

Burnout Prevention and Treatment

Techniques for Dealing with Overwhelming Stress



If constant stress has you feeling helpless, disillusioned, and completely exhausted, you may be on the road to 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 take action to help yourself. The unhappiness and detachment caused by burnout can threaten your job, your relationships, and your health. But by recognizing the earliest warning signs, you can take steps to prevent it. Or if you've already hit breaking point, there are plenty of things you can do to regain your balance and start to feel positive and hopeful again.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by [excessive and prolonged stress](#). It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest and motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Burnout reduces 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.

The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life—including your home, work, 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.

Are you on the road to 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.

Signs and symptoms of burnout

Most of us have days when we feel helpless, overloaded, or unappreciated—when dragging ourselves out of bed requires the determination of Hercules. If you feel like this most of the time, however, you may be burned out.

Burnout is a gradual process. It doesn't happen overnight, but it can creep up on you. The signs and symptoms are subtle at first, but become worse as time goes on. Think of the early symptoms as red flags that something is wrong that needs to be addressed. If you pay attention and actively reduce your stress, 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, frequent illnesses
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain
- 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

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 mentally. However, stressed people can still imagine 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 and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress feels like you're drowning in responsibilities, burnout is a sense of being all dried up. And while you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens.

Stress vs. Burnout

Stress	Burnout
Characterized by over-engagement	Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are overreactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to anxiety disorders	Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is physical	Primary damage is emotional
May kill you prematurely	May make life seem not worth living

Source:
Stress and Burnout in Ministry

Causes of burnout

Burnout often stems from your job. But anyone who feels overworked and undervalued is at risk for burnout, from the hardworking office worker who hasn't had a vacation in years, to the frazzled stay-at-home mom tending to kids, housework, and [an aging parent](#).

But burnout is not caused solely by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors contribute to burnout, including your lifestyle and personality traits. In fact, what you do in your downtime and how you look at the world can play just as big of a role in causing overwhelming stress 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 reward 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 socializing or relaxing
- Lack of close, supportive relationships
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep

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

Time to act

Whether you recognize the warning signs of impending burnout or you're already past the breaking point, trying to push through the exhaustion and continuing as you have been will only cause further emotional and physical damage. Now is the time to pause and change direction by learning how you can help yourself overcome burnout and feel healthy and positive again.

Dealing with burnout requires the "Three R" approach:

Recognize - Watch for the warning signs of burnout

Reverse - Undo the damage by seeking support and managing stress

Resilience - Build your resilience to stress by taking care of your physical and emotional health

To deal with burnout, turn to other people

When you're on the road to burnout, you can feel helpless. But you have a lot more control over stress than you may think. There are positive steps you can take to deal with overwhelming stress and get your life back into balance. One of the most effective is to reach out to others.

Social contact is nature's antidote to stress and talking face to face with a good listener is one of the fastest ways to calm your nervous system and relieve stress. The person you talk to doesn't have to be able to "fix" your stressors; they just have to be a good listener, someone who'll listen attentively without becoming distracted or expressing judgment.

Reach out to those closest to you, such as your partner, family, and friends. Opening up won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends and loved ones will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your friendship. Try not to think about what's burning you out and make the time you spend with loved ones positive and enjoyable.

Be more sociable with your coworkers. Developing friendships with people you work with can help buffer you from job burnout. When you take a break, for example, instead of directing your attention to your smart phone, try engaging your colleagues. Or schedule social events together after work.

Limit your contact with negative people. Hanging out with negative-minded people who do nothing but complain will only drag down your mood and outlook. If you have to work with a negative person, try to limit the amount of time you spend together.

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.

Find new friends. If you don't feel that you have anyone to turn to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](#) and expand your social network.

The power of giving

Being helpful to others delivers immense pleasure and can help to significantly reduce stress as well as broaden your social circle.

While it's important not to take on too much when you're facing overwhelming stress, helping others doesn't have to involve a lot of time or effort. Even small things like a kind word or friendly smile can make you feel better and help lower stress both for you and the other person.

