



WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Chapter 6

Preventing Burnout: Recognising the Signs and Taking Action

Recognising the Signs and Taking Action Before It Becomes a Crisis

In this chapter

Understand how burnout develops, recognise its early physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural signs, explore practical prevention and recovery strategies, and consider how workplaces can support sustainable careers.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY



Preventing Burnout: Recognising the Signs and Taking Action Before It Becomes a Crisis

Burnout has become one of the most significant workplace wellbeing challenges of modern working life. Increasing workloads, constant connectivity, staffing shortages, high expectations and the pressure to always be available have left many employees feeling physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted.

Unlike everyday tiredness, burnout is not something that disappears after a good night's sleep or a relaxing weekend. It develops gradually over time, often without people recognising the warning signs until they are already overwhelmed.

Burnout affects people across every profession and every level of an organisation. Healthcare workers, teachers, therapists, emergency service personnel, office workers, business owners and those working from home can all experience burnout. It does not happen because someone is weak or incapable—it happens when prolonged stress exceeds a person's ability to recover.

The good news is that burnout is not inevitable. By recognising the early signs and taking action promptly, individuals and organisations can reduce its impact and create healthier, more sustainable ways of working.

What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress. It is characterised by three key features:

- Feeling emotionally and physically exhausted.
- Becoming increasingly detached or negative about work.
- Experiencing reduced professional effectiveness.

Burnout develops gradually rather than suddenly. It often begins with ongoing stress that slowly drains energy, motivation and resilience over weeks, months or even years.

Stress vs Burnout

Although stress and burnout are closely linked, they are not the same.

Stress

Stress often involves:

- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Racing thoughts.
- Worry.
- Pressure.
- A sense that there is too much to do.

People experiencing stress often believe that if they can "just get through this busy period," things will improve.

Burnout

Burnout is different.



It often involves:

- Emotional numbness.
- Feeling detached.
- Loss of motivation.
- Chronic exhaustion.
- Feeling hopeless.
- Reduced enjoyment of work.
- Feeling that nothing you do makes a difference.

Rather than feeling there is too much to do, burnout often leaves people feeling they have nothing left to give.

Who Is Most at Risk?

Burnout can affect anyone, but some factors increase vulnerability.

These include:

- Heavy workloads.
- Long working hours.
- High emotional demands.
- Lack of control.
- Poor leadership.
- Insufficient staffing.
- Unrealistic expectations.
- Constant interruptions.
- Limited recognition.
- Poor work-life balance.

Certain personality traits may also increase risk, including:

- Perfectionism.
- High conscientiousness.
- People-pleasing.
- Difficulty saying no.
- Strong sense of responsibility.

These qualities can be strengths, but without healthy boundaries they may contribute to burnout.

Early Warning Signs of Burnout

Burnout rarely appears overnight.

Learning to recognise early warning signs is essential.

Physical Signs

- Persistent fatigue.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Frequent headaches.
- Muscle tension.



- Digestive problems.
- Increased illness.
- Feeling drained even after rest.

Emotional Signs

- Irritability.
- Anxiety.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Tearfulness.
- Low mood.
- Emotional numbness.
- Loss of enthusiasm.

Cognitive Signs

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Forgetfulness.
- Poor decision-making.
- Reduced creativity.
- Mental fog.
- Feeling unable to think clearly.

Behavioural Signs

- Working longer hours.
- Withdrawing from colleagues.
- Avoiding responsibilities.
- Increased mistakes.
- Reduced productivity.
- Calling in sick more frequently.
- Neglecting self-care.

Recognising these changes early allows intervention before burnout becomes more severe.

The Impact of Burnout

Burnout affects every area of life.

Physical Health

Burnout may contribute to:

- High blood pressure.
- Weakened immune system.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Chronic pain.
- Fatigue.
- Gastrointestinal symptoms.

Mental Health

Although burnout is not itself a mental illness, it may increase the risk of:

- Anxiety.

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- Depression.
 - Panic attacks.
 - Reduced self-confidence.
 - Emotional exhaustion.

Relationships

Burnout often affects life outside work.

