

A Practical Guide to Preventing Burnout

Tactical Strategies and Perspective Shifts to Help You Avoid Flaming Out

Have you experienced burnout in the past? Are you experiencing it now? Or perhaps you're concerned that you or someone you care about won't be able to avoid it in the future?

Whatever the case, many factors are at play (mental, physical, emotional, and environmental). Recent research has shed more light on what factors contribute to burnout, what we can do to reduce its likelihood, and how we can rebound from it.

According to the WHO, burnout is an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. They define burnout as "... a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; reduced professional efficacy."



ASSESSING BURNOUT

The Maslach burnout Inventory (MBI), developed by Christina Maslach, professor emerita of psychology at UC Berkeley and one of the leading researchers in the field of burnout, is used to assess burnout using three measures: exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. This tool has led to the identification of five work experience profiles.

- Engaged
- Disengaged
- Ineffective
- Overextended
- Burnout

Confusing some of these other conditions or states with burnout is common. Though, these experiences may lead to burnout if some of the causes of burnout are present and go unaddressed.

THE CAUSES OF BURNOUT

An awareness of your current situation is essential to addressing or preventing burnout. There are several work factors that, when out of balance, could contribute to disengagement, reduced effectiveness, overextension, and ultimately burnout.

Workload: Having too much on your plate, feeling overwhelmed, unreasonable time pressures.

Control: Lacking autonomy, resources, or voice.

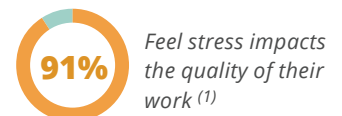
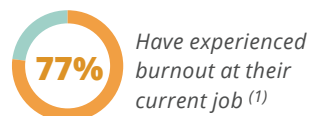
Reward: Feeling like the payoff (intrinsic or extrinsic rewards) are not worth what you are giving up (time, effort, etc.).

Community: Lacking a sense of support and camaraderie.

Fairness: Feeling like you are unrecognized or treated poorly while others receive recognition, resources, or special treatment.

Values: Going against your values or not having them met.

Clarity: Unclear expectations, lack of role clarity; poor communication; uncertainty.



STRATEGIES TO PREVENT BURNOUT

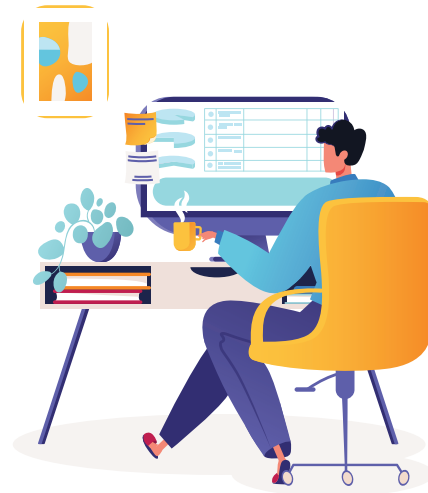
Although preventing burnout is not a one-size-fits-all formula, most people will gain valuable anti-stress benefits from the following tactical strategies.

Shift Between High Cognitive Tasks and Low Ones:

Rather than try to perform a series of tasks that require complex thinking back-to-back, try to insert a task that requires less mental exertion in between (for example, cleaning out the desk or running an errand). By shifting between intervals of higher and lower cognitive demands, our brains can experience 'down time' while still feeling that they are progressing toward a goal.

Compartmentalize: It is often challenging to keep stressful thoughts about a project or work situation from spilling into your personal life (and vice versa). One way to improve your relationship with even the most stressful bits is to identify the aspects of the situation you enjoy. What are you looking forward to regarding a project, task, or situation? Looking at your situation from the position of enjoying it (even just parts of it) may help you keep it in perspective when you aren't working on it.

Take Time to Rest: It can be difficult to schedule relaxation and self-care into our already-busy schedules, but it is vital to do so. Schedule time each day to do something that will help you relax, even if it's just for a few minutes. And, rather than seeing any gaps as times to panic and try to fill with activity, see them as opportunities to slow down and rebuild your energy reserves.



Say No: Overcommitting yourself can leave you feeling spread way too thin. If you find it difficult to refuse a request, practice saying 'no' more often. Eliminating unhelpful or unnecessary behaviors and activities (such as checking social media or performing tasks you can easily delegate) may also help. What activities make you feel stressed or harm your wellbeing? Try creating a 'not do' list of these activities, and then... don't do them.

Practice Physical Decompression: We hold stress in our bodies in the form of physical tension. To decompress and diffuse this concentrated stress, pay attention to how your body feels and frequently engage in techniques like deep breathing, muscle tensing and relaxing, jumping in place/shaking, and light stretching.

Indulge in Pleasurable Activities: If you neglect your interests, you might begin to feel a bit "hollow" inside. This, paired with overwhelm at work, is a real recipe for burnout. If you find it difficult to make time for your interests, try getting creative (listen to a podcast during your commute, cook up some gourmet lunches for the week, etc.). Devote your free time to a hobby or activity that excites you. Doing something you enjoy helps to reduce stress, and having something to look forward to (beyond simply "not working") can help you manage stress at work more easily.

SHIFTING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Even in undesirable situations, changing jobs is not always feasible, and the practical approaches listed might not always go far enough. However, changing your perspective and relationship to the work can effectively reduce perceived stress and prevent burnout.

Change Your Relationship to Your work: Identify or re-confirm your core values and look for ways to integrate them into your work. Also, look for ways to rekindle your passion through projects that are meaningful to you.

Regain Sense of Control: Don't fall into a victim mindset. Instead, take ownership over your situation and understand that the right actions will lead to the positive feelings you want, not the other way around.

Slow Down: Slowing down can actually speed things up. Reassess your assumptions about what you "need" to do and how quickly it "needs" to be done. Also, work on letting go of perfectionism as it adds undue pressure where you don't need it.

Shift Focus from Self to Others: Much of our stress comes from focusing on our personal drivers of success, fueled by our egos. Rather than constantly chasing your own success, try helping others more. Energizing others enables you to see yourself as part of an organism, strengthening your resilience.

Connect & Grow: Sometimes, burnout is fueled by the sense that we are stagnating. Connecting with others, working with a coach, and focusing on personal or professional development are all possible ways to gain clarity and 'unstick' yourself.



Burnout is real, and it's not something to be taken lightly.

You can take control of your wellbeing and avoid or rebound from burnout with some awareness. Take time to regularly pause and assess - paying attention to any warning signs, taking steps to reduce stress, and recognizing when you are not sufficiently challenged (or overly challenged).

One of the best ways you can help others avoid burnout is by paying attention to changes in their work behavior. Sometimes people can't see in themselves what others can easily spot. So, if someone is working harder than usual or forgetting things they usually don't forget, it could be a sign that they're experiencing burnout. However, also be sensitive about how you approach it as some might find it intrusive to ask them how they are feeling or to tell them what you are noticing about their behavior without their permission first.

If you know anyone who could benefit from this post's information, please be sure to share it with them. ◆

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1. (Deloitte, 2015)
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/burnout-survey.html>