

Preventing Burnout

Signs, Symptoms, and Strategies to Avoid It

An article on http://helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm

If constant stress has you feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, you may be suffering from burnout. When you're burned out, problems seem insurmountable, everything looks bleak, and it's difficult to muster up the energy to care—let alone do something about your situation. But if you're able to recognize the signs and symptoms of impending burnout, you can take steps to prevent it. Effective burnout-busting strategies include taking care of yourself emotionally and physically, asking for help when you need it, and staying connected to other people.

Recognizing burnout

Burnout is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can occur when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place. Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly hopeless, powerless, cynical, and resentful. The unhappiness burnout causes can eventually threaten your job, your relationships, and your health.

Because burnout doesn't happen overnight — and it's difficult to fight once you're in the middle of it — it's important to recognize the early signs of burnout and head it off. Burnout usually has its roots in stress, so the earlier you recognize the symptoms of stress and address them, the better chance you have of avoiding burnout.

Signs and symptoms of burnout

The signs of burnout tend to be more mental than physical. They can include feelings of:

- Powerlessness
- Hopelessness
- Emotional exhaustion
- Detachment
- Isolation
- Irritability
- Frustration
- Being trapped
- Failure
- Despair
- Cynicism
- Apathy

If you're burning out and the burnout expresses itself as irritability, you might find yourself always snapping at people or making snide remarks about them. If the burnout manifests as depression, you might want to sleep all the time or feel "too tired" to socialize. You might turn to escapist behaviors such as sex, drinking, drugs, partying, or shopping binges to try to escape from your negative feelings. Your relationships at work and in your personal life may begin to fall apart. You may lose your trust in others, believing that people act out of selfishness and nothing can be done about it.

The difference between stress and burnout

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves *too much*: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and psychologically. Stressed people can still imagine, though, that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better.

Burnout, on the other hand, is about *not enough*. Being burned out means feeling empty, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress is like drowning in responsibilities, burnout is being all dried up.

STRESS VS. BURNOUT

Stress

Characterized by overengagement
Emotions are overreactive

Burnout

Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are blunted

Produces urgency and hyperactivity
Loss of energy
Leads to anxiety disorders
Primary damage is physical
May kill you prematurely

Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is emotional
May make life seem not worth living

One other difference between stress and burnout: While you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens. The symptoms of burnout — the hopelessness, the cynicism, the detachment from others — can take months to surface. If someone close to you points out changes in your attitude or behavior that are typical of burnout, listen to that person.

Job burnout

Burnout is most common in the workplace. But there's a difference between a bad workday or two and job burnout. Most of us have days when we feel bored, overloaded, or unappreciated; when the dozen balls we keep in the air aren't noticed, let alone rewarded; when dragging ourselves into work requires the determination of Hercules. On the other hand, you may be flirting with burnout if:

- *Every* day on the job is a bad one.
- Caring about work seems like a total waste of energy.
- The majority of your day is spent on tasks you find either mind-numbingly dull or unpleasant.
- Nothing you do appears to make a difference in a workplace full of bullying, clueless, or ungrateful supervisors, colleagues, and clients.

Remember, workplace burnout isn't the same as workplace stress. When you're stressed, you care too much, but when you're burned out, you don't see any hope of improvement. You don't want to get to that point.

Causes of job burnout

While some careers have higher rates of burnout, it's present in every occupation. Those most at risk are employees who feel underpaid, underappreciated, or criticized for matters beyond their control. Service professionals who spend their work lives attending to the needs of others, especially if their work puts them in frequent contact with the dark or tragic side of human experience, are also at risk.

Other causes of job burnout include:

- Setting unrealistic goals for yourself or having them imposed upon you.
- Being expected to be too many things to too many people.
- Working under rules that seem unreasonably coercive or punitive.
- Doing work that frequently causes you to violate your personal values.
- Boredom from doing work that never changes or doesn't challenge you.
- Feeling trapped for economic reasons by a job that fits any of the scenarios above.

Preventing job burnout

The most effective way to head off job burnout is to quit doing what you're doing and do something else, whether that means changing jobs or changing careers. But if that isn't an option for you, there are still things you can do to improve your situation, or at least your state of mind.

