Preventing Burnout
Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Coping Strategies

If constant stress has you feeling disillusioned, helpless, and completely worn out, 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.

The unhappiness and detachment that burnout causes can threaten your job, your relationships, and your health. But burnout can be healed. You can regain your balance by reassessing priorities, making time for yourself, and seeking support.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs 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 helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

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 out of bed requires the determination of Hercules. If you feel like this most of the time, however, you may have burnout.

You may be on the road to burnout if:

- Every day is a bad day.
- Caring about your work or home life seems like a total waste of energy.
- You’re exhausted all the time.
- The majority of your day is spent on tasks you find either mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming.
- You feel like nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated.

The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life—including your home and social life. Burnout can also cause long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses like colds and flu. Because of its many consequences, it’s important to deal with burnout right away.

Dealing with burnout: The "Three R" approach

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

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. While you’re usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don’t always notice burnout when it happens.
Stress vs. Burnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stress</th>
<th>Burnout</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characterized by overengagement</td>
<td>Characterized by disengagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotions are overreactive</td>
<td>Emotions are blunted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Produces urgency and hyperactivity</td>
<td>Produces helplessness and hopelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of energy</td>
<td>Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads to anxiety disorders</td>
<td>Leads to detachment and depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary damage is physical</td>
<td>Primary damage is emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May kill you prematurely</td>
<td>May make life seem not worth living</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Stress and Burnout in Ministry

Causes of burnout

In many cases, burnout stems from your job. Anyone who feels overworked and undervalued is at risk for burnout—from the hardworking office worker who hasn’t had a vacation or a raise in two years, to the frazzled stay-at-home mom struggling with the heavy responsibility of taking care of three kids, the housework, and her aging father.

But burnout is not caused solely by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors contribute to burnout, including your lifestyle and certain personality traits. What you do in your downtime and how you look at the world can play just as big of a role in causing burnout as work or home demands.

Work-related causes of burnout

- Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
- Lack of recognition or rewards for good work
- Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
- Doing work that’s monotonous or unchallenging
- Working in a chaotic or high-pressure environment

Lifestyle causes of burnout

- Working too much, without enough time for relaxing and socializing
- Being expected to be too many things to too many people
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep
- Lack of close, supportive relationships

Personality traits can contribute to burnout

- Perfectionistic tendencies; nothing is ever good enough
- Pessimistic view of yourself and the world
- The need to be in control; reluctance to delegate to others
- High-achieving, Type A personality

Warning signs and symptoms of burnout

Burnout is a gradual process that occurs over an extended period of time. It doesn’t happen overnight, but it can creep up on you if you’re not paying attention to the warning signals. The signs and symptoms of burnout are subtle at first, but they get worse and worse as time goes on.

Think of the early symptoms of burnout as warning signs or red flags that something is wrong that needs to be addressed. If you pay attention to these early warning signs, you can prevent a major breakdown. If you ignore them, you’ll eventually burn out.

Physical signs and symptoms of burnout

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, feeling sick a lot
- Frequent headaches, back pain, muscle aches
- Change in appetite or sleep habits
Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout

- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout

- Withdrawing from responsibilities
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
- Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope
- Taking out your frustrations on others
- Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early

Preventing burnout

If you recognize the warning signs of impending burnout in yourself, remember that it will only get worse if you leave it alone. But if you take steps to get your life back into balance, you can prevent burnout from becoming a full-blown breakdown.

Burnout prevention tips

- **Start the day with a relaxing ritual.** Rather than jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, spend at least fifteen minutes meditating, writing in your journal, doing gentle stretches, or reading something that inspires you.
- **Adopt healthy eating, exercising, and sleeping habits.** When you eat right, engage in regular physical activity, and get plenty of rest, you have the energy and resilience to deal with life’s hassles and demands.
- **Set boundaries.** Don’t overextend yourself. Learn how to say “no” to requests on your time. If you find this difficult, remind yourself that saying “no” allows you to say “yes” to the things that you truly want to do.
- **Take a daily break from technology.** Set a time each day when you completely disconnect. Put away your laptop, turn off your phone, and stop checking email.
- **Nourish your creative side.** Creativity is a powerful antidote to burnout. Try something new, start a fun project, or resume a favorite hobby. Choose activities that have nothing to do with work.
- **Learn how to manage stress.** When you’re on the road to burnout, you may feel helpless. But you have a lot more control over stress than you may think. Learning how to manage stress can help you regain your balance.

Recovering from burnout

Sometimes it’s too late to prevent burnout—you’re already past the breaking point. If that’s the case, it’s important to take your burnout very seriously. Trying to push through the exhaustion and continue as you have been will only cause further emotional and physical damage.

While the tips for preventing burnout are still helpful at this stage, recovery requires additional steps.

**Burnout recovery strategy #1: Slow down**

When you’ve reached the end stage of burnout, adjusting your attitude or looking after your health isn’t going to solve the problem. You need to force yourself to slow down or take a break. Cut back whatever commitments and activities you can. Give yourself time to rest, reflect, and heal.

