

What is 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.

How can you tell if you're burning out?

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.

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

- Frustration and powerlessness
- Hopelessness
- Being drained of emotional energy
- Detachment, withdrawal, isolation
- Being trapped
- Having failed at what you're doing
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Cynicism (people act out of selfishness and nothing can be done about it)

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 itself as depression, you might want to sleep all the time or always be “too tired” to socialize. You might turn to escapist behaviours 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.

What is 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

Characterized by over engagement

Burnout

Characterized by disengagement

Emotions are over reactive	<i>Emotions are blunted</i>
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	<i>Produces helplessness and hopelessness</i>
Exhausts physical energy	<i>Exhausts motivation and drive, ideals and hope</i>
Leads to anxiety disorders	<i>Leads to paranoia, detachment, and depression</i>
Causes disintegration	<i>Causes demoralization</i>
Primary damage is physical	<i>Primary damage is emotional</i>

Stress may kill you prematurely, and you won't have enough time to finish what you started.

Burnout may never kill you, but your life may not seem 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, and the detachment from others — can take months to surface. If someone close to you points out changes in your attitude or behaviour that are typical of burnout, listen to that person.

What causes job burnout?

Most of us have days when we're bored to death with what we do at work; when our co-workers and bosses seem irremediably wrong-headed; 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; when caring about work seems like a waste of energy; when nothing we do appears to make a difference in a workplace full of bullying supervisors, clueless colleagues, and ungrateful clients.

We all have bad days at work. But when every day is a bad day, you're flirting with burnout.

Most burnout has to do with the workplace, and it's present in every occupation. Those most at risk may be 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, or if they're underpaid, unappreciated, or criticized for matters beyond their control.

The following scenarios can lead to workplace burnout:

- 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.

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.

Can burnout be prevented or treated?

Because burnout is related to stress, many of the methods effective in countering stress can help prevent burnout as well. 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.

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.

Ways to Prevent Job Burnout

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.

Look for a new job

Update your résumé and apply for jobs that are related to but different from what you do now.

Make a career move

Get whatever training you need to make a big move in the same field, such as practicing a new area of law or teaching high school rather than elementary.

Make a career change

If you know you want to work in a different career, start taking steps toward it now, even if it's one community-college course at a time. Find out what the requirements are for the job you really want and start meeting them little by little.

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.

Best defence against all burnout: Being with other people.

Although taking time to yourself to relax is important in reducing stress, if you are approaching burnout, it's also crucial that you cultivate relationships with other people and spend time socializing with them. Poor relationships and isolation can contribute to burnout, but positive relationships can help prevent or reduce its onset.

Here are some steps you can take to improve your relationships with others:

- 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 under appreciated. 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.

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 find ways to get your needs met.