

AN OVERVIEW OF BURNOUT AND WORK-RELATED STRESS

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WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout is a condition that has been receiving increasing attention over the past couple of years due to the pandemic, as employees have had to adapt to new working practices and faced job insecurity, and this has had a huge impact on mental health.*

It is important to differentiate between burnout and stress. Burnout may arise from periods of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as excessive stress. Stress usually involves feelings of "This is too much": too many pressures and demands at one time, yet you are still able to cope and there is hope that things will improve with time. Stress can be characterised by over-engagement (with a sense of urgency and hyperactivity), overreactive emotions, a loss of energy, and may lead to anxiety.

Burnout, on the other hand, involves feelings of "not enough". Symptoms of burnout include feeling empty and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, productivity and energy levels are low, and every day feels like a bad day. In contrast to stress, burnout is characterised by disengagement (detachment, loss of motivation and hope), blunted emotions, and it may lead to depression.

* [who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases)

BURNOUT OR STRESS?

What are the signs and symptoms of burnout?

Being aware of the signs and symptoms means you can take action sooner rather than later, which may reduce the severity of the symptoms.

Some of the most common signs of burnout can include:

- Feelings of energy depletion and persistent exhaustion
- Experiencing mental distance from your job, which is accompanied by feelings of negativity and cynicism towards your job, colleagues and workplace
- Noticing a decline in productivity and increased concentration problems
- Dissatisfaction with your own performance
- Difficulty making decisions
- Sleep problems
- Increased irritability



PREVENTING BURNOUT

There are various strategies you can use to ward off symptoms of burnout; prevention is better than cure.

Some practical ways to address this include:

- Familiarising yourself with the symptoms of burnout so that you can identify these in yourself should they occur
- Acting early – it is never too soon to reach out for help
- Having an honest and open conversation with a colleague or manager if you are feeling overwhelmed
- Checking in with yourself, and asking: How long have you been feeling this way? Does it seem to be worsening over time? What do you need to help you cope?
- Burnout can be linked to depression, but is mainly work-related. Ask yourself if work is the key cause for your current state of mind
- We know that excessive workload can lead to burnout. Ask yourself what is expected of you in your role. Perform a job analysis so you can identify explicitly what is part of your role and where you feel there may be areas that are outside of your role. Point this out to your line manager



How do we cope when we reach a stage of burnout?

- Try to create healthy boundaries between your work and your home life to maintain a sense of balance
- Reframe the way you look at work: try to find areas of value in your work (for example, focus on how your role helps others or contributes to a much-needed service)
- Set strong boundaries: put hard stops in place for breaks during the day to take walks, connect with friends and give your brain a chance to ‘switch off’ from work tasks
- Practice good sleep hygiene to improve sleep (stick to a regular routine; limit screen time before bed; create a quiet, comfortable and cool environment)
- Recognise that work is only one piece of the pie; find other pieces that help to bring balance to your life
- Try making small, sustainable changes rather than drastic changes, as this can be less overwhelming. Regular short breaks – walking around the block, listening to music, practicing deep, slow breathing and mindfulness – help us to decompress and can help restore balance
- Recognise that physical and mental health are interrelated. Incorporating regular exercise into your routine, staying hydrated and developing healthy sleep habits can help you to manage your overall wellbeing and stress
- Ask for help. Consider what small, helpful changes you can make for yourself, but also recognise that at some point you may need to seek external support



How managers can identify burnout in their team members:

When facing overwhelming stress, it can be difficult to (a) admit this to yourself, and (b) ask for help. Therefore, it is imperative that managers are equipped to recognise possible signs of burnout in their employees. We want managers to be able to start a conversation that their team members may be struggling to initiate themselves.

Here are some key signs to be aware of in your employee's behaviour:

- Decreased motivation levels
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Increased irritability
- Reduced concentration and focus
- Making mistakes on tasks that they usually have no problem with
- Recurrent illness or absences from work

How managers can support team members who have burnout:

Sometimes it takes someone else stepping in to help another bring about change. Here are some suggestions for managers when they suspect an employee may be experiencing burnout:

Here are some key signs to be aware of in your employee's behaviour:

- Arrange to have a private conversation at a time and place where the employee can speak freely and where you will not be interrupted.
- Demonstrate your concern for the employee's wellbeing by being empathetic and genuine in your conversation (there should be clear communication that your intention is to support them).
- Mention specific changes that you have observed – this can create a platform for an honest and open conversation to take place.
- Use active listening skills (maintain eye contact, don't interrupt, stay focused, listen without judgment, avoid jumping to conclusions, be aware of non-verbal cues, ask questions).
- Allow the employee space to ask for what they need (Do they require a reduction in workload or leniency on upcoming deadlines? Do they require more flexible working arrangements?).
- Signpost employee to mental health care resources and Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) information and contact details.
- Collaboratively talk through a potential plan with the employee and agree on action points for both of you.
- Take concrete action: Act swiftly on the agreed action points and communicate this to the employee – this will communicate your commitment to supporting the employee and navigating this difficult journey with them.

When it's time to seek support

If you feel that you are experiencing burnout and would like to have extra support, reach out to your manager or Mental Health First Aider for more information. Employee Assistance Programmes are often a first port of call that can signpost you to a range of professional help. Another starting point is to speak to your GP. Burnout is common and the sooner you recognise the symptoms, the sooner you can get support. Be kind to yourself and find someone you trust, whether that's a colleague, friend or family member, to speak to about how you are feeling.



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