

# How to prevent and overcome burnout

Community Resource



# What is burnout?

Burnout is characterised by extreme exhaustion, feelings of hopelessness and cynicism, and ineffectiveness. Burnout is caused by a combination of chronic stress, high expectations and feelings of pressure, often within work, study, or personal circumstances. Those who work with people are especially vulnerable to burnout.

Some stress is good for us. For example, when we can achieve a lot more than usual, such as a big assignment or a major project at work, in a short period of time. We can cope with this stress when we believe we have the skills, support and resources to handle what is in front of us.

However, some stress is not good for us and can occur when we start to feel as though we don't have the skills, support and/or resources to manage the level of stress we are experiencing.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), burnout involves three main factors, which usually occur one after the other:

**Exhaustion:** Exhaustion is often at the core of burnout. It can look like high physical, cognitive and emotional fatigue that can get in the way of your ability to do your job, studies or other tasks well.

**Feeling disconnected:** This may impact our work, study, relationships and other parts of life. You might start to feel yourself thinking negatively or feeling hopeless, and you could notice yourself detaching from those around you.

**Ineffectiveness:** This could look like a decrease in your sense of confidence in your ability to achieve tasks as usual. This might look like having trouble concentrating, making mistakes and reduced performance.

# Signs & symptoms of burnout

Burnout usually occurs gradually, which means the signs and symptoms can be difficult to spot at first. These can look like normal stress or even sometimes be mistaken for depression – although depression sometimes co-occurs with burnout.

## Emotional signs:

- Irritability
- Feeling hopeless
- Feelings of guilt when resting
- Loss of motivation and/or satisfaction.

## Cognitive signs:

- Trouble concentrating and focusing
- Poor memory
- Increased difficulty making decisions
- Cynical/negative thinking.

## Behavioural signs:

- Trouble getting out of bed
- Withdrawing from work, friends, and/or commitments
- Consuming higher amounts of food, drugs, caffeine, sugar, and/or alcohol.

## Physiological signs:

- Exhaustion, despite sleep
- Muscle tension, headache, backache, tiredness
- Lowered immunity
- Dizziness and nausea.



If it is not addressed, burnout can lead to health problems, including hypertension, sleep disturbances, depression and substance abuse. It can also lead to strained relationships and negatively impact career opportunities.

# Tips to prevent burnout

There may be changes you can implement to prevent stress from turning into burnout. These include:

- Identifying symptoms of stress and the source of these
- Setting easier and more realistic goals in your work/study or personal life
- Ensuring for work-life balance: Take regular breaks from your work/study or other tasks requiring focus, and include time for fun or enjoyable activities to unwind
- Prioritising self-care and take time to switch off
- Breaking up your regular routine and doing something different
- Exercising, eating healthily and drinking water
- Setting boundaries with work/study/friends as needed
- Developing new skills to help achieve difficult tasks
- Asking others for help with challenging tasks or emotionally draining situations
- Clarifying what is required of you in the environment where your stress is coming from and setting realistic goals
- Checking that your values line up with the environment where your stress is coming from (e.g. if your stress is work-related, check if your values are similar to the organisation, or if there is a mismatch)
- Seeking social and professional support from a psychologist.

## Using problem solving to identify areas of stress and make changes:

- Assess and take note the factors that are causing you stress
- Explore possible solutions to reduce stress
- Implement solutions and monitor the effects of these on your wellbeing
- Evaluate what worked well, what didn't and what you can change.



# Risk factors at work

While burnout can occur in different contexts (including at work, during studies or in your personal life), it is often related to work.

Risk-factors in the work environment include:

- High workload or too many tasks
- Feeling out of control or a lack of independence at work
- Low reward or recognition compared to your expectations or productivity
- Not enough social support at work
- Unfair and/or disrespectful treatment at work
- A mismatch between your personal values and those of the workplace
- Low self-esteem.



# Tips to manage burnout

Initially, it may be necessary to significantly reduce or take a complete break from responsibilities (including work, volunteer work, household chores and social activities) for a few weeks.

Following this, activities can be resumed gradually, starting with less-demanding tasks, and resting afterwards.

Below are some tips to help with recovery and prevention of burnout:

## 1. Look after your body

- Rest, rest, rest. This means saying “no” to some things, which is often challenging for people facing burnout. A psychologist can help to work out why someone struggles to say no and help build skills to manage this, such as assertiveness.
- Eat healthily with good portions of protein to give you sustained energy compared to the energy highs and crashes caused by sugar (which we often turn to when feeling stressed).
- Exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of burnout.
- Drink plenty of water. Staying hydrated is important for maintaining our health.
- Consider your intake of alcohol, caffeine and other substances. Monitor for any changes or concerns around substance intake, which can cause more problems while trying to recover from burnout.
- Box-breathing. Breathe in for three seconds, hold for three seconds, and breathe out for three seconds. This tells your body that you are relaxed and calm.
- Take regular breaks from your work. Just five mins away from your desk where you practice box-breathing or have a social chat with a colleague can help.





## 2. Consider your mindset (a psychologist can help with these strategies):

- Mindfulness has been found to reduce the negative cognitive and emotional effects of burnout and increase empathy and concentration. Notice your thoughts and feelings in a non-judgemental way.
- Journal to help process your thoughts and feelings.
- Observe unhelpful thinking styles, such as “I should ...” and reframe this to something like, “I can choose to do what is best for my wellbeing”.
- Practice self-compassion: Studies have found this is related to lower levels of burnout and depression. Self-compassion includes being kind and understanding towards yourself, as you would with another person. It also involves recognising that you are not alone, as everyone goes through some kind of suffering.
- Have faith: While recovery may take some time, you will get there.

## 3. Connect and reflect:

- Talking with someone you trust can help reduce the burden of burnout.
- Book a session with a psychologist to develop coping skills and help work through unhelpful thinking patterns, including perfectionism, conflict avoidance, struggles with assertiveness, or feeling you need to prove yourself. Cognitive behavioural therapy can help to change these thinking patterns.
- Reassess your priorities: Are you still enjoying your job, relationships and other areas of your life, or do you need to make changes? Take time to reflect on your values and see whether they line up with your decisions and your life. Start spending time with people/activities that fill your energy tank rather than drain you.
- Post burnout growth: Despite the challenge of having gone through this difficult time, learning from the experience could mean that you change your priorities and allow yourself to enjoy life more.

# Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that you or your family members are experiencing symptoms of burnout and it is becoming too difficult to manage, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in helping people with a range of mental health and wellbeing concerns, including burnout.

There are a few ways you can access a psychologist. You can:

- Use the Australia-wide [Find a Psychologist](#) service or call 1800 333 497.
- Ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be able to get a Medicare rebate. You may also be able to receive psychology services via telehealth so you don't need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

## More information

### [APS community resource](#)

[Climate change and dealing with burnout](#)

### [World Health Organisation](#)

[Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”:  
International Classification of Diseases](#)



# References

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