

Work burnout:

Understanding and preventing it



What is it?

Work burnout is a state of **physical**, **emotional**, and **mental exhaustion** caused by prolonged and excessive workplace stress. It often occurs when the demands of work exceed an individual's capacity to cope, leaving them feeling **overwhelmed**, **unmotivated**, and **detached**. Burnout isn't just about working long hours; it can also stem from a lack of support, unclear job expectations, or feeling undervalued.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises burnout as an **occupational phenomenon**, emphasising its impact on overall health and job performance. Left unaddressed, it can lead to serious consequences, including anxiety, depression, and physical health problems.

What are the symptoms of work burnout?

Burnout affects people differently, but common signs include:

Emotional Symptoms:

- Feeling drained, even after a full night's sleep
- Chronic frustration, irritability, or cynicism about work
- Loss of enthusiasm or sense of accomplishment

Behavioural Symptoms:

- Procrastination or decreased productivity
- Withdrawing from colleagues or avoiding work responsibilities
- Increased reliance on unhealthy coping mechanisms like overeating or substance use

Physical Symptoms:

- Frequent headaches
- Muscle pain
- Sleep disturbances or chronic fatigue
- Weakened immune system, leading to frequent illness

It's important to address the root causes of burnout, as leaving it unaddressed for too long can lead people to make drastic decisions they might not otherwise consider - like quitting a job despite the financial risks. Burnout can also spill over into other parts of your life, straining relationships and overall well-being.

What can you do?

Recovering from burnout requires a combination of self-care, setting boundaries, and addressing workplace stressors. Here are some actionable steps:

1. Recognise the signs

The first step is acknowledging that you're experiencing burnout, rather than dismissing it as "just stress".

2. Prioritise self-care

Make time for activities that rejuvenate you, such as exercise, meditation, or hobbies.

3. Set boundaries

Learn to say "no" to tasks that exceed your capacity and set limits on work hours.

4. Delegate and seek support

Share responsibilities with colleagues or talk to a supervisor about workload adjustments.

5. Unplug after work

Disconnect from work emails and notifications during non-work hours to recharge.

6. Reassess goals

Reflect on whether your current job aligns with your personal values and long-term aspirations.

7. Take breaks

Short breaks throughout the day and longer periods of time off can help prevent burnout from escalating.

Fact:

A 2023 study found that nearly 60% of workers globally experience symptoms of burnout, highlighting its prevalence across industries.

What support is available?

If self-care strategies aren't enough, consider seeking professional support to manage burnout:

1. Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and counselling can help reframe negative thought patterns and develop healthier coping mechanisms.

2. Workplace solutions

Speak with HR or a manager about adjusting responsibilities or creating a more supportive environment.

3. Stress management programs

Many workplaces offer wellness initiatives, such as yoga classes or mental health workshops.

4. Medical consultation

A virtual care doctor can evaluate physical symptoms of burnout and suggest interventions, such as stress management techniques or temporary leave.

"Burnout is what happens when you avoid trying to be human for too long"

Michael Gungor

If you're really struggling with burnout, you might need some time off work to recover. Talk to your manager as soon as you can – remember, your mental health and wellbeing is the most important thing.