

# Signs of Burnout

Burnout symptoms do not manifest or develop in the same way for everyone. However, there are certain burnout symptoms that are common. In early stages of burnout someone might just notice increased irritability or physical exhaustion. In later stages of burnout, most people experience emotional, physical and behavioral signs of burnout simultaneously.

Common emotional and psychological signs of burnout include:

- Irritability
- Frustration
- [Rumination](#) about work (circular thinking or worrying about work)
- [Lack of motivation](#)
- Lower levels of confidence about your abilities
- Increased feelings of negativity, detachment or overwhelm related to your work or occupation

Common physical signs of burnout include:

- Low energy
- Profound fatigue
- Sleep problems
- Memory or concentration difficulties
- Increased vulnerability to sicknesses, like the common cold.

Common behavioral signs of burnout include:

- Reduced performance via increased mistakes or decreased efficiency
- Increased absenteeism
- Tendency to isolate self

# How to Prevent Burnout

Avoiding burnout requires you to be aware of what increases your stress at work and to take steps to reduce that stress or at least manage it effectively. There is also work that can be done at an organizational level to reduce vulnerability to burnout for their employees. In a recent survey, almost 70% of professionals surveyed felt their employers did not do enough to prevent or alleviate burnout within their organization.<sup>4</sup>

Here are 11 tips for preventing burnout:

## **1. Identify What is Bothering You**

Oftentimes work stress accumulates over time. That being said, it can be helpful to identify the areas in your work life that increase your stress (sometimes referred to as a “stressor”). This may seem obvious, but knowing which areas of your role cause you the most stress can help you manage and adjust accordingly.

## **2. Learn About Stress**

The more you know about the human stress response, the more equipped you are to manage it. Specifically, it can be helpful to remember that our stress response (otherwise known as our fight-or-flight response) was evolutionarily designed to keep us safe.

As our bodies prepare to “fight” or “flee” a number of physiological changes take place, such as increased blood flow, which makes your heart rate increase. Learning about this process helps you catch your own physical signs of stress, which can allow you to be more proactive about your need for stress relief.

## **3. Remember That Your Body Doesn’t Know the Difference Between Real or Imagined Threats**

Your stress response system is not sophisticated enough to understand the difference between a real threat (like running into a bear in the woods) versus something your brain just worries about, such as how a mistake at work might cost you your jobs.<sup>5</sup> When you spend time **worrying** about something that *might* happen, your brain thinks that it *is* happening and kicks into high gear by releasing stress hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline.

## **4. Just Breathe**

By simply taking a slow deep breath, you are immediately communicating to the part of your body that initiates your relaxation response. Because of this, simply taking a slow deep breath is a great place to start when you notice that you are stressed.

Even if your mind is still racing, at least your body is getting some information that you are not in immediate danger. To help slow down your breathing, try counting your inhales and exhales and/or putting your hand on your stomach to notice the rise and fall as you breathe.

## **5. Deal With the Stress Before You Deal With the Stressor**

In order to combat burnout, we are ideally trying to reduce and manage both the stress and the stressor. However, when doing so, we want to do at least something to reduce or manage our stress first before we focus our attention on tackling the stressor itself. Imagine that you just experienced a disrespectful encounter with an abrasive coworker.

The co-worker's comment caught you off guard, felt personal and sent your heart racing. Your body needs to shed a few tears to complete the stress cycle, but instead, you head straight to your supervisor or HR to report the issue. In this scenario, there is a high likelihood that you burst into tears when describing what happened.

This is why it is important to take a moment to yourself to address your stress before trying to tackle the stressor itself. At a minimum, take a few deep breaths and, at best, do a few things to make sure you complete the stress cycle.

## **6. Find Stress Management Tools That Work for You**

There are a ton of stress management tools and techniques out there. Whether it is breathing techniques, saying calming statements to yourself, doing yoga, taking a walk outside, having a cup of tea, turning your attention to the sunset, listening to music or laughing out loud. There is at least something for everyone that will help with stress.

In a survey on stress in America, 42% of the respondents reported that they didn't do enough to manage their stress and 20% reported doing nothing.<sup>7</sup> Doing nothing to manage your stress is a fast track to burnout, so the goal is to find the tools that works for you.

## **7. Use Daily Relaxation Reminders**

Establishing relaxation reminders throughout your day is a great way to stay consistent with managing your stress proactively. You can set a reminder on your phone or work calendar or pick an object that you start to associate with relaxation (like a picture hanging on your wall or a key chain).

If you repeatedly take a deep breath, roll your shoulders back, and think (or say) the word "calm" or "relaxed" every time you receive a reminder or see your particular relaxation object your body becomes more and more efficient at returning to a state of relaxation.

## **8. Multi-Task Your Stress Relief**

Mindfulness stress reduction techniques can reduce stress-related brain activity.<sup>8</sup>

A great way to practice mindfulness is to play around with the concept during your daily tasks, like brushing your teeth or washing the dishes. Instead of letting your mind wander (maybe leading you to thoughts of work or other worries) try to stay in the moment while completing the tasks. You can shift your focus to various senses (i.e., sight, sound, smell, touch) but stay present.

## **9. Get Realistic With Time Management**

A universal cause of stress at work is tight deadlines and running behind. While this may be an inevitable aspect of your role, many times, we find ourselves in these

scenarios because we are unrealistic about our time expectations. In other words, we never think things will take as long as they actually do.

One way to be more realistic with your time expectations is to take a snapshot of how long it takes to complete various aspects of a task, especially if it is something relatively easy to capture like number of pages. Next steps are to clearly communicate what is realistic when timelines are discussed as a team or with leadership.

## **10. Determine Your Non-Negotiables**

There is a lot of individual difference in terms of what works for whom in the workplace. Developing a good understanding of the things that cause you stress in the workplace versus the practices that don't bother you, or better yet, make you feel engaged, motivated, valued, and respected, will help you identify your best fit.

For instance, for one person, weekend work may immediately impact the aspects of their lives they love the most, and therefore is a deal breaker. Whereas for someone else, having flexibility during the weekdays is their priority, so they don't mind putting in a few hours on Sunday.

## **11. Redefine Success to Include Wellness**

As the saying goes, *if you don't pick a day to relax, your body will pick it for you*. Use your vacation time (but watch out for those [post-vacation blues](#)). Take breaks throughout the day and eat your lunch, even when you are busy. Try to think of success more [holistically](#), as in reaching your career goals, while also enjoying your life and caring for your mind and body. Narrowly defining success in terms of achievement-oriented milestones only can encourage you to neglect other important areas of your life, which is not sustainable long term.

## **When Can Therapy Help?**

Therapy can be helpful any time you want additional support around your psychological health and the workplace. Therapy would be especially important if your work stress starts to dominate your life and impacts other areas of your wellbeing, such as your relationships. There are also specific [types of therapy to help manage stress](#) such as [mindfulness based stress reduction](#).