

Burnout: Recognise, Reverse, Rebuild

A workbook for professionals, and for the managers responsible for them

Burnout rarely arrives all at once. It builds over months, often in the people who care most about their work, and by the time it is obvious it has usually been there for a while.

This workbook follows three steps. Recognise the signs early. Reverse the damage by changing what is within your control and asking for help with what is not. Rebuild the habits and boundaries that make it less likely to happen again.

Work through it on your own in about 45 minutes, or use it in a one-to-one with your manager. The final part is written for managers and for the organisations they work in, because burnout is rarely only an individual problem.

It is a reflective tool, not a diagnosis. If anything here worries you, the section on getting professional help explains where to go.

Stress is usually about too much. Burnout is about not enough: not enough energy, not enough meaning, and not enough belief that effort will make a difference.

PART 1: RECOGNISE

01

What burnout is, and what it is not

The World Health Organization includes burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. It defines it as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, with three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion.
- Increased mental distance from your job, or feelings of negativity or cynicism about it.
- Reduced professional efficacy: a sense that you are no longer effective.

Strictly, the WHO definition refers only to work. In practice, the same pattern of depletion can build in other demanding roles, such as caring for a relative or parenting, and those pressures add to whatever is happening at work.

STRESS

Too much: too many demands, too much pressure

Emotions run high and feel reactive

A sense of urgency and over-engagement

You can still picture things improving once it is under control

Comes and goes, and is often tied to a situation

Your sense of who you are stays intact

BURNOUT

Not enough: energy, motivation, hope

Emotions are flattened or numb

Detachment and disengagement

It is hard to see that anything will change

Creeps up gradually until it feels normal

You can feel like a shadow of your former self

Short bursts of pressure can be energising. It is prolonged stress, without enough recovery, that wears people down. Stress is easier to spot and usually easier to resolve. Burnout takes longer to recognise and longer to recover from.

02

The warning signs

Everyone has days when they feel overloaded or unappreciated. The concern is when those days become most days. The early signs are subtle and easy to explain away, which is exactly why they are worth checking deliberately.

PHYSICAL

Feeling drained most of the time

Frequent minor illnesses

Changes in sleep or appetite

Headaches, muscle tension or other physical strain

Mental exhaustion that rest does not fix

EMOTIONAL

Self-doubt and a sense of failure

Loss of motivation and concentration

Growing cynicism and a negative outlook

Feeling trapped, alone or defeated

Losing interest in things you used to enjoy

BEHAVIOURAL

Withdrawing from responsibilities

Procrastinating, or taking longer to get things done

Isolating yourself from others

Using food, alcohol or other substances to cope

Snapping at people, or taking frustration out on others

Self-check: over the last month, how often have you experienced the following?

0 = never, 1 = occasionally, 2 = often, 3 = most days

	0	1	2	3
Feeling exhausted, even after rest	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dreading the start of the working day	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feeling that nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggling to concentrate or make decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feeling cynical or detached about your work	☐	☐	☐	☐
Getting less satisfaction from things you used to enjoy	☐	☐	☐	☐
Irritability with colleagues, family or friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
Changes in your sleep or appetite	☐	☐	☐	☐
Putting off tasks you would normally handle easily	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relying more on caffeine, alcohol or food to get through	☐	☐	☐	☐
Withdrawing from people at work or outside it	☐	☐	☐	☐
Working longer hours but achieving less	☐	☐	☐	☐

There is no pass mark. A pattern of 2s and 3s, particularly across all three dimensions of exhaustion, detachment and reduced effectiveness, is a reason to act now rather than wait.

EXERCISE

Reflect

1. Which three items did you score highest?

2. When did you first notice them? What was happening at the time?

3. Has anyone around you commented on a change in you?

03

The five stages of burnout

Burnout is usually described as a progression. Knowing the stages helps you place yourself honestly, and notice movement before it becomes entrenched.

STAGE 1

Enthusiasm

What it looks like: A new role, project or promotion. High energy, high commitment, a willingness to take on more and to put in whatever it takes.

What helps: Build good habits now, while it is easy: protect recovery time and set expectations you can sustain.

STAGE 2

Onset of stress

What it looks like: Some days are noticeably harder. Sleep, focus or patience start to slip, and personal time gets squeezed.

