

# Prevent burnout

Strategies to help identify risks and prevent burnout for yourself.

## What is burnout?

If you're emotionally exhausted or feel that you're unappreciated and overwhelmed even though you continue to work hard, you may be approaching or in burnout.

Though not considered a mental illness, burnout is a mental health issue. According to the *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research* (cited below), burnout is having a growing impact.

Burnout is more likely when you:

- Expect too much of yourself
- Never feel your work is good enough
- Feel inadequate or incompetent
- Feel unappreciated
- Have unreasonable demands either because you take them on or they're placed on you
- Are in a job that's just not a good fit for you

*Because burnout can be chronic in nature, affecting both your health and performance, prevention strategies are considered the most effective approach for addressing it.*

## Recognize signs and symptoms

The negative effects of burnout can increase significantly before you recognize the problem. Unaddressed burnout can increase your chance of developing clinical depression or other serious conditions.

These are some of the signs and symptoms of burnout:

- Reduced efficiency and energy
- Lowered levels of motivation
- Increased errors

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Irritability
- Increased frustration
- Suspicion
- More time spent working with less being accomplished

Severe burnout can also result in:

- Self-medication with alcohol and other substances
- Sarcasm and negativity
- Debilitating self-doubt
- Poor physical health
- Clinical depression
- Reduced job satisfaction
- Decreased productivity

## The lies we tell ourselves

Some who've recovered from burnout shared what they called "the lies we told ourselves" about the signs of burnout, even when loved ones pointed it out to them. These included:

- I'm fine
- Your nagging at me is more stressful than my work
- I love my job
- I'm happy to take more on
- I'm just tired
- You don't understand, no one else can do this
- People depend on me
- I really want to be helpful
- I'll be fine once this is done
- This too will pass

- I need to get back to the top of my game
- I'll take a vacation and then be okay
- If people just let me do my job, I would be fine
- It's not me, it's everyone and everything else

Most actually believed these statements to be true, and, to a certain extent, many of them were. The “lie” was denying that their current situation was damaging their health and well-being and that they needed to change. This denial eventually led to burnout.

## Prevention strategies

- **Reprioritize.** Stop what you're doing and make a list of your work demands. Organize them in order of priority and estimate the number of hours each takes per week. Review this list with whoever has decision-making capability to ensure you:
  - Have not missed any daily, weekly or project task hours
  - Have the hours reasonably calculated
  - Confirm the hours are equal to 40 or fewer hours per week – if you're approaching burnout, it's critical to limit your working hours. If it's over 40 hours, ask your leader/decision-maker to help you:
  - Ensure your priorities are in the right order
  - Choose what work can be dropped altogether
  - Choose what work can be delegated or shared with others
- **Refresh your skills.** There may be an easier way to accomplish your tasks. Be open to learning new skills for both efficiency and to be open to new ideas.
- **Take your breaks.** Research confirms that our focus and productivity increases overall when we take frequent breaks throughout the day. Eating lunch at your workstation and working through your breaks doesn't benefit anyone, least of all your employer. Take time to clear your mind, relax or move your body depending on your work, and go back to your tasks with a clearer mind. Check out [healthy break activities](#) for ideas.
- **Connect with others.** Don't spend your entire workday with your head down. Make a point of connecting with others, even if it's a greeting at the beginning

and end of your shift. To help prevent burnout, work needs to be more than just the endless completion of tasks.

- **Make life more than work.** Engage in non work-related activities and connect with people outside your workplace. This is critical to your long-term ability to avoid burnout.

## Recovering from burnout

We asked questions to participants at a roundtable entitled Recovering from burnout. Participants had all experienced burnout and were either recovering or already recovered. Their practical strategies and insights can help those at risk of, or currently experiencing, burnout.

### Approaches to recovery

Recovery was anywhere from 6 weeks to 2 years, with an average of 6 to 9 months. Most described recovery as a life-long journey. Many people benefitted from talk therapy, including group counselling and addiction counselling. Some were prescribed medication, which they felt was helpful. Most made significant life changes around how they took care of and thought about themselves, how they did their work, and how they engaged in relationships. Some of their strategies are below. Choose some from each category to try for yourself.

### Improved self-care strategies:

- Minimize or eliminate alcohol and caffeine
- Develop and follow a healthy eating plan
- Take time away from work if the burnout impairs your ability to function or requires treatment
- Ensure the recovery process includes developing a healthy approach to work
- Exercise
- Walk in green space
- Garden
- Find a creative outlet, such as painting

### Change the way you think and live:

- Focus daily on your accomplishments
- Avoid criticizing yourself unnecessarily
- Give yourself a gift on your birthday or another holiday event
- Create a serene and peaceful space in your home
- Keep your environment organized and tidy
- Write daily in a gratitude journal to help refocus your mind on the positive things in your life
- Post a list of what's valued, enjoyable or precious in your life on your fridge or somewhere you'll see it daily
- Nurture your spirit using quiet reflection, meditation or prayer

Change how you think about and do work:

- Stop multi-tasking – focus on one thing at a time
- Work at a reasonable, steady pace
- Break down seemingly overwhelming tasks and projects into smaller achievable parts
- Recognize and celebrate your small steps along the way
- Tell your manager you want to be successful at your job and ask them how they would measure that
- Take regular assigned breaks
- Resist working unnecessary overtime
- Even if you must provide contact information in case of emergency, try to stay disconnected from work during vacation time as much as possible

Improve relationships:

- Set boundaries for yourself in terms of what you will and will not do – be okay with saying “no”
- Avoid toxic people and situations
- Learn to be comfortable with saying “I don't know” if you don't know
- Shut out media that includes disturbing images and messages
- Became more involved and connected with your friends, family or community

## Staying well strategies

Everyone in the Roundtable discussion extended their recovery method into a plan to stay well. Many added strategies to detect early signs of stress or mental health deterioration. As soon as they recognized the potential for burnout, they began to take preventive action.

Elements of a self-care plan to prevent burnout:

- Develop a list of self-care strategies, which could include journaling, meditation, massage, yoga, reading, music, [mindfulness](#), stretching, tai chi, dancing, [breathing techniques](#), etc.
- Assess where you are each week in following through on your chosen strategies
- Tweak your list as needed for the upcoming week
- Determine your priorities for the week, month and year – make them reasonable – write them down and review them regularly to keep yourself focused on what matters to you
- Mentally scan your body for areas of tension at least once a week – address the areas of tension by considering the source and if necessary, seeking support or treatment
- Take time to become centred and grounded through quiet reflection, prayer or meditation – remind yourself that “the silence within me is not at war with chaos around me.”

Detect early signs of deteriorating health and take action:

- List what burnout looks like for you (anger, frustration, exhaustion, etc.) so you can identify it early and take steps to prevent a downward spiral
- If you're feeling overwhelmed, ask for help, delegate tasks or reset priorities
- Connect with people who care about you
- Ask people you trust for support
- Learn to verbalize your feelings to prevent future episodes of burnout
- Minimize or eliminate exposure to negative and toxic people in your life
- Attend relevant seminars and talks on mental health

We all agree that burnout is both a terrible condition and difficult to bounce back from. Don't wait until you experience it before learning to prevent it.