People may become:

- Less patient.
- Socially withdrawn.
- Emotionally unavailable.
- Easily frustrated.
- Too exhausted to enjoy hobbies or family life.

Work Performance

Ironically, working harder for prolonged periods often leads to reduced performance.

Burnout can result in:

- Reduced productivity.
- Poor concentration.
- More errors.
- Lower creativity.
- Reduced motivation.
- Increased sickness absence.

Preventing Burnout

Preventing burnout requires ongoing attention rather than waiting until crisis point.

Recognise Your Limits

Nobody has unlimited emotional or physical energy.

Understanding your own limits allows you to work more sustainably.

Ask yourself regularly:

- How is my energy today?
- What is draining me?
- What helps me recover?

Self-awareness is one of the strongest protective factors against burnout.

Prioritise Recovery

Recovery is just as important as productivity.

Recovery includes:

- Quality sleep.
- Regular breaks.
- Holidays.
- Time with family and friends.

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- Exercise.
 - Relaxation.
 - Hobbies.
 - Time away from work.

Recovery is not a reward for hard work, it is part of maintaining good health.

Build Healthy Boundaries

Healthy boundaries protect against chronic stress.

Examples include:

- Finishing work on time.
- Taking lunch breaks.
- Using annual leave.
- Turning off work notifications.
- Saying no to unrealistic demands.
- Asking for workload reviews.

Boundaries protect both wellbeing and long-term performance.

Ask for Help Early

Many people wait until they reach crisis point before seeking support.

Speaking to:

- A manager.
- A trusted colleague.
- Occupational health.
- A counsellor.
- A therapist.
- A coach.

can help identify solutions before burnout worsens.

Seeking help is a sign of self-awareness, not failure.

The Role of Employers

Burnout is not solely an individual responsibility.

Organisations have an important role in creating healthy working environments.

Supportive employers:

- Monitor workloads.
- Encourage regular breaks.
- Promote annual leave.
- Offer flexible working where possible.
- Train managers to recognise burnout.
- Encourage psychological safety.
- Review staffing levels.
- Provide wellbeing resources.
- Recognise employee achievements.



Healthy organisations recognise that preventing burnout benefits everyone.

Recovering From Burnout

Recovery takes time.

Many people expect to return to normal quickly, but burnout recovery is often gradual.

Recovery may involve:

- Reduced workloads.
- Time away from work.
- Medical support where appropriate.
- Counselling or therapy.
- Improving sleep.
- Gentle exercise.
- Rebuilding routines.
- Learning healthier boundaries.

Patience is important.

Recovery is rarely linear.

Some days will feel easier than others.

Creating a Sustainable Career

Preventing burnout is not about working less.

It is about working differently.

A sustainable career includes:

- Realistic expectations.
- Supportive relationships.
- Healthy boundaries.
- Regular recovery.
- Meaningful work.
- Continuous learning.
- Open communication.

Success should never come at the expense of long-term health.

Key Takeaways

- Burnout develops gradually following prolonged unmanaged workplace stress.
- Early recognition of warning signs makes recovery easier.
- Recovery requires both rest and meaningful changes to working patterns.
- Healthy boundaries protect long-term wellbeing.
- Employers and employees share responsibility for preventing burnout.
- Sustainable careers are built on balance rather than constant overwork.

Final Thoughts



Burnout is not a sign of weakness, a lack of resilience or poor commitment to your job. More often, it is the result of caring deeply about your work while operating under sustained pressure without enough opportunity to recover. Left unaddressed, burnout can affect every aspect of life, from physical health and emotional wellbeing to relationships and career satisfaction.

The encouraging news is that burnout is preventable. By recognising the early warning signs, maintaining healthy boundaries, prioritising recovery and seeking support when needed, individuals can protect both their wellbeing and their ability to enjoy meaningful work. Likewise, organisations that invest in healthy workplace cultures, realistic workloads and supportive leadership create environments where employees are far less likely to reach the point of exhaustion.

Work should provide purpose, challenge and opportunities for growth, but it should never come at the cost of your health. Preventing burnout is about creating a sustainable way of working that allows people to thrive, contribute and maintain their wellbeing throughout every stage of their career.