

Burn-out: What is it, and how to manage it

Burnout is a condition which appears to be on the increase, perhaps reflecting the state of our performance-oriented society. It is also a condition that should be taken seriously

As we have grown up we have taken for granted the fact that performance is part of life and we have to prove ourselves repeatedly. As long as our energy / demand balance is in equilibrium, this works without a problem. However, in the fast-paced world in which we now live, this balance becomes more difficult to maintain.

Burnout has 12 stages of development; however, it is important to point out that the individual phases do not necessarily occur consecutively. Burnout is a condition with progressive development. It is characterised by signs such as emotional exhaustion loss of performance and reduced satisfaction with life and then depersonalization ensues.

If these signs begin to appear, alarm bells start ringing. One major problem is that from stage 5, individuals suffering from burn out usually deny their conflicts and grossly ignore their own needs. From this stage it is important to call upon outside help.

There are people, whose personalities predispose them to Burn-out. It is more likely if people hold the believe that they are only of value or worth if they perform and function effectively. Such individuals feel they have to perform in order to be of worth.

To date, various scientific disciplines have not been able to agree on a definition of 'Burn-out Syndrome'. Diagnosis is not simple, as the symptoms are so varied and diverse. There is no general view on the duration of a burn out illness.

From stage 5 to 6, however, a longer leave of absence from work is often necessary to affect a true and far reaching change.

Burn-out generally progresses through 12 stage:

Stage 1

- Exceptional enthusiasm for one's work
- High expectations of oneself
- Disregard for one's limitations and postponement of own needs

Stage 2

- Exceptional readiness to take on tasks
- Voluntary additional work and unpaid overtime, even during days off and on holiday
- Feeling of being indispensable

Stage 3

- Chronic neglect of one's own needs (for example not taking the time to eat properly)
- Increased consumption of coffee and other stimulants such as cigarettes and alcohol
- Occasional sleep disturbance

Stage 4

- Atrophy of one's ability to enjoy and perceive one's own needs
- Blunders such as forgetting appointments, not completing promised work, inaccuracy
- Considerable sleep disturbance, lack of energy, feeling of weakness

Stage 5

- Dulling and attention disturbances
- Avoidance of personal contacts
- Problems with spouse or partner

Stage 6

- Feeling of insufficient recognition, disillusionment
- Resistance against going to work every day, inner recognition
- Increased absences, late arrival at work. Leaving work early

Stage 7

- Lack of direction and hopelessness, feeling of powerlessness, inner emptiness
- Search for compensatory satisfaction through food, alcohol or other drugs
- Decline in cognitive performance, inaccuracy, inability to make decisions
- Psychosomatic reactions such as muscle tension, back pain, tachycardia

Stage 8

- Crankiness, self-pity, loneliness, angry reactions to well-meaning approaches
- Reduced productivity, work-to-rule
- Emotional life becomes shallow, indifference, feeling of pointlessness
- Decline in social life, little personal interest in other people

Stage 9

- Alienation, deadened feeling and inner emptiness
- Automated functioning
- Increased occurrence of psychosomatic reactions

Stage 10

- Switching between strong painful emotions and the feeling of 'being completely empty
- Phobic states, panic attacks
- Loneliness and negative attitude to life
- Occasional excessive pointless gratifications, for example, shopping binges, gluttony etc

Stage 11

- Negative attitude to life and complete hopelessness
- Exhaustion and desire for prolonged sleep
- Existential doubt, thoughts and intentions of suicide

Stage 12

- Life threatening, spiritual and physical and emotional exhaustion
- Impaired immune system, heart and circulatory disorders, gastro-intestinal diseases
- Suicide ideation

The most important factor in the prevention and treatment of Burn-out is awareness. It is not a matter of personal weakness, but a consequence of extreme stress factors and people can do something about it themselves.

Slowing Down

- Deceleration, spirituality and inner strength have increasingly become familiar terms and we need to ensure that they do not fall victim to being words only, but rather that we use them to redefine our values and develop an understand of the true purpose of living.

Stress factors and resources

- If you are affected, you need to learn how you can influence certain stress factors. You need to become aware of your resources, both internally and externally. You should begin by breaking habits, and if necessary, profoundly changing your life.

Work/life balance

- It is important to ensure that you take on manageable amounts of work. Moreover, when considering your workload, you should also include housework, working at relationships, bringing up children, and not just occupational work.

Time Out

- Your family should be included in your world of experiences and decisions. They also suffer from the stress factors bearing upon you. Structure common free time and plan 'doing nothing' for the soul. Learn to enjoy and use free time purposefully, without having a guilty conscience. Redefine your boundaries and stick to them. Say NO more often

Sleep

- Ensure you get enough sleep – 6 to 9 hours per day. If you have been suffering from sleep disturbances for a long period of time, it is important to do something about it. Don't be ashamed to ask for assistance in whatever form aligns with your values, for example, medication, meditation, natural therapies.

Communication

- It has been proven scientifically that one of the most vital Burn-out factors is a lack of appreciation and recognition. Especially important is the opportunity to have open communication. One must be allowed to say, that one cannot go on, and be able to admit mistakes. Clear work assignments and general frameworks, within which colleagues feeling guided, are important preventative factors. One is best protected in surroundings in which the clarity of one's role is considered to be as important as a healthy autonomy and a culture of trust. This requires personal responsibility and courage, in order to achieve all these things. Address your problems, at work and in private, trust your environment, yourself and your capacity, this is the best way for you to remain healthy