



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Workplace Burnout

What is Burnout?

Chances are you have said or thought to yourself “*I’m burned out!*” at some point. In everyday life, we often use the term burnout to mean that we are “exhausted” or “wiped out” or to refer to “*exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration*” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). But in psychological research, burnout refers to more than just exhaustion. The term **burnout** is used to describe a group of signs and symptoms that consistently occur together and are caused by chronic workplace stress. Different uses of the same word can make things hard to understand – especially since even the terms themselves vary across sources – burnt out, burned out, burnout. Adding to the confusion, the term burnout appears in The International Classification of Diseases - 11th Edition (ICD-11) but it is not classified as a disease or a medical condition. In 2019, the World Health Organization identified burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” – something due to the conditions of work.

Burnout is defined in ICD-11 as: “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

1. feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
2. increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and
3. reduced professional efficacy.

Burnout refers specifically to the work environment and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

Researchers have identified **exhaustion, cynicism** and **inefficacy** as three key dimensions of the burnout experience. We all feel wiped out from time to time but if you are experiencing burnout, the *exhaustion* is overwhelming – you feel tired almost all of the time, both physically and emotionally. You will also perceive an increased mental distance or detachment from your job, or have a lot of *negative and cynical* thoughts related to your job. You may feel you dislike a job you previously were passionate about – and this lower engagement itself starts to feel frustrating. It will also be harder to work – you may notice a lower sense of *efficacy* (ability to produce a desired or intended result) and reduced productivity, accomplishment or ability to cope with the demands of your job. Everything feels overwhelming and the effects ripple into our personal lives.

It is important to keep in mind that burnout is **not** just an individual problem. Burnout is the result of multiple factors from the work environment. We experience stress when the job demands we face – physical, emotional, or otherwise – are greater than the job resources we have. Think about a campfire – if there is no wood to put on the fire and it’s pouring rain – it’s going to be hard to keep that fire going. No one wants or chooses the experience of burnout. People would prefer to be engaged and have enough resources to keep up with the demands of work and their day-to-day lives.





How do you know if you are experiencing burnout?

Burnout often has an insidious onset – meaning it gradually emerges over time.

The stage for burnout is set by workplace stress. When job demands outweigh job resources, workers experience stress. When this stress goes on for a long time, or becomes chronic workplace stress, people may experience burnout. People experiencing burnout may notice changes in thoughts, behaviour, emotions, motivation, and bodily sensations. Some signs and symptoms associated with burnout can be found below.

<i>Emotions & Motivations</i>	<i>Thoughts</i>	<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>Body/Physical</i>
Loss of motivation about work; low excitement and engagement Decreased job satisfaction Irritability, frustration, anger Anxiety, worry, insecurity Feeling alone in the world; desire to isolate oneself Feelings of incompetence and failure; drop in self-confidence	Negative thoughts related to one's job Increased focus on errors, mistakes and failures Cynicism about others' intentions Increased mental distance or detachment from one's job Negative or inappropriate attitudes towards clients, customers or colleagues Loss of idealism; increased intention to leave the job Difficulties with concentration, memory, judgment, decision-making	Difficulty producing the results you want or intend at work Lower productivity or accomplishment; inefficiency Procrastination Withdrawal and social isolation Absenteeism, Presenteeism	Persistent fatigue and exhaustion; feeling tired most of the time; low energy; feeling "worn out" Pain (e.g., headaches, backaches); sore muscles Increased susceptibility to cold, flus and infections Sleep problems (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep, or early morning awakenings) Gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g., digestive problems, ulcers); irritable bowel symptoms (e.g., abdominal pain, cramping); changes in appetite or weight Skin problems (e.g., hives, eczema)

Workplace Burnout can be confused with some other mental health and stress related problems such as Trauma and Stress-Related disorders, Mood disorders such as Major Depression, and Anxiety Disorders.





For more information on these issues, check out the related factsheets at <https://cpa.ca/psychologyfactsheets/>.

What causes burnout?

There are many different ideas about what causes burnout but most researchers agree that chronic work stress is a significant factor. Burnout is more likely to occur when job demands outweigh job resources.

Researchers also agree that both situational and individual factors may contribute or increase the likelihood of an individual developing burnout.

