Burnout: Signs, Symptoms and Prevention

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What is burnout?

When your body and mind are relentlessly strained, you can develop emotional and physical fatigue. Burnout is a physical, mental, and emotional response to constant levels of high stress. Burnout produces feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, cynicism, resentment and failure—as well as stagnation and reduced productivity. These stress reactions can result in levels of depression or unhappiness that eventually threaten your job, your relationships and your health.

Burnout is associated with situations in which a person feels:

- overworked
- underappreciated
- confused about expectations and priorities
- concerned about job security
- overcommitted with responsibilities
- resentful about duties that are not commensurate with pay

Burnout can occur when you feel you are unable to meet constant demands, and you become increasingly overwhelmed and depleted of energy. Debilitating sadness, anger or indifference can set in. You begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Knowing the signs of unmanaged stress and burnout can help reduce your risk of burnout. Identifying the causes of your stress, recognizing your limited control of any given situation, and taking care of yourself emotionally and physically can help you avoid burnout. Additionally, learning how to better manage stress will help you find greater enjoyment in your life and career. Helpguide's Stress Management and Stress Relief offers several tips for reducing and managing stress.

Did you know?

- Burnout arises in response to expectations placed upon us, either by ourselves or others. It is common in home or work situations where there are highly stressful demands on our time and energy, or when we feel others are dependent upon us.
- The most commonly discussed types of burnout are job burnout and caregiver.
Are you experiencing job burnout?

- Do work activities you once found enjoyable now feel like drudgery?
- Have you become more cynical or bitter about your job, your boss or the company?
- Are non-work relationships (marital, family, friendships) affected by your feelings about work?

Do you find yourself:

- dreading going to work in the morning?
- easily annoyed or irritated by your co-workers?
- envious of individuals who are happy in their work?
- caring less now than you used to about doing a "good job" at work?

Are you:

- regularly experiencing fatigue and low energy levels at your job?
- easily bored with your job?
- depressed on Sunday afternoons thinking about Monday and the coming week?

If you answered yes to five or more of the above, you may be suffering from job burnout.

(Adapted from Recognizing Job Burnout The Counseling Corner by the American Counseling Association, written by Audrey L. Canaff)

What is the difference between stress and burnout?

Burnout is not simply excessive stress. Rather, it is a complex human reaction to ongoing stress, and it relates to feeling that your inner resources are inadequate for managing the tasks and situations presented to you. The signs and symptoms of burnout are similar to those of stress, but burnout includes an emotional exhaustion and an increasingly negative attitude toward your work and, perhaps, your life. For a clear definition of stress, see Helpguide's Signs and Symptoms of Stress.

What causes burnout? Are you a candidate for burnout?

Most people are stretched thin, concerned about keeping their jobs, and may feel uncertain about the future. The American Counseling Association notes that job insecurity and changes among and within corporations leave many employees feeling anxious over their inability to control their careers. The ACA suggests answering these questions to explore the possible causes of job-related burnout:
• **What?** Have you faced changes in the organization, the demands of the job, your supervisor, or the industry?

• **When?** Was there a pivotal occurrence that changed the way you viewed your job - a new boss, coworkers, or responsibilities?

• **Why?** Have you changed? Are your interests or values pertaining to work now different than they were? Has the company's mission changed? Are your abilities and skills not being utilized?

Changes in your work environment and a feeling of lack of control over your work are major causes of the unrelieved stress that can easily become job burnout. Once you have recognized causes of work dissatisfaction, consider whether any of the causes can be addressed. For instance, you might be able to speak to your supervisor about possibilities such as transferring to another department or obtaining an updated description of your job duties and responsibilities. It is not always within your control to address problems at work, but it is worth identifying the causes and trying to see if you can change them.

Burnout pervades every occupation. However, it is thought to be more prevalent among service professionals. Decades ago, researchers began exploring the rates of emotional and physical fatigue among those whose jobs required attending to the emotional needs of others. Research by and among those in the human-service professions led to a general understanding of burnout as a feeling of no longer being able to give of oneself. While all employees are subject to experiencing burnout, it is especially common among teachers, clergy members, health practitioners and caregivers. The links below provide information on burnout awareness, prevention and alleviation targeted to these specific groups.

People with tendencies to place too-high expectations on themselves also may be more prone to burnout. When carried too far, compulsiveness, perfectionism, and inflated self-confidence can have detrimental impacts on your professional and personal life. Setting unrealistic goals, thinking anything is possible with the right amount of work, and taking on more than you know you can handle will leave you striving to maintain an intensity that simply cannot be sustained over time.

**What are the stages of burnout?**

Burnout has been found to proceed in stages that blend into one another so smoothly that you might not realize what is happening until you are in a state of despair and physical and emotional breakdown.