- **Clarify your job description.** Ask your supervisor for an updated description of your job duties and responsibilities. You may then be able to point out that some of the things you're expected to do are not part of your job description and gain a little leverage by showing that you've been putting in work over and above the parameters of your job.
- **Request a transfer.** If your workplace is large enough, you might be able to escape a toxic environment by transferring to another department. Talk to your supervisor or court a request from another supervisor.
- **Ask for new duties.** If you've been doing the exact same work for a long time, ask to try something new: a different grade level, a different sales territory, a different machine.
- **Take time off.** If burnout seems inevitable, take a complete break from work. Go on vacation, use up your sick days, ask for a temporary leave-of-absence—anything to remove yourself from the situation. Use the time away to recharge your batteries and take perspective.

Caregiver burnout

Outside the world of paid work, the people more prone to burnout than any other group are caregivers: people who devote themselves to the unpaid care of chronically ill or disabled family members. The stressors of caregiving — changes in the family dynamic, household disruption, financial concerns, and the sheer amount of work involved — can be overwhelming. The rewards of caregiving, if they come at all, are intangible and far off, and often there is no hope for a happy outcome.

“People today are feeling tremendous pressure to ‘do it all,’ taking care of children and aging parents while maintaining career and home. Instead of having a sense of accomplishment, many people feel guilt when they run out of energy to handle all of the tasks.”

Source: [Ohio State University Department of Aging](#)

The lack of control many caregivers feel over the situation is often compounded by other factors such as financial pressures, inadequate support, and poor management and planning skills. As these factors pile up, frustration and despair take hold and burnout becomes a very real danger. Unfortunately, once burnout occurs the caregiving experience is not a healthy option for the caregiver or the person receiving care.

Preventing caregiver burnout

Pau Casals, the world-renowned cellist, said, “The capacity to care is the thing that gives life its deepest significance and meaning.” Although caregivers are often isolated from others, it’s essential that they receive enough support that they don’t lose that capacity. So the first strategy for preventing caregiver burnout is: *Don’t try to do it all alone.* Ask for help when you need it. Enlist friends and family who live near you to run errands, bring a hot meal, or “baby-sit” the care receiver so you can have a well-deserved break.

Also, there are services to help caregivers in most communities, and the cost is often based on ability to pay or covered by the care receiver’s insurance. Services that may be available in your community include adult day care centers, home health aides, home-delivered meals, respite care, transportation services, and skilled nursing.

More strategies for preventing caregiver burnout:

- **Educate yourself.** Learn as much about the care receiver’s illness and about how to be a caregiver as you can. The more you know, the more effective you’ll be, and the better you’ll feel about your efforts.
- **Join a support group.** Find a caregivers’ support group. You’ll feel better knowing that other people are in the same situation, and their knowledge can be invaluable, especially if they’re dealing with the same illness you are.
- **Know your limits.** Be realistic about how much of your time and yourself you can give, set limits, and communicate those limits to doctors, family members, and other people involved.
- **Accept your feelings.** You might be angry toward the care receiver because your care isn’t appreciated; because you feel trapped in the position of caregiver; because someone you care about is ill. And then you might feel guilty for being angry. As long as you don’t compromise the well-being of the care receiver, allow yourself to feel what you feel.
- **Confide in others.** Talk to people about what you feel; don’t keep your emotions bottled up. This is where the support group comes in, but trusted friends and family members can help too. You may also benefit from seeing a therapist or counselor.

Ways to prevent and deal with burnout

In addition to specific strategies for preventing job and caregiver burnout, there are additional burnout-busting strategies that are universally helpful. For one thing, it’s important to build or maintain a foundation of good physical health, so be sure to eat right, get enough sleep, and make exercise part of your daily routine. It’s also vital to acknowledge your own needs and find ways to get them met. And because burnout is related to stress, many of the methods for countering stress can also help prevent burnout.

If you're approaching burnout, it's also crucial that you cultivate relationships with other people and spend time socializing. Poor relationships and isolation can contribute to burnout, but positive relationships can prevent it or reduce its impact.

Here are some steps you can take to cultivate positive relationships:

- **Nurture 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. Try to put aside what's burning you out and make the time you spend with loved ones positive and enjoyable.
- **Develop casual social relationships, on and off site, with people at your workplace.** "We do all kinds of things, whether it is getting together to play cards or going out to eat. It gives everyone an opportunity to relax and blow off steam," a teacher wrote to a contributors' site. Just remember to avoid hanging out with negative-minded people who do nothing but complain.
- **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 people about how to deal with daily stress — and to make new friends. If your line of work has a professional association, you can attend meetings and interact with others coping with the same workplace demands.
- **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.

