

# Module 1: What is Burnout?



You open your eyes first thing in the morning and already dread the day ahead of you. You feel exhausted and wish you could spend the day in bed. You get up, get dressed and head out the door anyway. You get to work and feel annoyed with everything and everyone around you. You don't care about your projects or the people you're supposed to help. You don't feel that what you do makes any difference to anything. You get to work anyway, but nothing that you do feels good enough. You feel sure that you're failing and that everyone sees that you're failing. You wish that you could have just stayed in bed today.

If any of the above feels familiar, you may be suffering from burnout.

## What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that many people feel after living through stress for a long time (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001).

The term burnout was first used in the 1970s to describe a collection of symptoms often seen in people working in the caring professions, for example, teachers, social workers, therapists, and those working in healthcare (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In response to stress and overwork, people working in helping professions often report feelings of exhaustion,

reduced empathy towards their clients, and a sense of reduced efficacy in their work. Since burnout was first identified and defined, it has been recognized as a condition that can affect people working in all kinds of jobs (Samra, 2018). Burnout can also be caused by stress experienced anywhere, not just at work. Stress due to caregiving responsibilities, financial hardship, school, interpersonal conflict, cultural and societal expectations, and even just the stress of everyday modern living can all lead to burnout (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020).

Although academic psychologists differ in the specific criteria that they use to define burnout, most definitions include an exhaustion component. Exhaustion at a physical, emotional, and mental level is often considered the hallmark of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2001). Exhaustion can be felt as, among other things, a sense of tiredness, low energy, reduced mental functioning, a loss of empathy, a loss of motivation, physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, a sense of worthlessness, or feeling unable to change a bad situation (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

The most popular scale for measuring burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory, often referred to as the MBI (Schaufeli et al., 2001; West et al., 2016). The MBI categorizes burnout symptoms as falling into three major categories:

- **Emotional Exhaustion** – Feeling like you are emotionally overextended. Feeling drained by interactions with other people. Feeling strained and chronically fatigued. Feeling a sense of deep and profound weariness that isn't relieved by sleep. If you notice that you are asking yourself "What now?" every time someone approaches you, you might be experiencing emotional exhaustion.
- **Depersonalization or Cynicism** – Negative, cynical, callous, or detached attitudes toward the people around you, especially people who you are responsible for, like patients, students, clients, or your children. Feeling indifferent or distant towards your work. Losing interest in your work. Feeling that your work isn't meaningful. If you feel that you just don't care about your work or the people you are supposed to be helping, you might be experiencing depersonalization or cynicism.
- **A sense of reduced Personal or Professional Accomplishment** – Negative emotions and thoughts about your achievements and your ability to succeed at work or in life in general. The feeling that you or your work doesn't contribute positively to the people or projects that you serve. A decline in your feelings of competency and your belief that you can be successful.

## Module 1 Exercise 1

Ask yourself the following questions to get an idea of how burned out you might be. Please keep in mind that burnout is not an official diagnosis recognized by the American Psychiatric Association and that this checklist should only serve as a guideline.

### **Emotional Exhaustion**

- Do you feel emotionally drained?
- Do you feel like you have less empathy or compassion than you use to?
- Do you feel like you're working too hard on your job, your relationships, or at home?
- Does the idea of facing the day make you feel tired?

### **Depersonalization/Cynicism**

- Have you become more callous towards others?
- Do you struggle to care for the people you normally care about?
- Do you feel like what you do doesn't matter or isn't important?
- Do you feel like no one cares about what you do?

### **Personal Accomplishment**

- Do you feel overwhelmed by problems?
- Do you feel you are unable to effectively deal with challenges?
- Do you feel like your contributions often make things worse?
- When there is a problem, do you struggle to stay calm?

## **Causes of Burnout**

Generally, burnout develops after exposure to chronic stress. In most classical definitions of burnout, these stressors are experienced at work. Workplace stressors can include having too much work, conflicting responsibilities at work and at home, low compensation, compensation inequality, low job security, role ambiguity, job complexity, and a lack of control over what you do (Toker & Melamed, 2017).

Feeling powerless can also lead to burnout. If you feel that what you do doesn't have any effect on the world, or if you feel that you have no control over your day or the trajectory of your career or your life you may be on your way to burnout.

Stress and a sense of powerlessness experienced in any part of life can lead to burnout. Although the burnout concept was originally developed to describe symptoms people feel after overexposure to work stress, it is now recognized that stress, overwork, and feeling powerless in any part of your life can lead to burnout.

## **The Physical Sensations of Stress**

When you experience stress, your body reacts in ways that you can probably feel. You may feel specific physical sensations as your body recruits the energy and resources needed to respond to the stressor (Black & Garbutt, 2002; Tsigos & Chrousos, 2002).

For example, if you're crossing the street and see that a car isn't going to be able to stop in time to avoid hitting you, you may feel energized, focused, and ready to take the action necessary to save your own life, notably running to safety. These sensations are due to your body releasing adrenaline into your bloodstream, your heart rate becoming elevated, your blood pressure increasing, and more oxygen getting to your brain. These physiological responses to stress are extremely adaptive and beneficial, allowing you to quickly get to safety. This stress response may also serve you well in situations that are not life-threatening but that may still require increased arousal and alertness. For example, if you have a job interview. Your body's stress response may allow you to recruit the cognitive and energetic resources you need to remain alert throughout the process.