You might begin a new job with boundless energy. Yet soon you find yourself in a state of disillusionment and disappointment. You might feel confused; you can’t quite put your finger on what’s wrong. Burnout symptoms begin to set in. Feelings of frustration and irritability eventually give way to full-scale exhaustion and fatigue. See below for a full discussion of [burnout signs and symptoms](#).
Fortunately, you can pull yourself from the grips of burnout before reaching the stage where you feel as if there is no point in going on or your health is at risk. There are things that you can do to prevent or overcome the symptoms of burnout.

**What are the signs and symptoms of burnout?**

Since burnout is not an overnight occurrence, it's important to recognize its early signs and to act before the problem becomes severe. In a chronic state of stress, your body will begin to show the following physical signs of stress overload:

- psychosomatic illnesses (psychological/emotional problems which manifest themselves physically)
- digestive problems
- headaches
- high blood pressure
- heart attacks
- strokes
- teeth grinding
- fatigue

When you are on the verge of burnout, you may feel:

- powerless
- hopeless
- drained
- like a candle burning at both ends
- frustrated
- detached from people and things around you
- little satisfaction from your work
- bored
- resentment for having too much to do
- like a failure
- stuck in a situation from which you cannot extricate yourself
- unsure about your choice of job or career
- withdrawn, isolated from coworkers and friends
- insecure about your competence and abilities
- cynical
- irritable
- anxious

Under prolonged conditions of chronic stress, the body begins the downward progression to burnout. When specific psychological responses interact with the body's natural physical responses to stress, burnout occurs. It is the end result of a tired body and mind. You may be unable to sleep or unable to stay awake. You might even turn to escapist behaviors such as sex, drinking, drugs, partying, or shopping binges to try to escape from
your negative feelings. Your relationships both at and outside of work may begin to fall apart. Burnout can impair your job performance as well as your health.

Some people experiencing burnout will feel as if their jobs are no longer interesting or enjoyable. They become indecisive, their productivity drops, and their work deteriorates. They may not even care about doing a good job and often perform tasks by rote. These people feel bored and put-upon, they may dread going to work in the morning, and they may feel envious of others who are happy with their work.

Others who see their jobs as intense, highly demanding, and stressful might try to push themselves even harder once they feel the effects of burnout. They will try to balance numerous roles, multitask, and respond to a variety of changing and challenging situations often at the expense of their own well-being. Initial responses to burnout include heightened feelings of anxiety followed by a need to do more by stepping up the pace—working harder, longer, and faster. They feel like they're running on a treadmill that won't stop.

If you suspect you are suffering from burnout, consider making changes in your life to improve your overall well-being and help you cope better with daily demands.

**Can burnout be prevented or treated?**

To prevent or treat burnout, you must become familiar with its symptoms and should try to identify possible causes. Many of the preventive strategies are the same as those recommended for stress management. See Helpguide's [Stress Management and Stress Relief](https://www.helpguide.org/stress/) for more tips on stress management.

Since burnout is a physical and psychological response that is connected to feelings you begin to have about a work or life situation, it is important to attend to the mind as well as the body when treating burnout. To prevent and reduce burnout, you can make the following changes to improve your physical, mental and social well-being.

**Physical**

Your body's ongoing response to stress wreaks havoc on your physical health. If you think you are experiencing burnout you should:

- **See a doctor.** Schedule a complete physical check-up with your doctor to discuss your concerns and any symptoms you’ve noticed.
- **Sleep.** Make sure you are getting the sleep your body desperately needs.
- **Eat right.** Develop healthy eating habits, including having breakfast and high-protein snacks to help sustain your energy throughout the work day.
- **Exercise.** Increase exercise by learning stretches that can be done in your office, taking walks during breaks, or beginning a new type of activity, such as yoga, to release tension.
Mental

Burnout often occurs when life feels out of balance—you feel you are giving too much of yourself to your jobs or others and are constantly in a state of stress and anxiety without any time to relax and enjoy life. To address the psychological effects of burnout you can:

- **Hone your coping skills.** Develop coping skills for dealing with stress including using muscle relaxation techniques, mental imagery and positive self-talk. You might consider finding a professional such as a therapist or life coach to help you hone these skills.
- **Arm yourself with self-knowledge.** If you are people-oriented, a perfectionist, or have a low level of assertiveness or a strong need for approval, you may be more prone to develop burnout than someone who is authoritarian and task-focused. Understanding your strengths and weaknesses can help you learn better ways to deal with day-to-day stress. For example, if you know you are the kind of person who has difficulty saying “no” without guilt, recognize how this pattern affects you and consider talking to a professional or respected peer or mentor about how to avoid taking on more than you can handle.
- **Monitor depression.** If you have a history of depression, burnout can reactivate it. See Helpguide's Depression: Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment Strategies for more information.
- **Learn effective time management.** To help you develop control over your work and home life, you might consider taking more time off, scheduling more frequent breaks while at work, or delegating tasks.
- **Set realistic goals.** This will add direction, clarity and focus to your life. Establish personally meaningful goals, divide them into short- and long-term, and establish a plan for attaining them and setting new ones. Striving, learning and reaching for new accomplishments will give you a real sense of purpose.
- **Put yourself first.** Regularly set aside time to be alone and to do something you enjoy. Ask yourself, “What recharges my batteries?” Maybe you long for time to read a good novel or to return to a favorite but long-forgotten hobby. Schedule “me time” into your day or week, and keep the commitment as faithfully as you would keep a doctor’s appointment.

