

COPING WITH COVID-19

Handling stress and grief during the pandemic and beyond



Burnout, Part 1 – Causes, Signs & Symptoms

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“Feeling burned out” is a national epidemic right now, as we continue through a pandemic that has affected every aspect of our lives for more than a year and a half.

In this first part of a series on burnout, we’ll discuss what burnout is (and isn’t), and its causes.

According to the World Health Organization, burnout is defined as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; reduced professional efficacy; and increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job.

Burnout is not just having a bad day or even a bad week. It results from an accumulation of stress over time. While some stress is positive and can be motivating and invigorating, chronic stress--combined with some other factors we’ll identify soon--can result in burnout.

Stress and burnout are related, but stress may or may not always lead to burnout. Some stress is useful—it heightens our senses and brings out our best. In times of stress, particularly chronic stress, some people may feel burned out frequently but mildly, and others feel burned out rarely but intensely. And keep in mind that different people have different thresholds for stress—some people continue to thrive under high levels of stress, while others feel like they reach their limit after much less exposure.

Some potential causes of burnout include:

- **Organizational changes or major shifts in work.** Changes in your workplace, such the drastic and sudden impact of COVID-19 that affected healthcare organizations, can lead to burnout.
- **Heavy workload that isn’t short-term.** Feeling constantly overworked can tax your energy reserves, making you feel “tapped out.” An overwhelming workload, long working hours, chronic staff shortages, etc. are also causes of burnout. During COVID-19 peaks, many people had long days, weeks and months.
- **Unrewarding work.** Fortunately, in healthcare, we are able to help people in many ways. But for those whose job doesn’t pay off in ways other than a paycheck, there may be no internal reward for working hard. Not getting the satisfaction of a job well done deprives us of vital internal motivation that can prevent burnout.
- **Neglecting basic needs.** When we are stressed we can easily get sidetracked from basic self-care needs like getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and making time to relax. Many people struggled with this during COVID-19.

Workers in many areas—healthcare, education, government, and many others--report that COVID-19 led to both sudden and prolonged changes at work and in our lives that have contributed to feelings of burnout.

What does burnout look like?

As mentioned, a bad day at work, or even a bad week on occasion, does not constitute burnout. Feeling like you have more bad days than good days, or having some of these symptoms for weeks at a time, are a sign that you could be experiencing burnout.

Another sign is no longer getting a sense of renewal from weekends or vacations, and spending your time off dreading going back to work.

Other signs include:

- **Fatigue.** One of the symptoms of burnout is physical and emotional exhaustion. Examples are feeling like you have “nothing left” emotionally, feeling completely “tapped out,” and feeling chronically tired.
- **Low productivity.** This can be a result of being overwhelmed with more work than you can finish on any given day, or it can be the result of emotional symptoms that interfere with your being able to maintain your usual level of productivity. Some people describe this as feeling like they’ve “hit a wall” in their job.
- **Appetite change.** The desire to eat more or less, often leading to an increase or loss of weight.
- **Physical symptoms.** These include headaches, tension, digestive upsets, backaches, grinding teeth, insomnia, and a depressed immune system, such as being unable to shake a cold, or feeling generally rundown.
- **Emotional symptoms.** This refers to mood swings, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, concentration problems, overreaction to criticism, difficulty making decisions, crying spells, and the “blues”—that constant feeling of dread about work, which becomes a dark cloud over your head even when you aren’t working.
- **Substance use/abuse.** Increased use of alcohol, drugs and/or tobacco.
- **Loss of inspiration.** No longer feeling motivated or inspired to do your best work; feeling bored by your job.
- **Feeling cynical or bitter.** You find yourself routinely criticizing your job, your company, your coworkers. You feel bitter toward your employer or coworkers, and have no optimism about your career.
- **Feeling constantly tense and irritable.** Burnout can show up as chronic irritability. You may find yourself overreacting to little things or reacting with anger toward people when it isn’t warranted.
- **Immobilization.** Sometimes the physical depletion we feel when burned out causes us to under-react—choosing to do nothing in response to a situation because we’re too exhausted or we just don’t care. This immobilization can also contribute to feeling “stuck” in your current situation and can result in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- **Apathy, or feeling detached.** You may begin to feel more and more detached and aloof from people, to the point of feeling that “nothing matters,” people or otherwise. An example is someone saying, “I feel like I’m just existing and that’s all – there’s no fun or enjoyment in life.” People who work in the helping professions are very prone to this.
- **Relationship issues.** These may include isolating yourself from others, being less tolerant of others, resentment, lack of intimacy, and lowered sex drive.

Who may be more prone to burnout?

Burnout can happen to anyone, but some types of personality types are more prone:

- **The dedicated and committed worker.** We know this type. We can always count on them, and they get the job done, and do it well no matter what. They take on too much, for too long, too intensely, and their needs become secondary. That can reach a limit over time, especially during long periods of high stress and heavy workload, such as during COVID.
- **The over-committed worker whose outside life is unsatisfying.** Those who define themselves primarily by their work, who may not have many outside interests, hobbies or close relationships, are at higher risk for an imbalanced work life, leading to burnout.
- **The authoritarian worker.** The person who has the perspective of, “Only I can do this, and do it correctly,” or “This will be done my way at all times,” is at higher risk of burning out.

If you recognize that you may be feeling burnout, or recognize these signs in someone else, watch for Part 2. We will discuss strategies for dealing with burnout, as well as how to avoid burnout in the future.

The Deaconess Employee Assistance Program offers free, confidential counseling services (in person or virtual visits) for Deaconess employees and their household. Learn more at www.deaconess.com/EAP.

If anyone you know is at risk of harming themselves or is experiencing a mental health crisis, get help immediately. Call 9-1-1, go to the nearest emergency room, call the CARE team at 812-476-7200, or call the National Suicide Hotline at 800-273-8255.

There is no charge for a CARE Team evaluation and all evaluations are 100% confidential.