What helps: Notice it and name it. Look at what has changed in your workload and what you have stopped doing for yourself.

STAGE 3

Chronic stress

What it looks like: Stress is present most of the time. Cynicism, lateness, procrastination, more caffeine or alcohol, less time with people.

What helps: Talk to someone, including your manager. Changes to workload and boundaries matter most at this point.

STAGE 4

Burnout

What it looks like: Exhaustion, self-doubt, physical symptoms and withdrawal. Coping strategies that used to work no longer do.

What helps: This needs more than a weekend off. Seek support from your GP or Employee Assistance Programme, and discuss changes at work.

STAGE 5

Habitual burnout

What it looks like: The symptoms have become part of daily life, with persistent low mood, fatigue and a loss of sense of self.

What helps: Professional support is important. Recovery is very possible, but it is a longer process and not one to manage alone.

EXERCISE

Where are you now?

1. Which stage best describes you today? Which described you six months ago?

2. What has moved you, in either direction?

PART 2: REVERSE

04

Understand what is driving it

Burnout usually has more than one cause. Work is often the main driver, but how we live and the way we tend to approach work make a difference to how much pressure we absorb.

WORK	LIFESTYLE	PERSONAL STYLE
Workload and sustained pressure	Not enough sleep	Perfectionism: nothing ever feels good enough
Little control over how or when you work	Too many responsibilities without enough help	Finding it hard to delegate or let go of control
Unclear or overly demanding expectations	Too little time to rest, socialise or switch off	People-pleasing and difficulty saying no
Lack of recognition for good work	Few close, supportive relationships	A tendency to expect the worst
Chaotic, high-pressure or conflict-ridden environments	Work spilling into every part of the week	Measuring your worth by your output
A mismatch between your values and the work		

The personal factors are not character flaws. Many of them are exactly what make people good at demanding jobs. They become a risk when they are applied without limits.

EXERCISE

Sort your pressures

List the three biggest pressures on you right now. For each one, decide whether you can control it, influence it, or neither. Put your energy into the first two, and look for support with the third.

1. Pressure 1, and whether you can control it, influence it or neither:

2. Pressure 2:

3. Pressure 3:

05

Manage your energy, not just your time

Time management on its own rarely fixes burnout, because the scarce resource is energy. A full diary can be sustainable when you recover well, and a lighter one can still be draining when you do not.

Rest, in all its forms

Sleep is only one kind of rest. Most people also need physical rest, mental rest from concentration, sensory rest from screens and noise, social rest, and emotional rest from having to manage other people's feelings.

Which of these do you get least of?

Movement

Aim for around 30 minutes of activity a day, which can be broken into 10-minute blocks. A short walk between meetings counts.

Where could 10 minutes of movement fit into your working day?

What you put into your body

Caffeine, sugar, alcohol and nicotine can feel like they help in the moment, and tend to deepen the dip afterwards.

What are you relying on more than you were a year ago?

Connection

Talking to someone who listens well is one of the quickest ways to settle the stress response. They do not need to fix anything. Time with supportive colleagues counts, and so does limiting time with people who reliably leave you drained.

Who could you talk to this week?

Boundaries

Saying no, or "not yet", to requests that would overextend you is not a lack of commitment. It is how commitment stays sustainable.

What is one request you would decline if you felt able to?

EXERCISE

Energy audit

1. In a typical week, what drains your energy most?

2. What restores it?

3. What is one change you could make in the next fortnight to shift the balance?

06

Re-evaluate, and reframe what you can

Burnout is a sign that something important is not working. That makes it a prompt to step back and look at what you are giving your energy to, and why.

Questions worth asking:

- Are my priorities still the right ones, or have they drifted?
- Is there a gap between what I value and what my work asks of me?
- What parts of my work still feel worthwhile, and could I spend more time on them?
- When did I last take proper time off, without checking messages?
- Is there support available that I have not used, such as an Employee Assistance Programme?

Changing job is sometimes the right answer, but it is rarely the only one. Finding the value in the work you do, adjusting how you work and changing what you expect of yourself can all make a substantial difference.

