

Understanding Burnout During COVID-19

As COVID-19 continues to sweep around the globe, millions of us have had our normal routines and responsibilities upended. Many of us are now adjusting to working from home while simultaneously balancing pressing family needs like caring for children or other relatives.

For those of us fortunate enough to still have meaningful paid work to do, it is possible that many of us were struggling to balance the pressures of work and our other demands and desires even before this pandemic. The extra upheaval and stress triggered by the pandemic has only added to the previous load. As a result, it is not surprising that we may now feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

You may even be wondering if you are experiencing burnout.

On some level, you may instinctively know what burnout is. But how much do you really know about what causes burnout, and what the early warning signs are? And do you know what can help prevent and manage burnout?

This resource explores the details on burnout—what it is, how it is different from stress, what causes burnout, and what it looks like in our day-to-day lives.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged work-related stress. It involves the gradual depletion of our resources for work, and shows up in three main ways:

- ✓ Feeling physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted
- ✓ Inability to feel our normal levels of empathy, care, and compassion for others
- ✓ A reduced sense of accomplishment and purpose

What is the difference between stress and burnout?

Oftentimes, stress and burnout lie along the same path. In other words, if we experience too much of certain types of stress for too long, that can lead to burnout.

We are usually aware of feeling too stressed. Feeling too stressed generally involves “too much”—feeling burdened, overwhelmed, or inundated by too many pressures that demand too much of us. Usually, however, when we are feeling stressed like this, we can still imagine that if we can just get everything under control, we will feel better.

Burnout, on the other hand, is farther along that track. Burnout is generally about “not enough.” When we are experiencing burnout, we are feeling empty and mentally exhausted, devoid of motivation, and largely beyond caring. In addition, we often do not feel like there is much hope of the situation changing.

If excessive stress makes you feel like you are drowning in responsibilities, burnout is a sense of having no energy left to give. And while we are often aware of being under a lot of stress, we do not always notice when that begins to push us towards burnout.

| Stress | Burnout |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Characterized by over-engagement | Characterized by disengagement |
| Emotions are over-reactive | Emotions are blunted or numbed |
| Produces urgency and hyperactivity | Produces helplessness, hopelessness and paralysis |
| Loss of physical energy | Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope |
| More often leads to anxiety | More often leads to depression and detachment |

What causes burnout?

There are three main types of contributors to burnout. These are:

1. **Work-related:** Things like heavy workload, long working hours, insufficient resources, exposure to people's suffering, job insecurity, and external pressures and demands related to funding, programming, and reporting.
2. **Lifestyle-related:** Things like working long hours without enough time for relaxing and socializing, not getting enough sleep, lack of close and supportive relationships, and patterns of taking on too many responsibilities.
3. **Personality-related:** Things like perfectionist tendencies (feeling like nothing is ever good enough or completely finished), a high need to be in control (which often leads to a reluctance to delegate or ask for help), a high-achieving, driven personality, and a more pessimistic view of yourself and the world.

How does burnout appear?

Burnout usually develops slowly. Then again, we are not usually living through a global pandemic that has suddenly triggered lots of extra work-related *and* lifestyle-related disruptions and stresses.

Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically increased the stress load, it will likely accelerate the rate at which some people will head towards burnout.

Because of this (and because we tend not to notice the ways in which we are gradually being depleted and drained over time) it is especially important to know what burnout looks like so that you can recognize it more easily when it starts to show up. Here are common signs of burnout in three areas of our lives:

1. Physical

- ✓ Feeling tired, sluggish, and drained all the time (even when it seems like you are getting enough sleep)
- ✓ Also, additional signs often triggered by heightened stress levels, such as getting sick more often, changes in appetite or sleep habits, headaches, backaches, and muscle pains

2. Mental/Emotional: This is the area where burnout appears most uniquely. Be alert for signs such as:

- ✓ Trouble focusing on your work, feeling interested in it, and completing tasks
- ✓ Difficulty making decisions and moving forward on tasks
- ✓ Becoming more absent-minded and forgetful, and finding more things slipping through the cracks
- ✓ Feeling overwhelmed and burdened by responsibilities and pressures
- ✓ Feeling like you are falling short of expectations (your own and others)
- ✓ Feeling like your work doesn't really make a difference
- ✓ Feeling used and unappreciated at work
- ✓ Feeling negative about coworker competence and dedication (and the organization as a whole)
- ✓ Feeling detached, and finding it hard to care about the problems and needs of others
- ✓ Difficulty caring about your work and whether you do it well

3. Behavioral: Here are some ways burnout can show up in behavior:

- ✓ Procrastination and having trouble getting started on things
- ✓ Taking longer to get things done
- ✓ Withdrawing and avoiding your responsibilities (including work itself)
- ✓ Avoiding people in general; being irritable; increase in unhelpful coping mechanisms (things that don't refresh and reconnect you, but mostly numb you)

If you are seeing signs of burnout:

There are a couple of important things to remember if you are seeing signs of stress and burnout right now.

First, you are not alone. People all over the world are stressed right now and experiencing all that comes with that. Do not be too quick to conclude that you are experiencing a bad case of burnout just because you feel exhausted and cannot focus well on work. Because this pandemic has triggered massive change and is forcing us to grapple with difficult and important decisions in an unpredictable context, almost everyone is experiencing *some* signs of stress and strain right now. Some of these signs and symptoms of stress will subside again as we settle into a "new normal" and find new routines and rhythms.

Second, now is the time to take action. Sure, some of the stress you are feeling now may dissipate over time, but do not forget that a lot of your usual coping mechanisms probably changed or vanished, right when all the pandemic-related stress appeared. As such, it is important to pay attention to helping yourself cope with this pressure, because many of your normal supports and outlets have changed. Once you recognize you are at risk of burnout (or already experiencing it), there is a lot you can do to help reverse the process and build your resilience. So find our related tip sheet on *Managing Burnout During COVID-19* and use it to make an action plan.