

FD Consultants

Psychosocial Support and Trauma Specialist Services

Recognising and recovering from burnout

Running out of gas? Recognising the signs of burnout before it's too late.



Burnout is one of those road hazards in life that high-achievers really should be keeping a close eye out for, but sadly - often because of their “*I can do everything*” personalities - they rarely see it coming. Because high-achievers are often so passionate about what they do, they tend to ignore the fact that they're working exceptionally long hours, taking on exceedingly heavy workloads, and putting enormous pressure on themselves to excel - all of which make them ripe for burnout.

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to:

- physical and emotional exhaustion
- cynicism and detachment
- feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

When in the throes of full-fledged burnout, you are no longer able to function effectively on a personal or professional level. However, burnout doesn't happen suddenly. You don't wake up one morning and all of a sudden “have burnout”. Its nature is much more insidious, creeping up on us over time like a slow leak, which makes it much harder to recognize. Still, our bodies and minds do give us warnings, and if you know what to look for, you can recognize it before it's too late.

What are the signs of burnout?

Each of the three areas described above is characterised by certain signs and symptoms. These signs and symptoms exist along a continuum. In other words, the difference between stress and burnout is a matter of degree, which means that the earlier you recognise the signs, the better able you will be to avoid burnout, if you do something to address the symptoms when you recognise them.

Signs of physical and emotional exhaustion:

1. **Chronic fatigue.** In the early stages, you may feel a lack of energy and feel tired most days. In the latter stages, you feel physically and emotionally exhausted, drained, and depleted, and you may feel a sense of dread for what lies ahead on any given day.
2. **Insomnia.** In the early stages, you may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep one or two nights a week. In the latter stages, insomnia may turn into a persistent, nightly ordeal; as exhausted as you are, you can't sleep.
3. **Forgetfulness/impaired concentration and attention.** Lack of focus and mild forgetfulness are early signs. Later, the problems may get to the point where you can't get your work done and everything begins to pile up.
4. **Physical symptoms.** Physical symptoms may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, gastrointestinal pain, dizziness, fainting, and/or headaches.
5. **Increased illness.** Because your body is depleted, your immune system becomes weakened, making you more vulnerable to infections, colds, flu, and other immune-related medical problems.
6. **Loss of appetite or over-eating.** In the early stages, you may not feel hungry and may skip a few meals or start to binge eat. In the latter stages, you may lose your appetite all together or maintain an unhealthy diet, and therefore begin to lose or gain a significant amount of weight.
7. **Anxiety.** Early on, you may experience mild symptoms of tension, worry, and edginess. As you move closer to burnout, the anxiety may become so serious that it interferes in your ability to work productively and may cause problems in your personal life.
8. **Depression.** In the early stages, you may feel mildly sad, occasionally hopeless, and you may experience feelings of guilt and worthlessness as a result. At its worst, you may feel trapped, severely depressed, and think the world would be better off without you.

9. **Anger.** At first, this may present as interpersonal tension and irritability. In the latter stages, this may turn into angry outbursts and serious arguments at home and in the workplace.

Signs of cynicism and detachment

1. **Loss of enjoyment.** At first, loss of enjoyment may seem very mild, such as not wanting to go to work or being eager to leave. Without intervention, loss of enjoyment may extend to all areas of your life, including the time you spend with family and friends. At work, you may try to avoid projects and figure out ways to escape work all together.
2. **Pessimism.** At first, this may present itself as negative self-talk and/or moving from a glass half-full to a glass half-empty attitude. At its worst, this may move beyond how you feel about yourself and extend to trust issues with colleagues and family members and a feeling that you can't count on anyone.
3. **Isolation.** In the early stages, this may seem like mild resistance to socialising (i.e. not wanting to go out to lunch; closing your door occasionally to keep others out). In the latter stages, you may become angry when someone speaks to you, or you may come in early or leave late to avoid interactions.
4. **Detachment.** Detachment is a general sense of feeling disconnected from others or from your environment. It can take the form of the isolative behaviours described above and result in removing yourself emotionally and physically from your job and other responsibilities. You may call in sick often, stop returning calls and emails, or regularly come in late.

Signs of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment

1. **Feelings of apathy and hopelessness.** This is similar to what is described in the depression and pessimism sections of this article. It presents as a general sense that nothing is going right or nothing matters. As the symptoms worsen, these feelings may become immobilising, making it seem like "what's the point"?
2. **Increased irritability.** Irritability often stems from feeling ineffective, unimportant, useless, and an increasing sense that you're not able to do things as efficiently or effectively as you once did. In the early stages, this can interfere in personal and professional relationships. At its worst, it can destroy relationships and careers.
3. **Lack of productivity and poor performance.** Despite long hours, chronic stress prevents you from being as productive as you once were, which often results in incomplete projects and an ever-growing to-do list. At times, it seems that as hard as you try, you can't climb out from under the pile.

If you're not experiencing any of these problems, that's great! However, you should keep these warning signs in mind, remembering that burnout is an insidious creature that creeps up on you as you're living your busy life.

If you are experiencing some of these symptoms, this should be a wake-up call that you may be on a dangerous path. Take some time to honestly assess the amount of stress in your life and find ways to reduce it before it's too late.

Burnout isn't like the flu; it doesn't go away after a few weeks unless you make some changes in your life. And as hard as that may seem, it's the smartest thing to do because making a few little changes now will keep you in the race with a lot of gas to get you across the finish line.

About FD Consultants

FD Consultants support anyone who has been impacted by trauma through work or personal circumstances, whether directly or indirectly. We offer consultancy to organisations when implementing a trauma management programme and duty of care policies for psychosocial support. FD Consultants offer services to enable individuals to remain resilient in highly stressful environments and situations.

We support individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), vicarious trauma, cumulative stress, anxiety and burnout. We believe in working and walking alongside individuals or organisations empowering them to find their own solutions and we strongly believe everyone can recover from mental health challenges with the right help and support.