



Understanding Stress and Burnout

Inspire Workplaces Calendar, Stress Awareness Month, April 2021

We're now a year into lockdown and many of us are feeling weary and mentally and physically exhausted from the stresses and strain of COVID-19.

And throughout - those on the front line with fear of illness, loss, compassion fatigue and health anxieties; or those for whom the lines between work and home life have blurred: working while home schooling or caring for dependents, experiencing 'zoom fatigue', feeling isolated, with fear of unemployment, financial pressures, and insecurities...we may increasingly be finding ourselves at risk of becoming 'burnt out'.

STRESS vs BURNOUT

It's useful to note the distinction between stress and burnout. Stress is something we can all experience during our daily lives. Put simply, it's our body's reaction to feeling threatened or under pressure - and **it occurs when the demands placed on us exceed our ability to cope.**

Stress can affect how we feel physically, mentally and how we behave; we can all experience stress differently, and the things that cause us to feel stressed may vary from person to person.

It's important to note that not all stress is bad. Low levels of stress can help to keep us motivated and to meet daily demands in our work or home lives, such as meeting deadlines or completing tasks. If left unchecked however, it can lead to more serious, longer-term issues for both our physical and mental health.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout, in contrast, is a state of '**emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress**' and occurs when we feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained and unable to meet constant demands.

The term was first used in 1974 by psychologist Herbert

Freudenberger who noticed that volunteers at a clinic for addicts and the homeless were becoming exhausted through prolonged overwork and beginning to feel demotivated, emotionally drained, cynical and depressed. It has since been classified by the World Health Authority as an 'occupational phenomenon'; defined as a syndrome '**resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed**'.

WHAT DOES BURNOUT LOOK LIKE?

Burnout has three key elements: **feelings of detachment, mental exhaustion and poorer performance at work.**

Broadly speaking, we feel exhausted, empty, detached and unable to cope. We become resigned and emotionally distanced from our work and our productivity and energy wane, leaving us feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF BURNOUT?

We can all feel stressed at times, but feeling stressed is different to experiencing burnout. **Where stress can be relatively short-term and where emotions are over-engaged through 'too many' demands, burnout occurs over a longer period of time and is in part characterised by detachment and disengagement.** Signs may appear subtle at first but worsen with time. It's therefore important to pay attention to what your body is telling you, to look for the signs, and if you need to - take active steps to reduce stress. Some common signs include:

- Often feeling tired or drained
- Frequent headaches or muscle pain
- Sense of failure and self-doubt
- Feeling like your work has little value
- Helplessness
- A sense of detachment
- Loss of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating and lack of creativity
- Withdrawal from responsibilities and isolating yourself
- Alienation from work-related activities
- Procrastinating

WHAT POSITIVE STEPS CAN WE TAKE TO AVOID BURNOUT?

Burnout often comes from our work (it is after all defined as an occupational phenomenon), but there are other factors that may contribute – such as our lifestyles or personality traits. It may be useful to consider what those contributing factors may be to be better placed to address them. Some of those factors may include:

Work: working within a high-pressure or challenging environment, unclear or demanding job expectations, a lack of recognition, lack of defined boundaries between work and home.

Lifestyle: a poor work/life balance, little time given to relax or socialise, taking on too many responsibilities, a poor diet, or not maintaining good sleep habits.

Personality: perfectionism, high achiever, a reluctance to delegate or ask for help, a pessimistic world view.

One positive first step to dealing with burnout is to acknowledge that you have it. It's OK to accept those feelings and in doing so you can seek support and begin to take care of your emotional and physical health. Here are a few tips and strategies for helping to prevent and manage burnout:

LOOK FOR THE SIGNS

Burnout doesn't happen overnight. Many of us have 'bad' days, but if those feelings of self-doubt and detachment persist, we may be starting to become burned out. Look out for some of the tell-tale signs: Are you constantly feeling tired and empty? Do you feel yourself withdrawing or avoiding work? Do you have frequent muscle pains or trouble sleeping? Listen to what your body and emotions are telling you and take steps to manage your stress.

REACH OUT

Connecting with others is an important part of maintaining our wellbeing – it can help us to build a sense of belonging and self-worth, and is an opportunity to share our experiences. Make time to speak with your friends or family. Even a phone call to share how you're feeling can make a big difference.

Becoming more sociable with your work colleagues can also help – try sending a text or making time for each other to catch up during the day; and limit contact with negative people who may drag down your mood and outlook.

RETHINK YOUR IDEA OF WORK

What is it that brings you in to work every day and what are your reasons for being there? If you find it difficult to answer those questions, it might be useful to reframe how you view your job. Focus on the aspects you enjoy – changing how you view your role can help you to see the purpose or value in it.

Also try taking up something fulfilling outside of work – find the balance between the two and focus on things that bring you happiness.

SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME

The blurring of boundaries between our work and home life during lockdown will have inevitably made it more challenging to separate the two. If we feel like work is constantly with us, how can we successfully switch off?

Try to maintain a comfortable space within the home reserved for work. As far as possible, maintain a 'working routine' just as you would if you were in the office. Get up and have breakfast when you normally would, and dress for work.

Keep to a realistic, manageable task list – prioritise the tasks that matter for the day and focus on those. That way, you'll be more likely to end the day with a sense of achievement, and less likely to stretch your working hours into the evening.

PUT YOURSELF FIRST

How often do you put work or other things before yourself? When do you prioritize your own happiness, goals and aspirations? Use this as an opportunity to reflect on where your priorities lie. Remember – it's OK to say 'no'. Set time aside to relax, or for fun activities that help to nourish your creative side. Remember to disconnect from technology and social media and resist the urge to check work emails out of hours.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Getting exercise, maintaining a balanced diet and sustaining a healthy sleep routine are all ways in which we can regulate our health, our mood and energy levels.

Exercise can help to reduce feelings of stress, provide clearer thinking, a greater sense of calm and increased self-esteem. It doesn't have to be daunting – it just means taking up an activity that you enjoy and making it a regular part of your life.

Avoid 'quick-fix' sugary snacks and refined carbs that, while giving us a temporary boost, can leave us feeling tired and with a low mood...and remember, while many of may reach for alcohol when we're feeling stressed, its temporary calming affects are short-lived, and in the long run or if misused, make stress harder to deal with.

If you are in distress or despair you can call Lifeline in NI on: 0808 808 8000 or Pieta House in ROI on: 1800 247 247.

Refs and further reading:

www.stress.org.uk/national-stress-awareness-month-2019/
www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases
www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm
www.verywellmind.com/stress-and-burnout-symptoms-and-causes-3144516
www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190610-how-to-tell-if-youve-got-pre-burnout
www.rightsteps.co.uk/covid19/preventing-burnout
www.hays.co.uk/blog/insights/take-burnout-seriously-what-you-can-do-to-prevent-it-during-the-covid-19-crisis
www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2020/10/01/how-to-deal-with-covid-19-burnout-at-work/?sh=395936202170
www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/stress.html
www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/
www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/stress/