

Avoiding Burnout¹

At first, working in prison for 4 hours feels like 8 hours and is emotionally taxing. Therefore, it is critical that you are aware of your limits.

When you're burned out, problems seem insurmountable, everything looks bleak, and it's difficult to muster up the energy to care—let alone do something about your situation.

The unhappiness and detachment burnout causes can threaten your job, your relationships, and your health. But burnout can be healed. You can regain your balance by reassessing priorities, making time for yourself, and seeking support.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged exposure to stress.

It occurs when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands.

As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place.

Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful.

Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

You may be on the road to burnout if:

- Every day is a bad day
- Caring about your work or home life seems like a total waste of energy
- You're exhausted all the time
- The majority of your day is spent on tasks you find either mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming
- You feel like nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated.

The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life—including your home and social life. Burnout can also cause long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses like colds and flu. Because of its many consequences, it's important to deal with burnout right away.

Dealing with Burnout: The "Three R" Approach

1. **Recognize** – Watch for the warning signs of burnout
2. **Reverse** – Undo the damage by managing stress and seeking support
3. **Resilience** – Build your resilience to stress by taking care of your physical and emotional health

¹ Adapted from Ruth Luban, *Keeping the Fire: From Burnout to Balance* (Ruth Luban Audio & Book, Sept. 1, 1994).

The difference between stress and burnout

Burnout may be the result of unrelenting stress, but it isn't the same as too much stress. Stress, by and large, involves *too much*: too many pressures that demand too much of you physically and psychologically. Stressed people can still imagine, though, that if they can just get everything under control, they'll feel better.

Burnout, on the other hand, is about *not enough*. Being burned out means feeling empty, devoid of motivation, and beyond caring. People experiencing burnout often don't see any hope of positive change in their situations. If excessive stress is like drowning in responsibilities, burnout is being all dried up. One other difference between stress and burnout: while you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, you don't always notice burnout when it happens.

Stress	Burnout
Characterized by over engagement	Characterized by disengagement
Emotions are over reactive	Emotions are blunted
Produces urgency and hyperactivity	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Loss of energy	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope
Leads to anxiety disorders	Leads to detachment and depression
Primary damage is physical	Primary damage is emotional
May kill you prematurely	May make life seem not worth living

Causes of burnout

Burnout is not caused solely by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors contribute to burnout, including your lifestyle and certain personality traits.

What you do in your downtime and how you look at the world can play just as big of a role in causing burnout as work or home demands.

Work-related causes of burnout

- Feeling like you have little or no control over your work
- Lack of recognition or rewards for good work
- Unclear or overly demanding job expectations
- Doing work that's monotonous or unchallenging
- Working in a chaotic or high-pressure environment

Lifestyle causes of burnout

- Working too much, without enough time for relaxing and socializing
- Being expected to be too many things to too many people
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others
- Not getting enough sleep

- Lack of close, supportive relationships

Personality traits can contribute to burnout

- Perfectionist tendencies; nothing is ever good enough
 - Pessimistic view of yourself and the world
 - The need to be in control; reluctance to delegate to others
 - High-achieving, Type A personality
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Warning signs and symptoms of burnout

Burnout is a gradual process that occurs over an extended period of time. It doesn't happen overnight, but it can creep up on you if you're not paying attention to the warning signals. The signs and symptoms of burnout are subtle at first, but they get worse and worse as time goes on.

Think of the early symptoms of burnout as warning signs or red flags that something is wrong that needs to be addressed. If you pay attention to these early warning signs, you can prevent a major breakdown. If you ignore them, you'll eventually burn out.

Physical signs and symptoms of burnout

- Feeling tired and drained most of the time
- Lowered immunity, feeling sick a lot
- Frequent headaches, back
- Change in appetite or sleep habits pain, muscle aches

Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout

- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated
- Detachment, feeling alone in the world
- Loss of motivation
- Increasingly cynical and negative outlook
- Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment

Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout

- Withdrawing from responsibilities
 - Isolating yourself from others
 - Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done
 - Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope
 - Taking out your frustrations on others
 - Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early
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Burnout prevention tips

- **Start the day with a relaxing ritual.** Rather than jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, spend at least fifteen minutes meditating, writing in your journal, doing gentle stretches, or reading something that inspires you.

- **Adopt healthy eating, exercising, and sleeping habits.** When you eat right, engage in regular physical activity, and get plenty of rest, you have the energy and resilience to deal with life's hassles and demands.
- **Set boundaries.** Don't overextend yourself. Learn how to say "no" to requests on your time. If you find this difficult, remind yourself that saying "no" allows you to say "yes" to the things that you truly want to do.
- **Take a daily break from technology.** Set a time each day when you completely disconnect. Put away your laptop, turn off your phone, and stop checking email.
- **Nourish your creative side.** Creativity is a powerful antidote to burnout. Try something new, start a fun project, or resume a favorite hobby. Choose activities that have nothing to do with work.

Recovering from burnout

Sometimes it's too late to prevent burnout—you're already past the breaking point. If that's the case, it's important to take your burnout very seriously. Trying to push through the exhaustion and continue as you have been will only cause further emotional and physical damage.

While the tips for preventing burnout are still helpful at this stage, recovery requires additional steps.

Burnout recovery strategy #1: Slow down

When you've reached the end stage of burnout, adjusting your attitude or looking after your health isn't going to solve the problem. You need to force yourself to slow down or take a break. Cut back whatever commitments and activities you can. Give yourself time to rest, reflect, and heal.

Burnout recovery strategy #2: Get support

When you're burned out, the natural tendency is to protect what little energy you have left by isolating yourself. But your friends and family are more important than ever during difficult times. Turn to your loved ones for support. Simply sharing your feelings with another person can relieve some of the burden.

Burnout recovery strategy #3: Reevaluate your goals and priorities

Burnout is an undeniable sign that something important in your life is not working. Take time to think about your hopes, goals, and dreams. Are you neglecting something that is truly important to you? Burnout can be an opportunity to rediscover what really makes you happy and to change course accordingly.

Recovering from burnout: Acknowledge your losses

- Loss of the idealism or dream with which you entered your career
- Loss of the role or identity that originally came with your job
- Loss of physical and emotional energy
- Loss of friends, fun, and sense of community
- Loss of esteem, self-worth, and sense of control and mastery
- Loss of joy, meaning and purpose that make work – and life – worthwhile

Burnout brings with it many losses, which can often go unrecognized. Unrecognized losses trap a lot of your energy. It takes a tremendous amount of emotional control to keep yourself from feeling the pain of these losses. When you recognize these losses and allow yourself to grieve them, you release that trapped energy and open yourself to healing.