

How to recover from burnout



Are you feeling like you just can't work anymore? Is your productivity tanking because your brain shuts down every time you're faced with a task? Do you vacillate between guilt for poor quality work and frustration for wasting your time away from home? You may be suffering from burnout.

Depending on the kind of work you do, days at your job can become long tests of endurance and willpower. When repeated for too long, burnout can set in and cause serious problems for your ability to keep going. Many workplaces keep quiet about the fact that burnout is fairly common, but it's a fact that many people stretch themselves too thin without knowing it. So, what can you do once you're in the throes of burnout?

The science of your mental health

Like it or not, your brain is composed of physical materials that depend on a stable composition to function properly. When those chemicals start to fall out of balance—whether from stressors, too little sleep, poor diet, injury, or countless other causes—they alter a person's ability to process the daily stresses of life. Bad days stretch into bad weeks/months/years.

Because we are animals at our core, we prioritize survival above all else. Our brain chemicals serve this purpose by moderating stress levels to match the situation we're in. Adrenaline, for example, gives people the energy needed to lift cars off of people or run miles without rest. Serotonin is responsible for moderating memory and biological rhythms like sleep.

Cortisol (a hormone related to stress) increases blood sugar, metabolizes fats and proteins, and limits the inflammation that comes from immune responses. In short bursts, cortisol plays a valuable role in sustaining the

body during times of danger. Over long periods, however, this kind of stress causes harm to the body.

Over time, increased cortisol levels can:

- Weaken the immune system and lead to more illness
- Prevent the growth of new bone, posing problems to calcium absorption
- Burn up proteins before they are able to be absorbed by muscles
- Increase sodium absorption, altering electrolyte balances
- Damage the long-term memory capability of the hippocampus (one sign of burnout is memory loss)

Like anything in life, moderation is everything. Keeping brain chemicals in balance takes effort, and being overworked can quickly disrupt that balance, even to the point where physical symptoms appear. To experience burnout is to live in a state where your survival feels threatened, and the only solution is to reduce that stress.

Burnout recovery starts with the basics

Drink more water. Get enough sleep. Take walks throughout the day. Make time for friends and family. Find a way to be creative.



Burnout isn't necessarily easy to overcome, but many people end up stressed out because they aren't making time for what's truly important: health of the physical, mental, and emotional varieties. These are not negotiable pastimes reserved for those with a little extra time on their hands—they must be prioritized.

Let's reiterate the suggestions above: set water goals to ensure you drink enough, don't get to bed later than midnight, take walks at 11 am and 3pm, call (or send text messages to) a family member once a week, and get messy with art as often as possible (painting, music, cooking, collage, journaling, etc.).

Breaks during work are seen by some employers as a frivolous waste of time. What those employers don't realize is that workers who [take frequent breaks](#) nearly always produce better work. And for the record, employers who don't value breaks are more likely to have a burnt-out workforce.

In the words of Katt Williams, "If it's 24 hours a day, then what the [bleep] is night? They don't tell you it's only 12 hours in a day, because then you wouldn't give them 8." Your health depends on your ability to stamp out time for yourself. Unfortunately, your employer isn't always likely to give it to you willingly. Work is inevitable,

but learning to set boundaries will make a world of difference against chronic stress. Self-care matters.

Making room for better mental health

On the opposite side of those basics mentioned above are habits that don't do you any good. Do you find yourself endlessly scrolling through social media? Working long hours Monday through Friday? How often do you get regular exercise? While these simple questions won't be enough to completely cure burnout, they can help.

With all the mental illness linked to social media, it's a small miracle it's still unregulated. Social media is a surefire way to pinch your self-esteem and feel a little worse about your day, which comes as no surprise to any of us. The torrent of highlights from other peoples' lives engenders both jealousy and exhaustion, as it is impossible to reach the feed's end and to truly know whether what you're seeing is real. Social media is basically designed to keep you safely [locked into your own ideas](#) without worrying about having to weigh the validity of other ideas that challenge or harm your beliefs.

Give yourself and your well-being a media break by leaving your phone at home and taking a walk.

Your body needs exercise

In our prehistoric former lives, days were spent working or farming for food—both far more demanding tasks than the effort required to eat today. Across the world, people are living longer, growing taller, and weighing more. However, this leaves us with a lot of energy only able to be discharged through physical activity.

If regular exercise isn't part of your routine, it's time to find something you like and get moving. Some people need a personal trainer or physical therapist to cultivate the habit, while others need a buddy to join them on the court. But don't feel limited to formal avenues of exercise—any activity that gets your heart rate up and makes you sweat a little is appropriate.

While exercise isn't a comprehensive answer to burnout, spending too many days without it can contribute to emotional exhaustion more than one might think, fraying nerves and destabilizing emotions.

Eat healthy food

If you're working so much that you can't step away long enough to eat something nutritious, you may be showing signs of burnout, which will eventually take its toll on your body. While unhealthy food will keep you fueled up enough to stay on task, saturated fats and excess sugars/carbohydrates commonly found in fast food could dampen your physical health, sending your body into recovery mode and clouding your mind.

