

Preventing Burnout



Burnout was first identified by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974. He described it as 'physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.'

Over 40 years later burnout is an all too common feature of working life, with over 11.3 million working days lost in 2013/14 due to work related illness. Most of us have either experienced it or recognise it amongst our friends and colleagues. Certain occupations have shown consistently high levels of work related absence; health professionals, teachers and social care professionals appear to be particularly at risk. Yet it is also increasingly common in sectors such as finance, the police and amongst senior level employees.

The reality is it can happen to any one of us if we do not recognise and respond to the warning signs. Many factors contribute to burnout – mental attitude, work expectations, personal lives and physical self care – and it has an uncanny

knack of creeping up on us, gradually making things more and more difficult, until finally one day we snap.

Fortunately if we know what to look for, and pause to check in with ourselves every once in a while, we can make changes that prevent us from reaching that snapping point. Burnout can feel like the end of the world but it is really a wake up call telling us that our lives are out of balance and things need to change. If we take this message seriously we can step back, re-evaluate our priorities and tread a more sustainable and satisfying path. This helpsheet will help you to identify some of the warning signs and suggest some preventative steps you can take. If there is anything that you would like to know more about please look at the resources at the end of the helpsheet or you can speak to one of our Adviceline team.

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Who is at risk of burnout?

We are all susceptible to burn out as we are all bound by human limitations. It is nothing to do with who is strong and who is weak although sadly some working cultures may perpetuate that myth.

Everybody has a breaking point and where that breaking point is, and what contributes to it, is different for each individual. While Sam thrives in a high energy, deadline orientated environment, their colleague Jay performs optimally in an environment where they have plenty of quiet time to focus and explore ideas in depth.

Were those two people to swap roles there would be a problem and over time they would experience heightened levels of stress. Being able to differentiate between the environments and roles that allow us to excel, and those that raise our anxiety levels is an important aspect of preventing burnout as it allows us to make choices that suit our dispositions.

Causes of burnout

- ▶ **Work related stress** – Stress is a common feature in many jobs but provided it is short lived and manageable it is unlikely to cause significant problems. Burnout is the result of prolonged periods of stress. You are more at risk if you feel you have little or no control over your work or you receive little or no recognition for good work. A persistently high level of chaos or pressure will eventually have adverse

effects, particularly if expectations are unclear or too high. It is also possible that a job that is dull, unchallenging or unfulfilling can cause increased stress levels over time.

- ▶ **Lifestyle factors** – Burnout is exacerbated by an unsustainable life / work balance. When work takes over so many things tend to take 2nd place, including those that give us meaning, purpose and pleasure - family, socialising, hobbies or simply some much needed downtime. Our health frequently is overlooked, as we skip meals and exercise in order to maximise work time.
- ▶ **Friends and families** can be a source of strength and comfort but sometimes they make overwhelming demands, leaving you with a greater burden of responsibility that you deserve or are willing to take on. Isolation can equally be damaging, if we have nobody to lean on, lift our spirits or simply be with us in our darker times.
- ▶ **Mental attitude** – The Financial Times cited that people who are competitive, self-critical and perfectionists are at greater risk. It is particularly evident amongst high achievers, who may of course appear to be successful. Having high standards is useful in any role, but it is a big problem if it feels like nothing is ever good enough, or if you need to control everything and everyone. While it is great to be motivated and have goals the downside is that if they are too demanding, and you forget to be kind to yourself, they can be you undoing and you can end up feeling like a failure. Another factor is a tendency to internalise stressful experiences, rather than discussing them, reflecting on them or dealing with them.

