

# Burnout

Burnout is typically defined as a negative reaction to chronic work stress characterized by exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. With beginnings in the mid 1970's by psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger and social psychologist Christina Maslach, burnout was originally considered non-scholarly "pop culture". Now considered an important field of study due to its effects on the professional, the health institutions and the consumers.

## Exhaustion

This is the most obvious and most widely reported symptom of burnout. Exhaustion can also be described as being worn out, having a loss of energy, depletion, debilitation and fatigue with diminished personal resources to cope.

## Depersonalization

This is the behavior of putting distance between oneself and the job by actively beginning to ignore job positives. This can be seen as indifference or cynicism, detachment from the job, inappropriate responses, irritability, loss of idealism and withdrawal with a negative and insensitive attitude towards the recipients of the service.

## Reduced Personal Accomplishment

This is described as reduced productivity or capacity, low morale, perception that professional achievements are falling below personal expectations and low personal self-worth.

## 5 Common Elements of Burnout

1. There is prevalence of dysphoric symptoms like mental or emotional exhaustion, fatigue and depression
2. Mental symptoms are more emphasized than physical symptoms
3. All symptoms are work-related
4. The person suffering was not afflicted with psychopathology before
5. Decreased effectiveness and work performance occurs because of the negative attitudes and behaviors.

Internationally, European workers have been found with lower average levels of exhaustion and cynicism compared to their North American counterparts.

Countries with longer work weeks have lower life satisfaction.

In the US, the average workweek for full-time employees is 41.5 hours

The US is in the top 10 countries for long work weeks.



## Risk Factors

- Younger populations are at higher risk for burnout, particularly 30-40 years old.
- Being single also increases burnout, specifically for men.
- Some studies indicate higher education is associated to burnout
- Those who are "*feeling types*" versus "*thinking types*" are also at higher risk.
- The exhaustion dimension of burnout has also been links to Type-A behaviors such as competition, time-pressured lifestyle, hostility, and excessive need for control.
- People suffering from anxiety, depression or low self-esteem and narcissism are also at higher risk.

# Mismatch



## Key Themes

Research shows that situational and organizational factors end up playing a larger role in burnout than individual ones. This is hypothesized as being a focus due to the ease and cost effectiveness of individual programs over systemic changes.

It is important to create careers where there is a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, supportive work communities, justice and meaningful, valued work.

Mismatch looks at the compatibility between job and employee within six dimensions of work-life, which provide the framework that encompass the major organizational precursors that lead to burnout. Individuals experiencing burnout can negatively impact their colleagues through "*contagion*", increasing interpersonal conflicts and disrupting job tasks. Further, there is evidence of negative "*spillover*" into the home life.

### Workload

This is simply having too many work related demands that exhaust an individual to the extent recovery becomes impossible. This can also be work that does not match the individuals skills or inclination.

### Control

Feeling responsible to produce results without capacity by resources or authority can create mismatch in control. This can also relate to an overwhelming workload with no feeling of autonomy to change this.

### Reward

A lack of appropriate rewards can be either financial (salary or benefits) or social, when one's hard work goes unnoticed and unappreciated, which devalues both the worker and the work.

### Community

In order to thrive, people crave praise, comfort, happiness and humor with people they care for and respect. It keeps people feeling connected. Chronic or unresolved conflict with others produces negative feelings and hostility.

### Fairness

Perceived fairness communicates respect and improves personal self-worth, contributing to a sense of community. Unfairness can be attributed to inequity of workload or pay, or complaints going unheard.

### Values

A conflict of values is most often between personal values and organizational values, or conflicting values of the organization. This could look like good outcomes or products versus meeting quotas.

Downstream focus in saving swimmers who are drowning rather than asking "Who or what is pushing them into the river in the first place?" -Antonovsky

# Indicators of Burnout



## Presenteeism

The behavior of going to work even when you are sick is very popular among high stress careers. This is often out of a feeling of responsibility to co-workers, feeling irreplaceable or desperation due to need for income or to maintain status for benefits. Sometimes this is due to hiding medical or mental health issues on the employee's part.

Unhealthy levels of cortisol have been found in the hair follicles of doctors and medical staff immediately following Covid-19. These levels were higher for those with direct patient contact.

