of burnout are in fact a coping mechanism. It's a healthy reaction of your mind and body in the face of emotional overload and/ or when there is a mismatch between effort, demands, and results.

In the case of emotional overload (extreme and prolonged stress), burnout manifests as a mechanism of psychological protection. There is a partial or complete detachment from emotions, which is expressed as distancing yourself from other people, devaluing relationships, and becoming detached or indifferent to work. This is a response that protects you from a nervous breakdown and allows you to continue to function; although this becomes more and more impaired if there is no intervention.

Occupational stress and burnout can also come from a mismatch between demands on the individual and the resources they have to deal with those demands. Demands might be work pressure or emotional burden (e.g. in the caring profession) and resources are what enables the individual to deal with those, such as supervision, coaching, role clarity, and autonomy. They can also be internal resources, such as optimism, healthy self-esteem, and boundary setting (e.g. the ability to say no). If these are out of balance, the body and mind might respond by shutting down in an attempt to preserve energy.

Trying to overcome burnout with brute force, like pushing through and ignoring the signs, will lead to a worsening of symptoms and potentially chronic burnout. That's why it's important to become aware and understand why these symptoms are appearing, and find the appropriate solution.

The opposite of burnout is 'engagement' which refers to being in a state of high energy, feeling motivated, involved, and dedicated, and having a sense of efficacy. Establishing boundaries, reflecting on your values, taking time to relax and reflect, and ensuring that you work in a rewarding environment will help you to bring balance back into your life.