

Burnout Syndrome

Burnout is a form of physical or emotional exhaustion resulting from excessive and/or prolonged stress which is not effectively recognized or managed. It is most commonly caused by occupational stressors which may include being overworked or underworked, being overchallenged or underchallenged, feeling powerless in one's work, feeling unappreciated, feeling the pressure of too much structure, rigidity, conformity and bureaucracy with not enough flexibility, variety or creativity.

Burnout can result from not enough communication, interactions with clients who have a lot of demands and emotional needs, not having opportunities to decompress after stressful interchanges or demanding circumstances, not having a support network to discuss issues and concerns or to express one's own feelings and needs.

Occupational stressors can include repetitive single tasks, problems without solutions, time pressures and demands, and difficult and demanding co-workers and/or supervisors.

Other variables that compound the problem include not taking care of oneself in terms of diet, exercise, rest, relaxation and recreation, not spending enough time with family and friends, developing self-destructive behaviors such as overeating or undereating, abusing alcohol, prescribed medications, and recreational drugs.

Some of the signs and symptoms of burnout are persistent anxiety, persistent irritability, insomnia, nighttime teeth grinding, forgetfulness, impaired concentration, headaches, high blood pressure, and heart palpitations.

As time passes and the stressors continue, other symptoms and signs present themselves, including lateness for work, procrastination, decreased sexual desire, persistent tiredness in the mornings, turning work in late, social withdrawal from friends and family, cynicism, sarcasm, loss of empathy, loss of motivation, and apathy.

Eventually, exhaustion sets in, accompanied by chronic sadness or depression, chronic stomach or bowel problems, chronic mental or physical fatigue, chronic headaches, and sometimes thoughts of suicide.

How can one prevent burnout? Pay attention. Watch for the warning signs. And when you see them, take action. Make changes in your life: Keep physically fit. Exercise regularly. Eat right. Avoid excessive sugar, salt, and caffeine. Avoid alcohol and/or drug abuse. Get enough rest and sleep. Take time out to enjoy yourself. Take time out for family and friends. Improve communication and conflict resolutions skills. Discover spiritual enrichment, which may include prayer and meditation. Change your self-talk to positive, esteeming messages. Learn relaxation techniques. Practice good time management. Improve your organizational skills. Try to have fun at work. Try to be creative at work. Try to develop job diversity. Look for ways to gain control in your job. Confront problems at work with an open heart and an open mind. Perhaps restructure your job, perhaps change employers or change fields. Develop a good emotional support system and communicate your feelings. Be ever vigilant for stress and imbalance, and make life course corrections as they appear.

Counseling and psychotherapy may prove very helpful. And one might benefit from psychiatric medications for a period of time while taking the necessary steps to reduce and manage stress and to repair and redefine oneself.

To conclude, burnout comes from excessive and/or chronic stress which is ineffectively managed. It is avoidable. It is repairable. It can be a blessing in disguise because the prevention and treatment of burnout can provide one with skills and tools to lead a fulfilling life of balance and happiness.