

# Burnout

## What Is Burnout?

Burnout occurs when an individual feels depleted of their physical and emotional resources. There is almost always an emotional component to burnout. **Working hard does not cause someone to burn out.** Many people work hard and enjoy every minute of it. However, if the person feels responsible for getting everything done and feels that there is not enough time, then the pressure and guilt they feel can contribute to burnout.

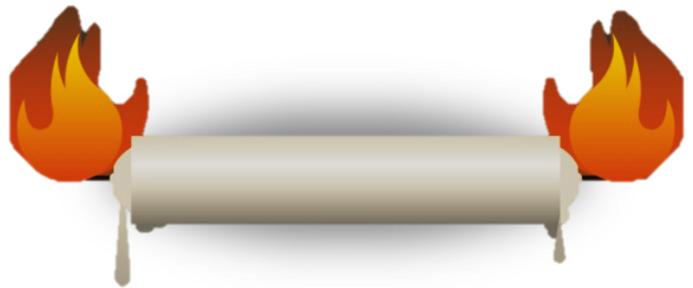
Burnout can also occur when an emotional issue is not resolved, such as being blamed for something wrong at work or being undermined when trying to accomplish something. **It is this emotional component of feeling powerless to do something about a situation that contributes to burnout.** The person may already have difficulty sleeping because of the situation and may continue to push themselves even though they are already exhausted. They get to the point where they cannot go on but they are not sure exactly what is contributing to this feeling.

**Compassion fatigue** can also be a contributing factor in burnout. This often happens to caretakers dealing with the ill or to individuals that work in particular helping professions. They will push themselves beyond what they are capable of due to a strong feeling of responsibility towards the ill or disenfranchised.

## What Are The Symptoms Of Burnout?

Individuals that burnout may experience some or all of the following -

- exhaustion
- depression
- sleeplessness
- poor eating habits
- lack of concentration or interest
- crying
- decreased self-esteem and confidence



Once off work individuals often find that they are exhausted, have very little energy and need a lot of sleep. They may also find that they are depressed. This is an emotional reaction to their situation. No one wants to be off work from burnout. While guilt feelings are common, these feelings pass in the process of healing.

Once rested and away from the people or job that contributed to the emotional component of burnout, the individual will start to feel better, to sleep and eat normally. This explains why employers and doctors think the person has recovered and can return to work. For many employees, as soon as they do go back to work or get close to returning, they feel sick and have a strong emotional reaction. They then say they are not ready to return. This can confuse and anger those who are counting on them to be back at work. Because of this factor, doctors often go month to month before setting a date when their patient can return.

## Can Burnout Be Overcome?

While the simple answer is yes, the real answer is more complicated. Resting and getting away does not take care of the emotional component of burnout. If the person does not heal emotionally the symptoms will return, especially if they go back to the same situation. Individuals often return when they do not want to but do so because they feel guilty staying at home. Others may feel more confident in their ability to cope but on their return realize they have not healed.

## Can I Recover From Burnout Myself?

Again, the simple answer is yes but the real answer is more complicated. Some individuals, once they are out of the situation and at home, realize how they contributed to the problem and how they need to change. When they return, they are able to translate their insight into action by carrying out the necessary changes (for example, not working overtime).

For other individuals it is not so clear what happened, or how they contributed to the problem, or what they can do about it. For these individuals a counsellor's expertise may be needed. The counsellor can help them figure out what occurred, how to heal, and if they need to change.

## Should I Be Looking For Another Job?

There are times when, no matter what an individual does, their current situation is not a satisfactory place for them to work. It may be wise for these individuals to look for another job. However, they may feel they need to stay in their current job due to other reasons including - not having the training to change jobs or the current job has flexible hours that fit with their daycare needs. In these cases the individuals need to look at what can and cannot be changed so that they can learn to enjoy their job and not burnout again.

## What If I Stay In This Job?

Sometimes individuals need to examine their reactions and what causes them to react in certain ways. They may need to learn to -

- deal with difficult people and let go of words that hurt them
- not take so much responsibility for others
- avoid feeling so much guilt when they are not able to accomplish everything they want to do
- set limits in what they will do and express this clearly
- practice self-care if their job entails taking care of others

Assertiveness training may be part of learning to set clear limits in a particular workplace. There are many components and as many reasons for burnout as there are individuals. Each situation has to be looked at individually.



## How Will I Know I Am Ready To Return?

If you have a clear idea of what happened before and how you will now react differently, then you have a good chance of not burning out again. Also if you are not having a strong emotional reaction to returning, you have gone a long way in your healing.