



Beating burnout

Whether you're working from home, based in the office or a combination of both, burnout is real – and it's often going unnoticed. We look at the signs of burnout, how to manage and prevent it, and where to find help. By Kathy Oxtoby

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At the start of 2020, none of us could have possibly imagined what was ahead and the impact it would have on all of us. That was less than three years ago; and since then we've lived through a global pandemic, war in Ukraine, rising bills and inflation...quite frankly it's entirely understandable that the stress of having to deal with world events, as well as the usual personal and professional pressures, could leave some of us feeling burnt out.

Spotting the signs

Many of us are closer to burnout than we think. We might believe we're coping – but there are some telltale signs that tell us when we're struggling and it's worth watching out for these. Recognising that your wellbeing

is suffering and that you might be reaching the point of burnout is the first step towards tackling the problem.

Physically, the signs of burnout include headache, backache, constant colds, an upset stomach and bowel disturbances. But as Lina Mookerjee, a British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) accredited psychotherapist, and a stress and wellbeing expert, points out, even before burnout starts to affect you physically, mentally you could be feeling stressed, irritable, quick to anger and impatient.

You may be tearful, anxious, having problems sleeping, and feeling exhausted. You may be having panic attacks – regular spells when the heart is racing and fear takes over. And you may be experiencing a sense of fear

and dread when thinking about things that didn't use to bother you – like going to work.

At work, one warning sign of burnout is a change in attitude, says Dr Pete Smith, president of the Self Care Forum, a national charity which aims to make self-care a part of everyday life. "You may become more cynical, or not like your colleagues as much. Your work standards might start to drop. You may not have enough time, energy or enthusiasm for your work, or you may feel detached from it." And at home, you may be experiencing that same sense of detachment, so that your relationships may be suffering as a result, he adds.

It's important to notice these signs – and the effects on you. It's tempting to

grit your teeth, carry on and accept that it's just all part of life, but that option could have serious consequences. Ignoring the signs of burnout can make you more vulnerable to mental or physical illness, with knock-on effects for your work, your home life and your relationships. "By keeping going you're not giving your body time to recover," says Lina. "This can lead to chronic disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and addictions. It's a recipe for disaster. Which is why getting help is absolutely key – it's not a sign of weakness; it's a necessity. Take a step back and assess your situation. Recognise that you've kept on going for all sorts of reasons. Don't blame or judge yourself. Acknowledge your feelings and the messages your body is telling you."

Protect and survive

So what can you do to protect yourself against burnout – especially if you suspect you're on the way to it?

Lina recommends reducing or removing "as many of the stresses on our body as possible", such as alcohol, nicotine, sugar and caffeine. This also involves getting away from the desk, Pete points out. "That break is so important, as people working from home have discovered. And make sure you take your holidays too."

And while you're away from the desk, get moving: study after study has shown that exercise is one of the top ways to combat stress and tackle burnout, experts advise. You could join a gym, fitness studio or leisure centre through one of CSSC's discounts or offers. Even a "short, sharp walk in the fresh air away from your desk, and your phone" can help to boost your wellbeing, says Lina.

Exercise may help with sleep too – which is important, as sleep can be the first thing to suffer when we're feeling burnt out. Good sleep hygiene includes switching off from pressures after work, rather than switching on the news as soon as you come home. Lina recommends switching off all your devices before you go to bed (to avoid the blue light that tells your brain it's daylight) sleep-inducing chamomile tea, and some deep breathing to help you wind down. For more helpful tips on

getting good-quality sleep, along with lots of other practical advice and tools, try the CSSC life app.

In addition, Pete points out: "It's important to have some sort of interest outside your professional life. Learning a new skill is a part of resilience and coping with life." Enjoy your spare time, and it'll help you enjoy your work too. You can explore cssc.co.uk/things-to-do to find a range of stress-busting activities, from visits to heritage sites or wildlife and theme parks, to discounted trips to the cinema. And you can join CSSC's communities to try new hobbies and activities, get active, share tips and

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meet new people. You can even learn a new language or work-related skill to stretch your creativity.

Making time for you may mean spending less time meeting other people's needs; and this can have benefits for your professional life too. Learning to say 'no' can help you to feel less overwhelmed. Ask yourself what you could say no to, or delegate, to make a little space for yourself.

Making connections

Of course, these measures may still not be enough to stave off burnout. Rather

than keeping your worries inside, it can help to share them with your family, friends and colleagues. "It's healthy to share what you're feeling, rather than letting those feelings fester," says Lina.

There are many sources of help and support available. Meditation and mindfulness apps, such as CSSC life, Headspace and Calm, can be downloaded to help cope with stress. And The Charity for Civil Servants' website has a burnout hub with information and advice about what help is available. However, it's also important to recognise if it's time to seek professional support. See if your workplace offers free counselling, or, if you want to find your own counsellor, search the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) therapist directory.

Your employer may have an employee assistance programme (EAP). HR managers say these programmes can provide employees with confidential 24/7-365 support, wellbeing and mindfulness resources online as well as access to counselling and therapy. Employers that allow weekly 'wellbeing time' can also help to avoid burnout – this has proved to be successful at CSSC.

Above all, if you're feeling stressed, overwhelmed and exhausted, but you haven't acknowledged how bad you are feeling, it's important to seek help. "Be honest with yourself, and take action. Be responsive, not reactive, to your stress," advises Lina. And remember, it's ok to call for that help, and you're not alone. As Pete says: "Burnout is something a lot of people experience – and it's nothing to be ashamed of."

Help and further information

- Calm: www.calm.com/
- Headspace: www.headspace.com/
- Mind: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
- The Self Care Forum: www.selfcareforum.org/
- The Charity for Civil Servants: <https://foryoubyyou.org.uk/our-services/wellbeing/burnout-hub>
- British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy: www.bacp.co.uk/
- NHS (Five steps to mental wellbeing): www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/

