

FD Consultants

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Specialist Services

Burnout information sheet

Burnout is a negative state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that is the end result of a gradual process of disillusionment. It is typically found among highly motivated individuals who work over long periods of time in situations that are emotionally demanding (Schaufeli, Maslach & Marek).



What is Burnout?

- Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to:
 - *physical and emotional exhaustion*
 - *cynicism and detachment*
 - *feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment*
- Alongside working long and hard, someone suffering from burnout is likely to have lost a sense of meaning or purpose in their work. They may also sense a misalignment between their own values and those they see their organisation as upholding. “Burnout creeps in when meaning is lost, when you no longer feel what you do matters; when you experience a dissonance between your values, what you believe in, and what you are asked to do; and when there is a gap between what your organisation preaches and what it actually does” (Pigni, 2016, p.30).
- High achievers, those with a particularly conscientious or ‘perfectionist’ outlook, and those doing work driven by strong personal values may be especially at risk of burnout. This is because they often feel compelled to work longer and harder to meet lofty standards, or to satisfy other people’s perceived needs. When this becomes unsustainable the end result is burnout.

Burnout doesn’t happen suddenly, and the signs tend to creep up over time. Our bodies and minds tend to give us warnings, which helps because we can then recognize and address burnout within ourselves and others.

- Someone experiencing full-fledged burnout will become ‘inoperative’ – i.e. no longer able to function on a personal or professional level. They may need a considerable amount of time off to recuperate physically and psychologically and may not return to their workplace at all. This highlights the costs and damage that burnout can present to teams, organisations, and individual relationships, and the importance of catching it early.

Stress and Burnout

- Most signs and symptoms of burnout exist on a continuum. In milder forms, some may indicate benign levels of stress but, when more intense or frequent, point towards burnout.
- We all experience stress from time to time, and sometimes it is manageable and even motivating. However, if we aren’t able to regularly rest and withdraw from stressful situations, we run the risk of hitting burnout, especially if we feel we’re hitting dead-ends, or that our work is losing a sense of purpose.
- Look out if you find yourself regularly feeling stressed with little opportunity for rest or reflection.

What are the common symptoms for Burnout?

Most of the symptoms of burnout can be categorised under these broad headings:

Physical and Emotional Exhaustion

- *Chronic Fatigue.* In the early stages – feeling tired and lacking in energy. In the later stages - feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, perhaps dreading what lies ahead each day.
- *Insomnia/Disturbed Sleep.* Initially struggling to fall or stay asleep a couple of nights a week may progress to insomnia being a nightly occurrence where, in spite of exhaustion, you simply can't sleep.
- *Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating.* Lack of focus and mild forgetfulness are early signs of burnout. Later, impaired concentration means you can't complete your work, and everything piles up.
- *Physical symptoms and increased illness.* Physical symptoms such as chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, gastrointestinal discomfort, dizziness, fainting, and headaches can all be indicators of increasing stress. Moving towards burnout someone's body will likely be depleted so their immune system will be weakened. This means increased vulnerability to colds and infections.
- *Appetite and eating.* In the early stages, you may not feel hungry and skip a few meals or start to binge eat. Further in, you may lose your appetite all together or maintain an unhealthy diet with erratic eating patterns. Significant weight loss or gain can therefore become apparent as burnout manifests.
- *Anxiety.* Early on, you may experience mild symptoms of tension, worry, and edginess. As you move closer to burnout, anxiety will intensify and start interfering in your ability to work productively. It might also cause problems in your personal life.

- *Depression.* In the early stages, you may feel slightly sad and occasionally hopeless, alongside experiencing feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Closer to burnout, you may feel trapped, severely depressed, and as if the world would be better off without you.
- *Anger.* At first, this may present as interpersonal tension and irritability. In the latter stages, it may manifest into angry outbursts and serious arguments at home and in the workplace.