EXERCISE

What matters

1. What do I want my work to give me, beyond income?

2. What am I currently neglecting that matters to me?

PART 3: REBUILD

07

Self-care as a practice: awareness, balance, commitment

Self-care is less about treats and more about taking an active role in protecting your own wellbeing, particularly when pressure is high. It has three parts. Awareness: noticing when you are losing balance. Balance: across work, personal life, rest and enjoyment. Commitment: making it a priority rather than something that happens if time allows.

Self-care audit: how well are you doing each of these at the moment?

3 = I do this well, 2 = I do this OK, 1 = I rarely do this, 0 = I never do this, ? = this never occurred to me

	3	2	1	0	?
Getting enough sleep	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Taking breaks during the working day	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Eating regular meals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Moving or exercising	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Switching off from email and messages outside work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Taking all of my annual leave	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spending time with people who support me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Doing something purely because I enjoy it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Saying no when I need to	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Asking for help when I need it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Noticing early when I am becoming stressed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

EXERCISE

One step

Choose one item you scored 0 or 1. Do not try to fix everything at once.

1. The item I will work on:

2. What I will do differently, and when:

3. Who I will tell, so that someone notices:

08

Getting “burned in”, not burned out

Recovery is not about going back to exactly how things were, because that is what led here. It is about building a way of working that you can sustain.

- B: Begin where you are, and ask how you got here.
- U: Understand your work style, including whether you are working harder rather than smarter.
- R: Reflect on your challenges. Which can you control? Where do you need help?
- N: Nurture the habits and strengths that keep you well: sleep, food, movement, people.
- E: Extend your reach. Look at what else is possible, rather than what is fixed.
- D: Determine your longer-term goals.
- I: Initiate lasting change, in small steps.
- N: Never settle for running on empty as normal.

EXERCISE

Your plan

1. Three warning signs I will watch for:

2. What I will do when I notice them:

3. What I will ask of my manager or organisation:

09

When to seek professional help

Self-care and changes at work are not always enough. Seek professional support if:

- Changes to your work or routine have made no difference.
- Strategies that used to help no longer do.
- You are struggling to function at work or at home.
- Your mood has been low for more than a couple of weeks.
- You are having thoughts of harming yourself, or that life is not worth living.

Where to go:

- Your Employee Assistance Programme, if your organisation has one. It is confidential.
- Your GP.

- NHS Talking Therapies, which you can refer yourself to in England.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

PART 4: FOR MANAGERS AND ORGANISATIONS

10

The role of leaders

The people most at risk of burnout are often those who invest the most in their work. Think of a racing car: fast and robust, and still dependent on pit stops. Skip them, and sooner or later something fails at speed.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING A MANAGER CAN DO

Be a role model, and practise recovery yourself. Teams take their cues from what their manager does, not what they say.

In practice:

- Take your own leave, and do not send messages while you are on it.
- Notice the early signs in your team, particularly in your most committed people.
- Ask about workload in one-to-ones, not only about output.
- Make it normal to say "I am at capacity" without it counting against someone.
- Recognise good work specifically, not just when something goes wrong.
- Know what support your organisation offers, and how to refer someone to it.

Individual strategies only go so far if the causes are organisational. The Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards set out six areas of work design that, if not well managed, are associated with work-related stress. They are a practical place to start.

AREA	A QUESTION TO ASK
Demands	Are workloads, deadlines and working patterns achievable?
Control	How much say do people have in the way they do their work?
Support	Do people get the encouragement and resources they need from managers and colleagues?
Relationships	Is conflict dealt with, and is unacceptable behaviour addressed?

AREA	A QUESTION TO ASK
Role	Do people understand their role, and are roles free of conflicting demands?
Change	Is change managed and communicated well, with people involved?

EXERCISE

For managers

1. Who in my team is most at risk, and what am I seeing?

2. Which of the six areas is weakest for my team?

3. One thing I will change, and one thing I will raise with senior leaders:

A CLOSING REFLECTION

Look back at your self-check and your self-care audit.

What is the one change that would make the biggest difference?

What support do you need to make it?

When will you look at this workbook again?

Recovery is not about going back to how things were. It is about building a way of working you can sustain.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases, World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>)
- Management Standards, Health and Safety Executive (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>)
- Work-related stress and how to manage it, Health and Safety Executive (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>)