Signs of burn out

Burnout is a gradual process that occurs over an extended period of time. The earlier you can catch it, the better. Here are some of the warning signs to look out for, although this is not an exhaustive list and the experience and symptoms will vary:

- ▶ **Decline in general health** – frequent minor illnesses such as colds, taking longer to recover from illness, headaches, digestive issues, changes in skin health such as eczema or acne breakouts, loss of libido, fatigue, exhaustion

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- ▶ **Poor concentration** – inability to focus on what you are doing, being forgetful and less effective at your work
- ▶ **Attempting to self-soothe / escape** – increased use of alcohol or drugs, gambling, on-line gaming, pornography, comfort eating or self-harm. These behaviours often mask difficult feelings that we do not wish to face, and for brief periods we feel better. In the long term they are damaging and do not address the actual situation which is causing distress.
- ▶ **Change in mood** – irritability, sadness, despair, impatience with friends and family, frequent tearfulness, feeling helpless, worthless, resentful or cynical
- ▶ **Anxiety** – palpitations, panic attacks, on high alert, persistent worries that are never resolved.
- ▶ **Disturbed sleep** – difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, waking during the night for no apparent reason or waking up feeling unrefreshed after a full night's sleep.

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- ▶ **Decide what you can let go of** – Burnout is a sign that what you are doing is overwhelming and unsustainable. In order to make life more manageable you need to decide what you can give up. A good starting point is to imagine

how your perfect life would be structured – you can break it down into percentages of leisure time, family time, hobbies, fitness and whatever else is important to you. Once you have done this compare it to how your life is now and see how they match, or do not match up. You can then identify the areas of your life that require change. Of course there are things that cannot be changed; the need to earn an income, look after family and so on, but there is usually some room for improvement, even if it seems small to begin with. Often the pressure is self-imposed and by changing our attitude we can have some relief, e.g. it may not be necessary to be the best salesperson in the UK, instead recognise when you are 'good enough'.

- ▶ **Delegate** – You don't have to do it all by yourself. Delegation is a necessary part of managing workload but for some it is easier said than done. It may be that you feel you can do something better yourself, perhaps you dread the idea of having to spend time training someone or you feel as though you are offloading and should be able to manage on your own. It can be helpful to remember that by delegating you are offering others the chance to grow and develop their skills. Always be clear about what the objectives are so that you allow the person to find their own way of approaching something whilst adhering to the key objectives. You might even learn something valuable from them. It may take time and patience to train someone else but the pay off is often worth it.
- ▶ It is also important that your values and the organisation's values are in alignment as this provides the motivation for you to do well. For instance a vegetarian working at McDonalds, or a pacifist working in an arms factory, is unlikely to be committed to the role.
- ▶ **Talk to your line manager** – When work seems overwhelming discuss your concerns with your line manager. It may be within their control to implement changes that can make a real difference. If possible have some suggestions ready before you approach them; perhaps there are others who could take on some of your workload, or working from home for one day each week would help ease the load. In some instances just having the opportunity to talk something through thoroughly can bring some clarity.



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- Is this the right job for you?** – Sometimes, despite best efforts, you may conclude that you are doing a role that is simply not suited to you. Most of us would accept that even the best jobs have elements that are less enjoyable, but if none of it is enjoyable then stress will build up. Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi asserts that we work best in a field in which we can achieve flow. This is the state of effortless concentration and enjoyment we experience when we are fully immersed in a task. It is well recognised amongst artists, musicians, gardeners, sports players and it is what children experience when they play. At work we can achieve this if we are doing tasks that we enjoy; a supermarket cashier can achieve flow in the way she interacts with her customers, it could happen during a routing surgical operation, writing a report or giving a presentation. Take some time to reflect on whether you have enough opportunities to achieve this in your current role.
- Adopt a healthy lifestyle** – When we are busy it is easy to forget to look after ourselves, yet this is precisely when we need peak health in order to keep us mentally alert and physically fit. Skipping meals and failing to get adequate exercise will only result in poor concentration, sluggishness and general ill health. Ensure you eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly and have at least 20 minutes exposure to daylight each day. Try to get adequate rest and sleep.

- Schedule in downtime** – put it in your diary and make sure you stick to it.

Conclusion

Hopefully if you heed the warnings and take some positive steps early on you will avoid burnout. If you have already reached burnout then know that it is not too late to implement changes that make your life better, and allow yourself to take the time to fully relax and recover.

Further Resources

The Joy of Burnout: How the end of the world can be a new beginning

by Dr Dina Glouberman

Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-being, Wisdom and Wonder

by Arianna Huffington

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