Reframe the way you look at work

Whether you have a job that leaves you rushed off your feet or one that is monotonous and unfulfilling, the most effective way to combat [job burnout](#) is to quit and find a job you love instead. Of course, for many of us [changing job or career](#) is far from being a practical solution, we're grateful just to have work that pays the bills. Whatever your situation, though, there are still steps you can take to improve your state of mind.

Try to find some value in your work. Even in some mundane jobs, you can often focus on how your role helps others, for example, or provides a much-needed product or service. Focus on aspects of the job that you do enjoy, even if it's just chatting with your coworkers at lunch. Changing your attitude towards your job can help you regain a sense of purpose and control.

Find balance in your life. If you hate your job, look for meaning and satisfaction elsewhere in your life: in your family, friends, hobbies, or [voluntary work](#). Focus on the parts of your life that bring you joy.

Make friends at work. Having strong ties in the workplace can help reduce monotony and counter the effects of burnout. Having friends to chat and joke with during the day can help relieve stress from an unfulfilling or demanding job, improve your job performance, or simply get you through a rough day.

Take time off. If burnout seems inevitable, try to 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 pursue other methods of recovery.

Reevaluate 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? This can be an opportunity to rediscover what really makes you happy and to slow down and give yourself time to rest, reflect, and heal.

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 commitments you want to make.

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 or whatever is causing your stress.

Set aside relaxation time. [Relaxation techniques](#) such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response.

Get plenty of sleep. Feeling tired can exacerbate burnout by causing you to think irrationally. Keep your cool in stressful situations by [getting a good night's sleep](#).

Boost your ability to stay on task

If you're having trouble following through with these self-help tips to prevent or overcome burnout, HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) can help.

- Learn how to reduce stress in the moment.
- Manage troublesome thoughts and feelings.
- Motivate yourself to take the steps that can relieve stress and burnout.
- Improve your relationships at work and home.
- Rediscover joy and meaning that make work and life worthwhile.
- Increase your overall health and happiness.

Make exercise a priority

Even though it may be the last thing you feel like doing when you're burned out, exercise is a [powerful antidote to stress and burnout](#). It's also something you can do right now to boost your mood.

Aim to exercise for 30 minutes or more per day or break that up into short, 10-minute bursts of activity. A 10-minute walk can improve your mood for two hours.

Rhythmic exercise, where you move both your arms and legs, is a hugely effective way to lift your mood, increase energy, sharpen focus, and relax both the mind and body. Try walking, running, weight training, swimming, martial arts, or even dancing.

To maximize stress relief, instead of continuing to focus on your thoughts, focus on your body and how it feels as you move: the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the wind on your skin.

Support your mood and energy levels by eating a healthy diet

What you put in your body can have a huge impact on your mood and energy levels throughout the day.

Minimize sugar and refined carbs. You may crave sugary snacks or comfort foods such as pasta or French fries, but these [high-carbohydrate foods](#) quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy.

Reduce your high intake of foods that can adversely affect your mood, such as caffeine, trans fats, and foods with chemical preservatives or hormones.

Eat more Omega-3 fatty acids to give your mood a boost.

[The best sources](#) are fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines), seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

Avoid nicotine. Smoking when you're feeling stressed may seem calming, but nicotine is a powerful stimulant, leading to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety.

Drink alcohol in moderation. Alcohol temporarily reduces worry, but too much can cause anxiety as it wears off.

Recommended resources



[Stress Management](#): Enhance your well-being by reducing stress and building resilience - Harvard Medical School Special Health Report

[The Road to Resilience](#) - Prevent burnout by building your resilience to stress and adversity. (American Psychological Association)

[Job Burnout: How to Spot it and Take Action](#) - Find out if you're at risk of workplace burnout and what to do if you are. (Mayo Clinic)

[Self-Help Burn-Out](#) - Coping tips to prevent and recover from burnout. (Texas A&M University Student Counseling Service)

HelpGuide

Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., Lawrence Robinson, and Robert Segal, M.A. Last updated: November 2018.