Eating healthy isn't always convenient—that's an unfortunate truth—but with some foresight and meal planning, you can put things into your body that will have you operating at your best. Just a little effort will do the trick. There's no need to see a dietician and draft out a meal schedule months in advance, but it's probably time to eat a little less pizza and a little more vegetables. If you don't have time to make healthy meals yourself, consider a meal delivery service where you can get healthy meals at home.

Go outside more

In the work-from-home era, it's remarkably easy to spend long periods indoors. Whether it's a desire to get more work done or a fear of having to smile and wave at neighbors, staying home is one of the most common coping strategies for burnout. Your body needs some outside air. One great stress management technique is to go somewhere you can't get cell service and focus on enjoying nature. If you're lucky enough to live by mountains, camping is a fantastic option for a quick reset. However, don't dismiss the value of a walk around your neighborhood either.

Look up some scenic locations near where you live, pack a lunch, and forget about work for a while. It's a cheap/free way to escape screen life, if only for a moment.

Read a book now & then

It's rarely easy to make time for stuff that doesn't seem essential. Eating is a must, so working it into the day is natural. Reading though? Not so much, yet the benefits of reading are well-documented.

Those who suffer from burnout tend to let their minds wander to where the frustration of work-life snowballs into existential dread. With reading, however, that energy is stoked and channeled somewhere productive—an alternate reality where daily life fades into the pages before you. Fiction is a great way to fully remove yourself from your problems and forget about what's bothering you for a while.

Is reading a short-term distraction? Yes. It may not solve burnout for good, but it's a great way to broaden one's perspective and enhance the capacity for empathy. Some therapy methods even utilize reading as a way to envision a happy place to go when stress becomes overwhelming.

Music works too



Not a long-term solution by any means, but popping in your favorite album can quickly boost your mood. Music is one of those things that speak to your soul. Artists who speak to you can make you feel seen and understood, which is lacking when burnout is present.

Talking about your Problems

Despite our best efforts—adequate sleep, healthy food, regular exercise—burnout can burrow deep within and make a nest that's difficult to sweep out. The next step is to find somewhere to express it, whether to a friend, a therapist, or (as a last resort) to your boss.

Start by talking to your friends or loved ones. Let them know you're not seeking a solution to your problem, but just a listening ear. Focus on how you feel, rather than how you wish things were. Why? Because expressing feelings forces you to make contact with the emotional parts of yourself that can be silenced with burnout. Expressing feelings takes effort. It requires slowing down and using more gut feeling than mind. Friends (or co-

workers) who listen to these kinds of problems are golden. However, not everyone wants to hear about your work-related problems—even your friends. You may have to seek a more professional confidant.

The value of therapy cannot be overstated. Help from a trained counselor can provide guidance on how to put the stress of work into perspective. On top of that, a therapist can show you if your personal biases are getting in the way of your ability to be happy. We are often our own worst enemy when it comes to work-life balance issues, so if your insurance covers it, take the time to locate a local experienced therapy professional. It pays dividends.

Bringing Issues to Your Boss

Not all problems can be solved outside work, however. Prolonged burnout requires a plan of action, and that plan may start with talking to the right manager. Obviously, conversations like these must be handled with tact—blurting that you're sick of work isn't likely to go over well. Instead, frame the issue in terms of career goals. Your work is suffering because you feel overextended or unable to meet the demands placed on you.

Should you decide to speak to a manager about burnout, remember to:

- **Stay focused on how you feel.** Avoid blame. Job burnout is primarily a feeling of being overwhelmed, which, while valid in many instances, is no one else's "fault." Stick to how *you* feel rather than how things *ought* to be. Your boss will be less likely to jump on the defensive.
- **Provide avenues for help.** If your manager could provide assistance, what would it look like? Tell them about it. Being specific turns your case into a problem to be solved rather than an attitude to be adjusted.
- **Express your desire to continue contributing.** Make it clear that you're not quitting, just struggling. This is a normal part of life and work, and just having that kind of support can be the difference between moving forward and feeling stuck.

If you've been working your butt off to be a strong team member, you've earned the right to have your concerns heard and addressed.

Everything is temporary

Be patient. Try not to make any rash decisions when you feel burnt out. Sometimes, all that's needed is a change of seasons—in a month, you may find the strength to get through it.

Of course, there's always the chance that you're ready for a job change. If that's the case, try to do any job hunting while still employed. This will allow you to negotiate your salary from a position of power. You can even use another job offer to negotiate a higher salary with your current employer. Who knows? Maybe looking for another job will cause you to question your decision and decide to stick around.

Life is uncertain, and security is an illusion. Work occupies a significant part of our lives, so finding a way to make it livable is critical to our ability to thrive. If you're feeling burnt out, do everyone a favor and share your feelings. We need more of that.