

Stress and Burnout: What to do?

Today's workplace trends are providing fertile breeding ground for an epidemic of stress and burnout. The recent economic downturn has employers focused on increasing productivity by accomplishing the same work with fewer employees. Collapsing positions means adding more weight to remaining workloads, resulting in employees who are working harder, faster, and longer. When combined with electronic accessibility this trend is creating a culture of 24/7 availability, and blurring the boundaries between work and home. Virtually every working adult has experienced some degree of workplace stress, but not everyone is able to identify at what point it becomes problematic. To prevent long-term health problems it is important to be able to recognize early stages of burnout.

Burnout is a chronic condition that occurs when the body or mind can no longer cope with overwhelmingly high demands of time and energy. When burnout sets in people begin to stop caring as much about what they do and often find themselves "going through the motions" to get by day to day. Work performance suffers; there are accompanying feelings of guilt or apathy, and increasing feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and resentment. People often feel drained and irritable and have trouble sleeping. Friends and family may notice an increase in withdrawal from social engagements and previously enjoyed activities. Physical pains and discomfort can also increase including headaches, body aches and a higher susceptibility to infection. If this sounds like you or someone you know, it is imperative to examine the roots of the problem and make changes. Consider the following risk factors for burnout:

Employment characteristics

- Poorly defined job description
- Low reward or recognition
- Lack of clear goals, rules or boundaries
- Excessive or insufficient work load
- Poor working conditions
- Inequity
- Lack of control
- Environment that does not support personal values

Lifestyle characteristics

- A tendency to over-commit, leading to a "packed" personal and/or family schedule
- A lack of social support or trusted relationships
- Reliance on short-term stress relief and unhealthy coping mechanisms (i.e. alcohol, drugs/medication, caffeine, junk food)
- Heavy reliance on screen time as 'down time'

Personal characteristics

- Perfectionist tendencies
- Difficulty saying no
- Desire to be in control
- No clear sense of identity outside of work
- Lack of ability to process or express negative emotions
- Rigid expectations of self and others
- Tendency to neglect one's own needs
- Equating high productivity or workload with self-worth

Once you have examined the factors contributing to burnout, take action:

Create better boundaries. Some people naturally attract more responsibility, and others oblige by allowing them to do all the work. Learn how to say no and start practicing.

Prioritize and organize. Schedule a time buffer at the beginning of your day so that you are not rushing into the office already in a state of high arousal. Plan and take regular breaks. Prioritize tasks, and break projects into smaller chunks. Create time boundaries around email and work calls and inform others of the change. Learn to delegate.

Improve your emotional intelligence. Focus on self-awareness, paying attention to emotions, thoughts, and their impact on your decisions. Resist perfectionism, flip negative thinking, and cultivate compassion toward yourself and those around you. Pay attention to what your mind and your body are telling you.

Go to the source. Adopt a positive approach by communicating your concerns to your supervisor or Human Resources representative. Create a culture of empowerment by addressing workplace issues that in the long run threaten to decrease productivity. Find out about your Employment Assistance Program and access available supports that target stress reduction and wellness.

Book an appointment with a psychologist. Trained professionals can provide support in a wide variety of areas including health, burnout, relationship problems, life skills, addiction, recovery and more. Therapy can reduce stress, improve morale, and enhance coping skills.

Reach out. Social support has been seen as one of the largest predictors toward a reduction in burnout and stress for workers. For some the mere thought of asking for help or admitting to feeling overwhelmed is equated with weakness and to be avoided at all costs. Men more often fall victim to this misguided belief and suffer in silence. The long-term results of withdrawing and suffering in silence are too lengthy to list here, and too costly to put a price on. Letting go of one's pride and asking for help is a courageous thing to do.