

Health tip: Recognizing Burnout

Originally used to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in “helping” professions, burnout may affect individuals in several career fields, from career-driven people to overworked employees, homemakers, and students.¹

According to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), burnout is an occupational phenomenon characterized by three dimensions. These dimensions include feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, reduced professional efficacy, and increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism related to one’s job.²

Signs and symptoms of burnout^{3,4}

There are three main groups of symptoms that are signs of burnout:

- 1. Exhaustion.** Those affected feel drained and emotionally exhausted, unable to cope, tired and down, and don’t have enough energy. Physical symptoms include things such as pain and gastrointestinal problems.
- 2. Alienation from work-related activities.** People who have burnout find their jobs to be increasingly stressful and frustrating. They may start to be cynical about their working conditions and colleagues while also distancing themselves emotionally.
- 3. Reduced performance.** Burnout typically affects everyday tasks at work, at home or when caring for family members. Those impacted are very negative about their tasks, find it hard to concentrate and lack creativity.

It is important not to confuse the signs and symptoms of burnout with those for stress or depression. Signs and symptoms that occur in both burnout and depression include feeling down, extremely exhausted and experiencing reduced performance. When seeking help, it is recommended to speak with a medical professional as self-diagnosing may lead to the wrong treatment.

In contrast, burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it is not the same thing as too much stress. While stress involves **too much**, burnout is about **not enough**. Being burnt out means lack of control, lack of clear job expectations, or work-life imbalance. Most people may feel stress, but burnout develops gradually over time.



Myths about burnout

There are many myths about burnout; don’t be fooled. Some myths include.

Myth. You must not be good at your job.

Myth. Burnout means you need to make a job change.

Myth. Burnout may be overcome by working harder.

Myth. One day of rest will make everything better.

Myth. Taking time away from work or investing in self-care makes you weak.

Causes and consequences of burnout⁵

There are several possible causes and consequences of burnout. Specifically, job burnout may result from various factors including:

1. **Lack of control.** An inability to influence decisions that affect your job — such as your schedule, assignments, or workload—as well as a lack of the resources you need to do your work, could lead to job burnout,
2. **Unclear job expectations.** If you're unclear about the degree of authority you have or what your supervisor or others expect from you, then you're not likely to feel comfortable at work.
3. **Dysfunctional workplace dynamics.** Perhaps you work with an office bully, feel undermined by colleagues, or your boss micromanages your work. This may contribute to job stress.
4. **Extremes of activity.** When a job is monotonous or chaotic you need constant energy to remain focused which may lead to fatigue and job burnout.
5. **Lack of social support.** If you feel isolated at work and in your personal life you might feel more stressed.
6. **Work-life imbalance.** If your work takes up so much of your time and effort that you don't have the energy to spend time with your family and friends, you might burn out quickly.

Should burnout be unaddressed, significant consequences may occur. These consequences range from excessive stress, fatigue, and insomnia to alcohol or substance misuse, heart disease, and high blood pressure.

Coping with burnout⁶

Whether you recognize the warning signs of impending burnout or you're already past the breaking point trying to push through the exhaustion and continuing as you have been may only cause further emotional and physical damage. Now is the time to pause and change direction by learning how you may help yourself overcome burnout and feel healthier and more positive. Dealing with burnout requires the “Three R” approach:

1. **Recognize.** Watch for the warning signs of burnout.
2. **Reverse.** Undo the damage by seeking support and managing stress.
3. **Resilience.** Build your resilience to stress by taking care of your physical and emotional health.

The following tips for preventing or dealing with burnout may help you cope with symptoms and regain your energy, focus, and sense of well-being.

- **Evaluate your options.** Discuss specific concerns with your supervisor. Work together to change expectations or reach solutions. Set goals for what must get done and what may wait.
- **Seek support.** Whether you reach out to co-workers, friends or loved ones, support and collaboration might help you cope. If you have access to an employee assistance program, take advantage of relevant services.
- **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore programs that may help with stress such as yoga, meditation, or tai chi.
- **Get some exercise.** Regular physical activity may help you to better deal with stress. It may also take your mind off work.
- **Get some sleep.** Sleep restores well-being and helps protect your health.
- **Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is the act of focusing on your breath flow and being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling at every moment, without interpretation or judgment. In a job setting, this practice involves facing situations with openness and patience, and without judgment.

Sources:

¹ Depression: What is burnout? - InformedHealth.org - NCBI Bookshelf (nih.gov), June 2020. Accessed October 2022.

² Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases (who.int), May 2019. Accessed October 2022.

³ Depression: What is burnout? - InformedHealth.org - NCBI Bookshelf (nih.gov), June 2020. Accessed October 2022.

⁴ Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases (who.int) May 2019. Accessed October 2022. Burnout Prevention and Treatment - HelpGuide.org, November 2021. Accessed October 2022.

⁵ Job burnout: How to spot it and take action - Mayo Clinic, June 2021. Accessed October 2022.

⁶ Burnout Prevention and Treatment - HelpGuide.org, November 2021. Accessed October 2022. Job burnout: How to spot it and take action - Mayo Clinic, June 2021. Accessed October 2022.