



BURNOUT AND STRESS

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Mental health problems often result from stress. Burnout may occur as you endure chronic or prolonged stress, unrealistic expectations, and exceed your own limits. Being overworked, overwhelmed, and overloaded can damage your health, home life, and happiness. This lesson will help keep stress from breaking you, identify the signs and symptoms of burnout, and give you some ideas, skills, and strategies to help reduce stress and give you a more balanced life.

**This mental health e-lesson is available at
[journeytorecovery.com](https://www.journeytorecovery.com)**



BURNOUT AND STRESS

IN THIS CHAPTER

- *Recognize the impact and effects of burnout*
- *Evaluate your risk of burnout*
- *Discover 14 strategies to find better balance*

UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING BURNOUT

Mental health problems often result from stress. If you are overloaded with difficult situations, recent crises, and significant time pressures, you may be headed toward burnout. Burnout may occur as you endure chronic or prolonged stress, unrealistic expectations, and exceed your own limits. Being overworked, overwhelmed, and overloaded can damage your health, homelife, and happiness. To keep stress from breaking you, it is important to identify the signs and symptoms, and have some ideas, skills, and strategies in place to help reduce it and live a more balanced life.

COMMON HIGH STRESS SITUATIONS

- Divorce/separation
- Moving
- Pregnancy or a new baby
- Miscarriage
- Mental health disorder with hospitalization or treatment
- Serious car accident
- Injury and disability
- Job loss/unemployment
- Aging or dying parents
- Taking care of a sick or injured family member
- Bankruptcy
- Death of a loved one
- Severe financial stress
- Legal problems (law suits, arrests, jail time)
- Addiction of self or a family member
- Serious health concern or illness of self
- Serious health concern or illness of someone else
- Traumatic situations and post-traumatic stress reactions
- Domestic violence

NOTES

Using the previous list, and writing your own, identify several common stressors that may lead to burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed for you.

BURNOUT DEFINITION

A simple definition of burnout is “doing too much, with too little, for too long.” One of my hobbies is woodworking. I have a nice workshop. In the workshop I have an air compressor. The motor on the air compressor has a duty cycle, or a run/rest cycle. That motor is designed to run, fill up the air tank, and then shut off. That motor is not designed to run all the time. If you increase the load or run it all the time, the motor will burn out. You and I each have a duty cycle, or a run/rest cycle. If you exceed your duty cycle, you too could burn out. This often results in physical illness, anxiety, worry, depression, frustration, and irritability, among other things. To not exceed your duty cycle, some self-exploration and knowledge of yourself is necessary. Don't compare yourself to others. Know your own vulnerabilities and limitations, and work within the confines of your own run/rest cycle.

THE IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

Read through the following list and mark those you have experienced in the last three months.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Exhaustion | <input type="checkbox"/> Increased alcohol or drug use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lowered energy | <input type="checkbox"/> Isolation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of motivation, | <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decreased enthusiasm | <input type="checkbox"/> Cynicism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Negativity and pessimism | <input type="checkbox"/> Helplessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reduced job confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> Hopelessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lowered levels of performance | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduced care for yourself physically |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased preoccupation with work | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor food choices |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carelessness | <input type="checkbox"/> Increased spending for comfort |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased moodiness | <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal or homicidal thoughts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depression | <input type="checkbox"/> Increased Emergency Room visits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> Problem solving difficulties |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worry | <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble making decisions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attention, concentration and focus difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> Increased relational conflict |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low frustration tolerance | <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches | <input type="checkbox"/> Insomnia or restless sleep |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Missed days of work | <input type="checkbox"/> Apathy |

CHRONIC BURNOUT MAY LEAD TO SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS

- High blood pressure
- Depression
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Abnormal heartbeat
- Changes in sex drive
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Heart disease
- Fertility problems
- Skin problems
- Heart attack
- Arthritis
- Ulcers
- Asthma flareups

NOTES

SIGNS OF BURNOUT

Everyone responds differently to stress. Some people shut down, while others respond by going full-speed ahead. Regardless of how you deal with it, the consequences of stress affect every area of your life, mind, body, heart, thoughts, and behavior. Some people become constantly worried about work. Others engage in instant indulgences for comfort such as eating more or making poor food choices or drinking more alcohol. As burnout gains momentum, you may find yourself not enjoying work or your life in general. You may become more cynical, rude, and isolated. You may find yourself withdrawing from activities and social connections you previously enjoyed. Over time, chronic stress and burnout can create serious health problems like gastrointestinal difficulties, heart disease, depression, and obesity.

JOB BURNOUT RATING SCALE

1 = Not at All 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often 5 = Very Often

1.	I am drained, tired, and have little energy.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I am irritated by small, insignificant matters.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I don't get the credit or acknowledgment I deserve for the work I do.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I am misunderstood and unappreciated at my job.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I don't have enough time to reasonably meet my job duties and responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I work under constant pressure and unrealistic demands.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I am responsible but not supported.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I have become pessimistic, negative, and cynical.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I don't have the permission, means, or opportunity to express my concerns.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I am overwhelmed by what is expected of me.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I am working with increased demands and fewer resources.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I experience headaches, muscle tension, colds, and flu.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I sacrifice my own schedule, activities, and interests for my job.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I think I am in the wrong profession or have the wrong job.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	The politics and bureaucratic structure at work adds to my discontentment.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I am unable to perform adequately and feel like a failure.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	I worry and feel on edge when I think about my job tasks, duties, and responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I look for ways to miss work or skip meetings.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I anticipate and fear reprimand and criticism.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I don't laugh, smile or feel happy while at work.	1	2	3	4	5

SCORE INTERPRETATION

20-39	White Bread	Few or no signs of work stress or burnout
40-59	Warm Bread	Some mild signs of work stress may be evident
60-79	Lightly Browned Bread	Moderately concerning signs of work stress are evident
80-100	Toast	Severe risk of burnout is evident

This Burnout Scale was written by Dr. Baumchen as an informal assessment of job burnout. It is not a scientifically validated instrument. Results are to be interpreted as such. Use this instrument as an indicator that further discussion on this topic may be helpful. Additionally, results may be affected by other current psychological stressors or medical problems.