**Burnout recovery strategy #2: Get support**

When you’re burned out, the natural tendency is to protect what little energy you have left by isolating yourself. But your friends and family are more important than ever during difficult times. Turn to your loved ones for support. Simply sharing your feelings with another person can relieve some of the stress. The other person doesn’t have to ret to “fix” your problems; he or she just has to be a good listener. Opening up won’t make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your friendship.

**Burnout recovery strategy #3: Reevaluate your goals and priorities**

Burnout is an undeniable sign that something important in your life is not working. Take time to think about your hopes, goals, and dreams. Are you neglecting something that is truly important to you? Burnout can be an opportunity to rediscover what really makes you happy and to change course accordingly.

Recovering from burnout: Acknowledge your losses
Burnout brings with it many losses, which can often go unrecognized. Unrecognized losses trap a lot of your energy. It takes a tremendous amount of emotional control to keep yourself from feeling the pain of these losses. When you recognize these losses and allow yourself to grieve them, you release that trapped energy and open yourself to healing. These may include the loss of:

- Idealism or dream with which you entered your career
- The role or identity that originally came with your job
- Physical and emotional energy
- Friends, fun, and sense of community
- Self-esteem and sense of control
- Joy, meaning and purpose that make work—and life—worthwhile

Source: *Keeping the Fire* by Ruth Luban

Coping with job burnout

The most effective way to combat 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.

- **Actively address problems.** Take a proactive rather than a passive approach to issues in your workplace, including stress at work. You’ll feel less helpless if you assert yourself and express your needs. If you don’t have the authority or resources to solve the problem, talk to a superior.
- **Clarify your job description.** Ask your boss for an updated description of your job duties and responsibilities. Point out things you’re expected to do that 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.
- **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.

More help for preventing burnout

FEELING LOVED
The Science of Nurturing Meaningful Connections and Building Lasting Happiness

Is stress hurting your work and relationships? Dr. Jeanne Segal’s engaging and practical new book can help you make life improving changes. LEARN MORE »

- Caregiver Stress and Burnout: Tips for Recharging and Finding Balance
- Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes: Understanding Stress Responses and Reducing the Harmful Effects
- Stress at Work: Tips to Reduce and Manage Job and Work
- Job Loss and Unemployment Stress: Tips for Staying Positive During Your Job Search
- How to Stop Worrying: Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief
- Stress Relief in the Moment: Using Your Senses to Quickly Change Your Response to Stress
- Relaxation Techniques for Stress: Finding the Relaxation Exercises That Work for You
- Stress Management: How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress

Resources and references

- Burnout signs, symptoms, and causes
  - The Four Stages of Burnout – Description of the four stages of burnout, including telltale signs and symptoms. (The Stress Doc)
  - Stress and Burnout (PDF) – Learn about the signs, symptoms, and causes of burnout, along with strategies for reducing burnout. (University of Melbourne Counselling Service)

Preventing and recovering from burnout
Self-Help Burn-Out – Helpful coping tips for preventing and recovering from burnout. (Texas A&M University Student Counseling Service)

Recovering From Burnout – Advice on how to learn from your mistakes and recover from burnout by finding a new direction. (Mind Tools)

How to Prevent Burnout From Stress – Advice on preventing burnout by living like a sprinter, not a long-distance runner. Includes coping strategies and tips. (Life Evolver)

The Road to Resilience – Prevent burnout by building your resilience to stress and adversity. This article offers a wealth of helpful tips and strategies. (American Psychological Association)

Job and workplace burnout

Job Burnout: Know the Signs and Symptoms – Find out if you’re at risk of job or workplace burnout and what to do if you are. (Mayo Clinic)

Take This Job and Love It! – Research shows that burnout is not a problem of people but mostly of the places in which they work. Find out what to do about it. (Psychology Today)

Cant' Get No Satisfaction – Feature story on the growing problem of burnout in the workplace and recent research on the phenomenon. (New York Magazine)

Burnout: Is it a Burning Issue in Your Company? – Helps managers identify, prevent, and alleviate burnout among their employees and for themselves. (workplaceissues.com)

Burnout in helping careers

Stress and Burnout in Ministry – Learn how the demands of congregational life lead to stress and burnout and how members of the clergy can help themselves. (Churchlink.com)

Eight Ideas for Managing Stress and Extinguishing Burnout – Written for physicians by a pastoral counselor, this article contains eight tips for preventing burnout. (American Association of Family Practitioners)

What other readers are saying

“I got into a position where my energy and enthusiasm were declining at a puzzling and alarming rate. The article profiled the problem perfectly and was very helpful in starting me down the path to getting this fixed.” ~ Ohio

“Recently I left my job because a burnout situation, was really hard to quit. When I found your page, it was a relief. It was clear and I love your suggestions and easy tips. Your article and all your related information gave me a new hope. I’m still a job seeker but I’m healing from the burnout.” ~ Mexico


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