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Heartburn or Acid Reflux
- Crying More Frequently
- Sleep Issues or Fatigue
- Over or Under Involvement with Colleagues
- Irritability
- Overworking
- Inability to Set or Maintain Boundaries
- Withdrawing From Social Groups
- Problems in Personal Relationships
- Mood Swings
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse
- Lowered Self-Esteem
- Increase in Negative Thinking (*Cynicism*)
- Memory Problems
- Inability to Focus on Small Tasks
- Feelings of Loneliness
- An Increase in Absences From Work
- Forgetting to Attend Important Meetings
- Checking out and Disengaging in Meetings
- Changes to Weight
- Unusually Inappropriate Responses in Meetings (*cussing, randomness, overly joking, crude remarks*)
- Avoiding Coworkers or Supervisors
- Increase in Mistakes on Paperwork
- Daydreaming about Alternate Jobs or Careers
- Feelings of Loss of Purpose
- Unethical or Unprofessional Behaviors
- Conflict or Drama at the Office

To address and prevent burnout, individuals must begin addressing coping actively. Research has determined that those who approach stressful events by coping in a passive, defensive way are much more likely to experience burnout. Further, low levels of hardiness, poor self-esteem and an external locus of control further increase this risk.

# Individual Interventions



## Research

Healthcare workers with burnout are more likely to misinterpret negative emotions (such as fear and anger) as happiness. These same providers also scored higher on salivary cortisol tests.

The most common and successful treatments for burnout are CBT programs including both individual and group settings with length varying from 3 months to a year. These programs included stress management, Qigong, skills development, cognitive coping training or social support groups.

Another study on 7,905 American surgeons found that there was a significant increase on major medical errors when burnout was a factor.



**Nutrition**-Eating well and regularly is important to keep our body from fight or flight and mistaking this for starvation. Proper nutrition gives the brain and body energy and nutrients to manage stress levels, reduce inflammation and improve overall health (physical and mental).



**Hydration**-even 1% dehydration can impair many aspects of brain function that lead to changes in attentiveness, critical thinking skills, memory and overall concentration. Dehydration can impact work effectiveness and can mimic many mental health disorders.



**Exercise**-Even just a 5 minute exercise, such as a short walk can improve concentration and attention. It provides natural happy hormones and combats inflammation, high cortisol levels, and insulin resistance.



**Sleep**-essential to homeostasis, the immune system, maintaining performance, muscle restoration, energy metabolism, and cognitive function. Reduce extra media exposure and maintain regular sleep-wake schedules.



**Social Systems**- We are social beings. Get creative with how you connect with others and set aside *dedicated time* in your schedule to accomplish this. Consider joining groups, picking up hobbies or attending events.



**Time Management**-consider changes to your schedule, by days of the week, hours per day, break times, start and end times and pre-blocked times for self-care. Working on salary does not mean un-ending hours for the company.



**Meditation**-breath work, yoga, mindfulness and meditation have all shown significant scientific proof to have positive outcomes when used to reduce stress and mental health illnesses. Practicing positivity increases positivity.



**Boundaries**-setting appropriate boundaries with your time, colleagues, boss and yourself will help you from becoming overwhelmed. This helps you practice self-awareness, communication and positive connection with others.

## Individual Skills:

Scaling

GLAD-Gratitude, Learning, Accomplishment, Delight

10 Count Breath

Prime the Conversation

Cold Showers/Ice Baths





## Cortisol

Unhealthy levels of cortisol and inflammation have been linked to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Cortisol is a hormone that in small doses can be very effective in helping the body manage stress or a threat. Large doses, as you would see with long term stress, anxiety and burnout begin to disrupt the homeostasis of the body. Often times as a result we will see weight stored around the waist as cortisol stores energy for long-term threats but doesn't process what has been stored before storing more.

Reducing stress will help reduce inflammation and boost your immune system.

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## Statistics

67% of all workers believe burnout has worsened over the pandemic  
37% of employed say they are working longer hours since the pandemic started  
61% of remote and 53% on-site workers find it more difficult to unplug from work during off-hours

# Resources Continued



## About the Author

Stefanie Sherman, LPC, NCC, has presented and lectured on burnout at several events and conferences. Stefanie is focused on research and professional learning to explore connections between anxiety disorders, stress, burnout, narcissism and emotional abuse. Her private practice, Venture Wellness, is 100% private pay and telehealth with individual and group sessions in Idaho. She lives with her husband in Washington.



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