A number of risk factors for contributing to burnout have been identified:

Individual risk factors

- Demonstrating perfectionism in every aspect of one's work, without considering priorities
- Placing too much importance on work (e.g., work as sole focus of life)
- Low self-esteem, cognitive rigidity, emotional instability and external locus of control
- Certain personal situations (e.g., major family responsibilities) disrupting work-life balance
- Difficulties in setting limits and boundaries (leading to work-life imbalance)
- Having high expectations of oneself and heightened professional conscience
- Difficulty delegating or working with a team in a stressful environment
- Inadequate adaptation strategies (dependence, poor time management, high need for support, unwise lifestyle habits, difficult interpersonal relationships)
- A highly driven, 'A-type' personality that is high in competitiveness and need for control

Situational risk factors

- Work overload
- Lack of control and inability to participate in decisions related to the way one's work is done.
- Insufficient reward and recognition (e.g., financial compensation, esteem, respect) can be devaluing and heighten feelings of inefficacy.
- "Toxic" Community where work relationships are characterized by unresolved conflict, lack of psychological support, poor communication, and mistrust.





- Unfair treatment or incivility and disrespect can lead to cynicism, anger and hostility.
- Values conflicts on the job, where there is a gap between personal and organizational values, can create stress as workers must make a trade-off between their beliefs and work they have to do.
- Poorly defined responsibilities, ambiguous roles, and difficult schedules have also been identified as stressful when the situation persists.

What helps people with burnout?

The best practice approaches for burnout are multi-faceted, involving a high focus on self-care strategies for the individual, and reducing work environment stressors.

Burnout interventions should focus on both:

- the **individual** (e.g., increase employees' psychological resources and enhance coping; providing rest and respite from demands; enhancing the use of self-care strategies), and
- the **environment** (e.g., change the occupational context and reducing sources of stress, primarily related to work demands).

There is more research on individual strategies than on environmental or organizational strategies. However, there is research evidence for the primary role of situational factors and it appears that individual-focused interventions are not sufficient to tackle severe burnout. Workplace stressors also need to be considered and addressed.

How can you prevent or deal with burnout?

For individuals

- Change *work patterns* (e.g., work less, take more breaks, avoid overtime)
- Develop *coping skills* (e.g., time management)
- Improve *interpersonal effectiveness* skills (e.g., assertiveness and conflict resolution skills)
- Prioritize *self-care* (e.g., exercise, eat healthy, get enough sleep)
- Practice relaxation, meditation and/or mindfulness strategies
- Obtain social support (from colleagues and family)
- Change the way you think about your work (e.g., using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy)
- Enhance self-understanding through psychotherapy





- Enhance emotional intelligence skills (e.g., self-awareness and self-regulation of emotions, as well as other awareness)

For organizations

- Ensure employees have a *sustainable and manageable workload* – where demands are realistic.
- Involve employees in decisions that affect their work tasks so they have some opportunity to exercise professional autonomy and *control/ability* to access the resources necessary to do an effective job.
- *Recognize and reward* employees for work well done.
- Build a healthy *community* where employees have positive relationships and social support. Develop communication and conflict resolution skills so employees have effective ways of working out disagreements.
- Develop *fair* and equitable organizational policies. Treat employees with appropriate respect.
- Define organizational **values**, job goals and expectations.
- Promote good health (including mental health) and fitness

How can psychologists help people with burnout?

Psychologists **educate workplaces** (leaders and employees) about burnout so they understand what it is and how to handle it, via all-team or leadership-specific workshops and professional development sessions.

Psychologists can also conduct **assessments** on individuals to help figure out if they are experiencing burnout and develop a plan for addressing it. Psychologists can help workplaces identify organizational factors that may be contributing to stress and burnout.

Psychologists can help you **build individual skills**, such as coping, stress management, time management, and emotional intelligence. Psychologists can help organizations develop programs for improving employee engagement, reducing stress, and preventing burnout.

Psychologists engage in **research** to help us better understand burnout and develop the best strategies for preventing and treating it.

Finally, Psychologists can **advocate** for people experiencing burnout.

For more information:

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral





services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

You can find additional **information and free self-help resources** on *mental health in the workplace* and *burnout* at:

- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health (workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com)
- CSA National Standard for Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace (https://store.csagroup.org/ccrz_CCPage?pagekey=content&contentkey=Z1003HealthandSafety_EN)
- World Health Organization https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/
- Mental Health Commission of Canada (<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/what-we-do/workplace>)

Santé mentale en milieu de travail:

- <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/Francais/ce-que-nous-faisons/sante-mentale-en-milieu-de-travail>
- https://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/fr/
- https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence//fr/

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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