

BE AWARE of the fires that cause burnout

by Dr Karina de Bruin

Most of us have occasionally experienced feelings of anxiety in our lives. Although it is normal to have feelings of anxiety at particular times, it may become a problem when it is excessive and prevents someone from coping with everyday tasks and enjoying life.

Are emotional exhaustion and burn-out the same?

When we are highly stressed, our bodies react by releasing stress hormones into the blood and activate a 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Long-term, accumulated stress often leads to emotional exhaustion, where you find yourself in a state of feeling emotionally overwhelmed, empty, and drained.

Emotional exhaustion is one of the signs of burnout.

Christina Maslach and Susan Jackson constructed the

Maslach Burnout Inventory which explains occupational burnout through three interrelated components, namely:

- emotional exhaustion,
- feelings of depersonalisation or detachment, and
- a sense of ineffectiveness or lack of accomplishment.

The difference between the signs of stress and burnout is only a matter of degree. Burnout slowly stalks us and announces itself once it is too late.



Are there signs to look out for?

The earlier one recognises the signs, the better one can manage it to avoid burnout.

There are ways to find out when you are on the path to burnout. Ask yourself the following questions and be honest about those you have answered 'yes' to:

- Do you experience a lack of energy and feel tired most of the time?
- Do you often struggle to fall asleep or to stay asleep – even when you are tired?
- Do you skip meals because you do not feel hungry? Do you lose weight without wanting or having to?
- Are you forgetful and struggle to concentrate on your work?
- Do you have colds, flu, and infections more often than usually?
- Do you feel tense, anxious, or irritable without any specific reason?
- Do you miss deadlines at work?

Is it OK to ask for help?

We have a responsibility toward our employers to perform at our best and if we are not able to do so, it can be a good idea to discuss it with our supervisors – but it is not always an easy task.

Many workplaces offer support through employee assistance programmes or provide mental health resources in the community to help employees manage stress factors.

Although burnout is not a permanent state, it takes quite a long time to recover. And if not managed properly, it is possible to go down the same path again.

As a first step, be attuned to your body and your emotions. If you experience some of the signs and symptoms, and if your friends and colleagues tell you that you are showing these symptoms, acknowledge the fact that you may be suffering from burnout, or are on your way there.

It's not easy to get to the bottom of it!

Use a stress diary to list all the situations that make you feel stressed, worried, and helpless. For each of these stressors, think about one change that you can make to reduce its impact on your life – and implement those.

Learn to say 'no', delegate some of your tasks, and trust that the tasks will be completed successfully.

Create a support system through friends and family, and use it. Social support is one of the most important resources in trying to overcome the harmful impact of stress in our lives.

On a very basic level, make sure that you get enough good sleep, exercise regularly, and eat healthy.



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