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What is burnout?

Burnout is described as a person's reaction to a long period of persistent, unresolved stress. It is not a medical condition, but is characterized by physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion. The pandemic itself can be a source of stress (e.g., fear of you or a loved one becoming infected with COVID-19). Other sources include work stress (e.g., work-life imbalance, unreasonable work demands), learning about upsetting news (e.g., local crimes, weather events), or caring for a sick family member.

People experiencing burnout sometimes struggle to cope with everyday challenges or responsibilities. They may also have a lack of energy even after getting enough sleep and have difficulty providing support to others. Over time, they may feel hopelessness, detachment, or depression.

Burnout usually does not get better on its own. If left unresolved, it can lead to serious consequences including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, and other illnesses.

Identifying the Symptoms of Burnout in Yourself and Others

People experiencing burnout often feel overwhelmed, listless, unable to cope, emotionally drained, anxious, sad, fatigued, or indifferent.

Other signs of burnout include:

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Poor self-care habits (e.g., ignoring personal hygiene).
- Using food or substances (including drugs or alcohol) to feel better or to numb feelings.
- Being cynical or always having a negative outlook.
- Struggling to get to work or having trouble being productive at work.
- Being irritable or impatient (e.g., blaming others).
- Lacking satisfaction from your achievements or lacking enjoyment in activities outside of work.
- Feelings of isolation, detachment or disconnection.
- Changes in sleep habits (e.g., having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep).
- Changes in appetite (e.g., over or under eating).
- Unexplained headaches, backaches, or other physical complaints.
- Worsening of chronic health conditions.

Stress Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic



- Adapting your daily routine in response to changing public health measures.
- Ongoing worries, such as:
 - Did I forget to bring a mask with me while shopping?
 - What are the COVID-19 infection rates in my community?
 - Will my unvaccinated children be safe at school?
 - Will the vaccine protect me from all COVID-19 variants?
- Being isolated from friends and family.
- Worry that you or someone you care for will get infected with COVID-19.
- Pandemic information overload.
- Lack of job stability (e.g., loss of job, income, hours cut back).

How Employers can Prevent Burnout

Create a psychologically safe and healthy workplace that addresses:

- **Work expectations**
 - Provide clear expectations. Make sure that all employees understand and follow them.
- **Physical activities**
 - Allow employees to take time for physical activity during the workday.
- **Assign suitable workloads**
 - Keep workloads fair between employees, with reasonable deadlines.
- **Have a good support structure in place**
 - Provide easily accessible resources to employees, reducing the effort they need to accomplish tasks. Choose or train managers that will be available and supportive to employees. Prioritize well-being in the organization.
- **Train managers and employees**
 - Job-specific training will boost confidence among employees, reducing stress. Provide training on burnout to help employees recognize it in themselves and others.
- **Support work-life balance**
 - Encourage everyone, including managers, to take their breaks and lunches away from the work environment. Maintain reasonable work hours. Limit vacation carryover to make sure all employees take a break. Taking vacation can reduce the chance of employee burnout, especially after a particularly stressful time.
- **Acknowledge success**
 - People feel validated when their hard work and effort is celebrated. Small gestures such as public announcements of accomplishments will show employees that their work is relevant and meaningful to the organization.
- **Set up a mental health first aid program**
 - Workplace mental health first aiders on site can help employees who are having a mental health crisis and offer support until professionals arrive.

Tips to Avoid Burnout

- Connect with friends and loved ones (e.g., social media, phone calls, video chats, texts, physically distanced outdoor gatherings).
- Learn about COVID-19 from reputable sources, and [adjust your activities](#) to reduce your risk.
- Follow local public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Get vaccinated, if possible.



- Understand and recognize the signs of stress (e.g., muscle tension, breathing difficulties, anxiety).
- Establish a healthy routine with consistent wake up, work, play and family times.
- Talk to your manager about your stress level, work together to find solutions such as reduced work hours or permission to attend therapy during work hours.
- Practice mindfulness (e.g., stretching, meditating, breathing exercises).
- Take part in activities you enjoy (e.g., reading, walking, yoga, gaming, hobbies).
- Be kind and compassionate to yourself and others.
- Seek help (e.g., talk with family members, friends, mental health professionals/hotlines, employee assistance program).
- Take a burnout self-assessment, such as those available from [Wellness Together Canada](#), [Mindtools](#), or [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#).

Recovering from Burnout

Burnout is not a simple mental issue and takes time to recover from (weeks to years). In some cases, it can become a lifelong struggle. Recovery approaches include different forms of therapy (e.g., talk therapy, group counselling), medication (as prescribed by a therapist), and major lifestyle changes.

Because the causes of burnout are varied many recovery strategies have been developed:

- **Improve self-care**
 - Seek help from a mental health professional. Don't suffer alone.
 - Develop healthy eating habits
 - Take a time away from work to focus on treatment and recovery
 - Reduce or eliminate alcohol and caffeine consumption
 - Exercise
 - Get the recommended amount of sleep
 - Explore your creative side (e.g., write, draw, paint)
 - Visit green spaces regularly
- **Change your outlook on life**
 - Avoid self-criticism
 - Focus on daily accomplishments, positive aspects of your life, and the things you can control
 - Make your home a serene and peaceful place. Keep it organized and clutter-free.
 - Keep a gratitude journal to focus on the positives in your life
- **Change the way you work**
 - Prioritize your tasks or discuss priorities with your manager
 - Stop multi-tasking – start and complete one task at time
 - Adjust your pace of work so that it's reasonable and steady
 - Keep assignments manageable; break them down into smaller achievable parts
 - Avoid working overtime, if possible
 - Disconnect from work during personal and vacation time



- **Improve relationships**
 - Determine boundaries for your time – learn to say ‘no’ when you feel overwhelmed
 - Assess your social media – remove unwanted messages, images, and contacts
 - If beneficial to you, connect with friends, family, and your community
 - Avoid toxic people and situations

Avoiding Future Burnout

After recovering from burnout, some people may benefit from using strategies to prevent future burnout episodes such as:

- Assessing yourself weekly. Restart self-care if you start to feel overwhelmed.
- Anticipating difficulties in your upcoming schedule. Make adjustments to minimize them.
- Determining your priorities and focusing on them
- Learning your personal signs of burnout. If you see them, take prevention steps early.
- Returning to counselling

Helpful Resources

- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health
 - [Am I at risk for burnout?](#)
 - [Burnout response for leaders](#)
 - [Prevent burnout](#)
- [Wellness Together Canada](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)
- [Canadian Psychological Association](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#)

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please contact your local hospital, call 911 immediately, or contact a [Crisis Centre in your area](#).



It is important that mental health resources and support are provided to all workers, including access to an employee assistance program, if available.

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Note that this guidance is just some of the adjustments organizations can make during a pandemic. Adapt this list by adding your own good practices and policies to meet your organization’s specific needs.

For further information on respiratory infectious diseases, including COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#)

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