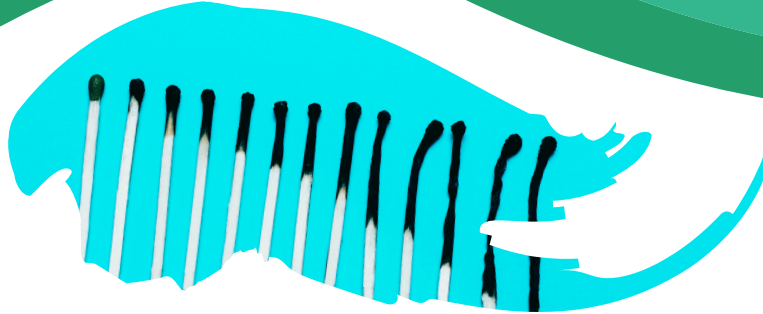




Understanding Burnout

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Burnout is the result of excessive and chronic stress that has not been successfully managed. It is a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, which can lead to feelings of depletion, mental distance from tasks, and reduced productivity. When you are in a state of burnout, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

Burnout often stems from work; however, over the past 18 months, many people are reporting symptoms of burnout after extended periods of lockdown. This may be due to compounding stressors, such as increased pressure while working from home and home-schooling, additional life stressors such as financial difficulties, and reduced access to social support systems that help us through challenging times.

Recognising the Signs and Symptoms

Everyone has probably experienced stress at one point. When stress is excessive, prolonged, and unmanaged, it can lead to burnout.

When experiencing stress, people can still recognise their capacity to feel better if things were under control. They may continue to operate, but with a sense of urgency or hyperactivity. People experiencing burnout struggle to see the possibility of positive change, describing feelings of being empty and beyond caring.

Burnout is a gradual process, so recognising the signs before it progresses is crucial. Early symptoms are evident in three main areas:

- **Physical:** for example, frequent illness, feeling tired most of the time, headaches, or changes in appetite or sleeping habits. Other symptoms could include chest pain, heart palpitations, or shortness of breath

- **Psychological:** for example, forgetfulness, reduced concentration, negative outlook, feelings of isolation or helplessness, and a loss of motivation. Symptoms may also include excessive anxiety or worry, hypersensitivity, irritability, or frustration
- **Behavioural:** for example, isolation, withdrawal, increase in alcohol or drug use, absenteeism from work, or reduced productivity. Despite working longer hours or putting more time into projects, you may be left with uncompleted tasks or with deadlines not being met.

Prevention and Recovery

When we can recognise the early signs of impending burnout, we can reduce the likelihood of severe and longer lasting symptoms. The following six steps can help you manage symptoms of burnout and get you started on the road to recovery.

1. Find the Source and Make Immediate Changes

Burnout often relates to occupational stress, but the combination of a number of professional and personal stressors can lead us to feel overwhelmed. Say you are working full-time, caring for a young family, remaining socially connected with friends, and managing a chronic health condition, all while dealing with relationship problems. Each stressor may be manageable in isolation, but the combination of these prolonged stressors can lead to symptoms of burnout.

Immediate changes may help lighten the load. Delegating tasks at work, requesting flexible working hours, seeking support from loved ones, or evaluating your social commitments, for example, may assist in the above scenario.

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2. Enhance Psychological Detachment

Psychological detachment is when we switch off mentally from work or other stressors. Just like creating a physical space, detaching psychologically can help us recharge our batteries and get the most from our downtime. Psychological detachment is not a sign of a lack of connection or care about our work or the problem we are managing. Rather, it is a skill that can help create the opposite.

When we can psychologically detach, we can return to work or our stressor feeling restored and engaged. Taking up a hobby, reading, exercising, and unplugging from technology are all effective psychological detachment strategies you can try.

3. Self-Compassion

When experiencing burnout, people often have a sense of hopelessness and feel like a failure. We are often our hardest critic. At this point you might feel like you can't do anything properly or have lost direction. Practicing self-compassion means giving yourself some love. Remind yourself that it's okay to need a break and try prioritising yourself.

4. Re-Evaluate Priorities

Perhaps you've stopped engaging in activities that bring you joy. You may have disengaged from your social networks, or you may be experiencing resentment about a job you once loved. Remember what makes you happy and what you enjoy.

Take time to re-evaluate your priorities and think about what you really want in your life. This can help you identify factors that prevent burnout developing.

5. Focus on Health and Wellbeing

Taking charge of your physical health and wellbeing is an important key to burnout prevention and recovery. Exercise can give us an emotional boost – even a short walk can provide benefits. Eating a healthy balanced diet and practicing good sleep habits to achieve a restful sleep are also essential for our wellbeing.

Meditation and mindfulness activities can also be beneficial in preventing burnout. They can help you distract and relax, which reduces the levels of stress hormones in the body.

6. Seek Professional Help

Recovery from burnout isn't easy. Feelings of helplessness and a persistent low mood can be challenging to confront alone. Professional support can help provide guidance in identifying the cause of burnout, exploring coping strategies, and implementing these into your everyday life.

Final Words

Exposure to continual stress can cause us to burn out; however, burnout doesn't happen overnight. Recognising the early signs is crucial in prevention and recovery. It's impossible to avoid stress completely, so it is vital that we engage in activities that regularly recharge our batteries.