## Module 1 Exercise 2

Think back to a time when you were faced with something scary or extremely stressful. This could be a situation where you felt that you were in physical danger, where you were scared for the safety or wellbeing of a loved one, when workplace stressors were particularly extreme, or when you felt the potential for social embarrassment. Think about how your body felt and how you perceived the world. Did you feel your heart racing? Did you get tunnel vision? Did things seem to move in slow motion? Did you have an increased sense of clarity and purpose? Did you feel a sense of increased physical strength or immunity to pain?

Having a sense of how you feel when experiencing stress may help you identify when you may need to step away from the situation and take a break. Once you are able to recognize when your body is mounting a stress response, you can use these internal sensations as a sign that you need to take a break as soon as you can.

## Emergence and Progression of Burnout Symptoms

Burnout starts when you don't have a chance to recover from stress (Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). Exposure to high levels of stress over prolonged periods of time causes the body to adapt to all of the physiological effects of stress. These adaptations lead to specific symptoms at the physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional levels. These symptoms are the symptoms of burnout.

- **Physical symptoms** – Effects on the immune, cardiovascular, digestive, endocrine, and reproductive systems. Symptoms include headaches, intestinal problems, muscle tension, chest pain, fatigue, changes in sex drive, upset stomach, and vulnerability to disease.
- **Mental symptoms** – Reduced cognitive performance. Impairments in attention, concentration, and working memory. Higher cognitive processes like executive functioning are particularly impaired. Difficulty with thinking clearly, learning new things, forgetfulness, absent-mindedness, trouble staying focused, problem-solving, planning, and self-control.
- **Emotional symptoms** – Stress reduces the capacity to control your emotions (Raio et al., 2013). This may include emotional instability, intense emotional reactions, feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, feeling frustrated and angry, irritability, anxiety, panic, overreacting, feeling upset or sad without knowing why.
- **Behavioral symptoms** – Due to the cognitive problems and the increased emotional reactivity, people with burnout have more interpersonal conflicts. You may be more easily agitated. You may seek out comfort in alcohol, or other drugs, overeat, quit hobbies and sports, or withdraw from social life.

If stress exposure continues, burnout symptoms may progress. You may find yourself going to extreme lengths to avoid responsibility or to reduce complexity in your life. You may become very rigid. Your capacity for creativity, problem-solving, empathy, and insight may be reduced.



You may become less able to cope with personal and professional demands. You may be seen as obsessive-compulsive, dependent, paranoid, rigid, indecisive, or suspicious.

If burnout continues to progress you may reach a state of clinical burnout, characterized by reduced motivation and passivity (van Dam, 2021). People in this stage of burnout may exhibit learned helplessness, a phenomenon first described in laboratory animals subjected to unavoidable electric shocks (Seligman, 1972). These animals stopped trying to escape the electric shock, seemingly accepted their fates, and became completely unmotivated. This most advanced phase of burnout is characterized by chronic demotivation where the person believes that they don't have any control over their situation.

## Burnout at Work

Burnout often results from extended exposure to workplace stressors. Certain workplace conditions and job characteristics can encourage the development of burnout. Factors that can affect the development of burnout include (Maslach and Leiter, 2005):

- **Workload** – Having too much work or not enough resources. Resources can include materials needed to do the job, time to complete the job, and training to do the job.
- **Control** – Being micromanaged, lacking influence, having accountability without power to effect change.
- **Reward** – not enough pay, acknowledgment, or satisfaction.
- **Community** – isolation, conflict, disrespect.
- **Fairness** – discrimination, favoritism, nepotism.
- **Values** – ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks.

The last thirty or so years have seen substantial changes in the workplace and degradation of the trust that employees feel towards their employers (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). Employees increasingly feel undervalued, unappreciated, and underpaid. Many of the changes that have occurred in the workplace in the last generation have negatively impacted the factors that contribute to burnout. For example, people don't tend to stay with the same employer for as long as they used to. This decreased job security has negative effects on people's sense that they are in control of their own careers, their sense of community with coworkers, and their sense of fairness. These trends have only accelerated in recent years with increasing automation and the rise of the gig economy.

## Module 1 Exercise 3

How burned out is your job making you? Ask yourself the following questions to get an idea of how susceptible to burnout your job might be making you.

- **Workload** – Do you have enough resources to complete your work every day? Do you often need to provide your own materials or supplies to do your work? Do you often need to work late? Are you often confronted with surprising or unexpected events?
- **Control** – Are you involved in making decisions that affect your work? Do you feel that someone is always hovering over you, judging all of your decisions? Do you have any

influence on how things are run? Are you held responsible for things you have no control over? Do you feel that management considers your needs?

- **Reward** – Are your achievements recognized by management? Do you see opportunities for bonuses, raises, or promotions? Do you feel that your work makes a positive difference in the world or to other people?
- **Community** – Do you have supportive interactions at work? Do you have friendly relationships with people at work? Is your workplace a friendly place, relatively free of interpersonal conflict? Do you feel respected by your managers and coworkers?
- **Fairness** – Do you feel that management is committed to treating everyone fairly? Do you feel that rewards, bonuses, raises, and promotions are allocated fairly and transparently? Do you feel that your workplace is relatively free from discrimination?
- **Values** – Do you feel that you have the opportunity to contribute to meaningful projects? Do you feel that your organization is doing meaningful work?

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