Social

Although time alone is important, maintaining a balanced life also means spending time cultivating your relationships with others. Poor relationships can contribute to burnout, but positive relationships can help prevent or reduce it. Steps you can take to improve your work and home relationships include:

- **Nurturing your closest relationships such as those with your partner, children or friends.** These relationships can help restore energy and alleviate some of the psychological effects of burnout, such as feelings of being underappreciated. To develop supportive love relationships, see Helpguide's
Renewing Marriage and Other Intimate Relationships e-book on building strong and trusting intimate love relationships.

- **Connect with a cause or a community group that is personally meaningful to you.** Joining a religious, social, or support group can give you a place to talk to like-minded others about how to deal with daily stress. If your vocation has a professional association, you can attend meetings and befriend others coping with the same workplace demands.

- **Address your dissatisfaction at work.** Talk to a supervisor to explore options that may alleviate your stress. Perhaps your job responsibilities can be reviewed or your hours changed to better suit your needs.

- **Consider a job or career change.** You might choose to consult a Career Counselor. Check the National Career Development Association's Web site for helpful guidelines in selecting a career counselor. Look up specific listings in the Yellow Pages. However, you should avoid making choices out of desperation or panic and should wait until a time when you are able to make logical, rational decisions.

- **Practice healthy communication.** Express your feelings to others who will listen, understand and not judge. Burnout involves feelings that fester and grow, so be sure to let your emotions out in healthy, productive ways.

In summary, to prevent or recover from burnout, learn to cultivate methods of personal renewal, self-awareness, and connection with others, and don’t be afraid to acknowledge your own needs and to find ways to get your needs met. Think of your personal energy in terms of not only energy expenditure, but also energy renewal, and focus on creating a balance in your life. To enjoy a healthy, sustainable life, let your mind, body, and spirit be continuously renewed.

### Online resources for burnout

#### Articles with stress / burnout quizzes

- **Stress Test** – Part of an article directed toward doctors, but the 20-item test is relevant to anyone who wants to assess burnout level. (American Academy of Family Physicians)

- **Burnout Inventory** – Another quick test to help you measure your level of burnout. (Awakenings)

- **Preventing Burnout** – Includes further assessment tools as well as exercises to help you overcome stress-causing frustrations. (Coping.org)

#### Balance and job burnout

- **The Road to Burnout** – Describes how the stages of burnout could occur in the workplace. It is helpful for understanding the insidious progression of burnout. (HealthyPlace.com)
Recognizing Job Burnout – Linked to Workplace Blues, with many articles on job-related stress and workplace issues in general. (American Counseling Association)

Burnout - Is it a Burning Issue in Your Company? – An article to help managers identify, prevent and alleviate burnout among their employees. (workplaceissues.com)

Antidotes for Workplace Burnout – Describes 10 ways to combat stress and replenish energy. (Vibrant Life magazine)

Service careers and burnout

If your work directly involves tending to the needs of others, you are at high risk of burnout. In addition to the general and job resources above, here are a few articles directed toward specific service providers.

Clergy Burnout – Religious leaders are often "on-call" for a wide variety of needs and demands. While this article is directed toward Christian clergy, the issues are relevant to spiritual leaders of most faiths. List comparing stress to burnout appears at the very end of the article. (Churchlink.com)

Coping with Caregiver Burnout – Written for those caring for an aging or sick family member, this article addresses the emotional, physical and financial stressors that lead to burnout and includes coping strategies. (Healthology)

Teacher Burnout – Teachers are in an increasingly demanding and stressful occupation, with expectations from all directions and a lack of appreciation or financial compensation. Outlines some special needs of teachers and suggests strategies for burnout prevention. (Western Regional Resource Center)

Ideas for Managing Stress and Extinguishing Burnout – Written for physicians, this article contains 8 tips for managing stress and preventing burnout. (American Association of Family Practitioners)

Physician Stress and Burnout – An online course that addresses the pressures of being a physician. Includes self-assessments and offers suggestions for handling the emotional stresses of dealing with life-and-death issues on a daily basis. (Texas Medical Association)

Related articles on Helpguide

- Stress: Signs and Symptoms, Causes and Effects
- Coping with Stress: Management and Reduction Techniques
- Stress Relief: Meditation, Yoga, and Other Relaxation Techniques

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