Cynicism and Detachment

- *Loss of enjoyment.* At first, you may not want to go to work or feel eager to leave each day. Later, loss of enjoyment may extend to all areas of your life, including time spent with family and friends. At work, you may try to avoid involvement in projects and seek ways to escape work all together.
- *Pessimism.* Initially you may experience negative self-talk and move from a glass half-full to a glass half-empty attitude. Further into burnout, this extends from how you feel about yourself to others, potentially creating trust issues with colleagues and family members and a feeling that you can't count on anyone.
- *Isolation.* In the early stages, you may feel mildly resistant to mixing with others - avoiding lunch and social events with colleagues or closing your door to keep them away. In the latter stages, you may become angry when someone speaks to you, or come in early or leave late to avoid interactions.
- *Detachment.* This means feeling disconnected from others or from your environment. It can start through some of the isolative behaviours described above and progress towards removing yourself emotionally and physically from your job and other responsibilities. You may call in sick often, stop returning calls and emails, or regularly come in late.

Ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

- *Feelings of apathy and hopelessness.* Similar to depression and pessimism, apathy and hopelessness present as a general sense that nothing is going right, or nothing matters. As symptoms worsen, these feelings may become immobilising, making it seem like “what’s the point”?
- *Increased irritability.* This often stems from feeling ineffective, unimportant, and unable to do things as efficiently or effectively as before. In the early stages, this can interfere in personal and professional interactions but, at its worst, it can do lasting damage to relationships and careers.
- *Lack of productivity and poor performance.* Despite long hours, chronic stress impedes productivity, which often results in incomplete projects and an ever-growing to-do list. At times, it seems that as hard as you try, you can’t climb out from under the pile.

Self-help tips for managing Burnout

- If you recognise clusters of these symptoms in yourself, or in a colleague or employee, it’s important to address them early. Burnout does not go away on its own without changes to working patterns or lifestyle being made.
- If you’re an employee feeling at risk of burnout at work, speak to your line-manager to explain how you’re feeling and find out what adjustments are possible.
- If you’re exhausted, see if you can take a break (we’d advise making sure you use your annual leave, R&R, or any TOIL allowance on a regular basis).
- Ask if you can refocus on tasks and activities that seem realistically achievable, that you feel motivated by, and that fit in with your personal values.
- Outside of work, seek to maintain balance by attending to your self-care, relationships and, if relevant, spirituality.

- It can also help to step back and remind yourself of the ‘bigger picture’ with regards to what your team and organisation do, trying to see some of the successes. When burnout kicks in we can take a very narrow focus, becoming preoccupied with our own struggles and perceived failings.
- It is particularly important to aim for healthy patterns of sleep (learning about good [sleep hygiene](#) may help if this is a struggle), eating and exercise, avoiding too many ‘quick fixes’ (such as alcohol, drugs, junk food and pornography) that can potentially become harmful and addictive further down the line.
- Stay connected to the important people in your life (friends, family, supportive colleagues) to combat the isolation that burnout can thrive in.
- Try to find some meaningful activity to engage in outside of work that feels nourishing and replenishing. This might include creative pursuits or spiritual practice.
- If you’re an employer, it’s important to try to create a psychologically healthy workplace where staff feel safe to speak up about concerns over issues such as stress and burnout. This can be done through:
 - Offering psychosocial support interventions such as trainings or leaflets on stress-management and resilience building, alongside access to counselling.
 - Asking managers to model healthy practices by working reasonable hours and avoiding the kind of language (such as exhortations to go ‘above and beyond’ or to give ‘110%’) that can encourage burnout culture in the workplace.

Professional resources for Burnout

- The Maslach Burnout Inventory is the most commonly used assessment tool to gauge risk of burnout
<https://tinyurl.com/4u9arec3>.
- The Headington Institute www.headington-institute.org website features a range of articles and resources relating to burnout and other work-related psychosocial issues for those in the care-giving professions.

Further useful information and reading

- Gloubermann, Dina. (2003). *The Joy of Burnout*. Inner Ocean Publishing. An exploration of the opportunities that burnout can bring if seen as a signal that change is required.
- Pigni, Alessandra. (2016). *The Idealists Survival Kit: 75 Ways to Avoid Burnout*. Berkeley: Parallax Press. An accessible book on burnout especially aimed at those working in the humanitarian/international aid sector.

FD Consultants

Individual support

At FD Consultants we can help individuals recover from burnout. We are a network of accredited therapists. We specialise in stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and trauma care.

Organisational support

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant's team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.