FINDING BALANCE

There are several practical tips for achieving balance. Balance often begins with being intentional about how we are spending our time. It is important to set aside haphazard living, and instead be deliberate, planned, and purposeful. To be intentional is to meaningfully focus on key areas of life; your actions are purposeful and not random or chaotic.

Here are some strategies to keep focused on the goals you are trying to achieve:

1 **Keep love and work balanced.**

This is made easier if you work for those you love and love your work.

2 **Set priorities and goals.**

Do the important, difficult, and necessary things first rather than indulging in the quick, easy, fun, and entertaining distractions of life.

3 **Directly and assertively limit your duties.**

Recovering from chronic stress and burnout requires removing or reducing some of the demands you are under. Saying no may be difficult, yet it is necessary to know how much work, stress, and responsibility you can handle. Don't wait for others to quit asking, rather you must set boundaries, ask for what you need, and assertively stick to your limitations. You are not responsible to deliver everything others may want from you.

4 **Get enough sleep.**

Lack of sleep is a primary cause of burnout. It can greatly reduce your job performance and productivity, and damage your health. Less than 6 or 7 hours of sleep each night can cause daytime sleepiness, fatigue, low energy, low motivation, increased depression and lowered frustration tolerance. Getting the sleep you need can quickly replenish your energy and brighten your mood.

5 **Try something new.**

Stay inspired, energized, and creative by learning and expanding your life. Resist the ruts in the road. To stay energized, make strong efforts to fight against complacency.

6 Intentionally relax.

Plan activities that are soothing and restful, such as reading a book, listening to music, visiting with others, paging through a magazine, or playing a game. Set aside designated time for recreation and relaxation.

7 Turn it off.

Retrain yourself not to hear and respond to every ding or buzz on your phone or computer. Turn it off if you must. It is interesting how we can become slaves to our own tools of service. People may expect you to be constantly available. To stay in balance, it is wise to run your own schedule, rather than submit to theirs.

8 Laugh at yourself.

A client once said: "If you learn to laugh at yourself, you'll have a lifetime of good material." All too often we are too serious, too critical, and too frustrated with ourselves over the trivialities of everyday life. Actor and director, Clint Eastwood offers this advice, "Take your work seriously, but don't take yourself seriously." Laughing at ourselves can reduce the pressure we are under, like letting some air out of an overinflated tire.

9 Know yourself.

Get to know your own vulnerabilities and limitations. Perhaps you want approval from others and too quickly say yes to tasks you need to refuse. Are you tempted to sacrifice yourself to care for others? Are you vulnerable to guilt or the badgering of family and friends? Look for physical signs of tension and stress such as headaches, sleep problems, and muscle tension in your neck and back. Watch for increasing symptoms of worry, anxiety, and depression. Knowing yourself can keep you from exceeding your own limits and compromising your own boundaries.

10 Exercise.

Not only does regular exercise promote good health and high self-esteem, it also helps battle anxiety and depression. Exercise eases tension and releases positive hormones. Activities that draw you outside and into nature are also soothing and helpful. Consider working out at least three times per week, for a minimum of 30 minutes each time.

11 Focus on the positive.

It is so easy to concentrate on what is wrong at work, the frustrations of projects, and the faults of other people. Focusing on the negative aspects of life increases bitterness. Bitterness and resentment are monumental factors in producing burnout. Instead, focus on what is going right, the favorable qualities of your loved ones, and the joyful moments that come your way.

12 Cultivate a rich, non-work life.

Find something outside of work that challenges and engages your attention and focus. Whether it is a hobby, volunteer opportunity, sport, or fitness activity, find something you are passionate about; this will serve as a distraction and boost your self-esteem.

13 Get organized.

Getting organized keeps you focused on priorities, reduces worry, and strategically applies your limited energy to the tasks at hand. Use lists or your electronics to hold necessary information, rather than trying to hold it all in your mind.

14 Move on.

There may be times where the current stress, added to your physical and emotional health, becomes overwhelming and pushes you to a breaking point. Consider getting help, leaving your current position, or taking time off to heal and get back on your feet. You may need to consider reduced hours, a position that has less demands, or a new occupation. Seek the counseling and support you need.

THE TENSION IN LIFE

Getting a lot done is not the goal of life. As soon as that becomes the highest priority, your life has become incredibly out of balance. Our relationships and the people in our lives are served by our work and projects. This likely is not a carefree and friendly balance as much as it is a pull of competing forces that must be held in tension, each one tugging with its own persistent agenda. As you grow stronger emotionally, you'll be better able to identify and maintain what you must do for yourself and what you can do for others.

WORK/LIFE BALANCE

It is important to learn strategies to bring yourself back to a place of peace and calm before the stress of life becomes overwhelming. Then, when your stress level increases, you have the tools needed and can use them effectively. Achieving life balance is not something you find once, but something you work at your whole life. Now, when you think of the words, "work/life balance", it seems to imply that work is on one side and life is on the other. Does that mean your work is separate from your life? I'd like to suggest that they aren't separate and that there can be balance when they are integrated. Keeping love and work balanced is made easier if you work for those you love and love your work. Remember to focus on the positive, rest when you can, and punctuate the inevitable strains of life with love and laughter.