

- Burn Out (Psychology)

How your body knows when you are burned out

Burnout is not just mental or emotional. It can also manifest itself in physical symptoms like insomnia, migraines or stomach aches

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Do you wake up feeling angry or not wanting to get out of bed? Then you are probably edging towards a burnout. The phenomenon has practically become ubiquitous in our culture.



When people think of burnout, mental and emotional symptoms such as feelings of helplessness and cynicism often come to mind. But burnout can lead to physical symptoms as well, and experts say it can be wise to look out for the signs and take steps when you notice them.

Burnout, as it is defined, is not a medical condition — it's "a manifestation of chronic unmitigated stress", explained Dr Lotte Dyrbye, a physician scientist who studies burnout at the Mayo Clinic in the US. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes burnout as a workplace phenomenon characterised by feelings of exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy.

When people are under stress, their bodies undergo changes that include making higher than normal levels of stress hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, epinephrine and norepinephrine. These changes are helpful in the short term — they give us the energy to power through difficult situations — but over time, they start harming the body.

Here's how to recognise burnout in your body and what to do about it.

What to look out for

One common burnout symptom is insomnia, Dyrbye said. When researchers in Italy surveyed front-line health care workers with burnout during the first peak of the pandemic, they found that 55 per cent reported having difficulty falling asleep, while nearly 40 per cent had nightmares.

Research suggests that chronic stress interferes with the complicated neurological and hormonal system that regulates sleep. It's a vicious cycle, because not sleeping throws this system even more out of whack.

Physical exhaustion is another common sign. Changes in eating habits — either eating more or less than usual — as well as headaches and stomach aches can also be incited by burnout.

What to do

If you're experiencing physical symptoms that could be indicative of burnout, consider seeing your doctor or a mental health professional to determine whether they are driven by stress or rooted in other physical conditions, Dyrbye said. Don't just ignore the symptoms.

If it is burnout, then the best solution is to address the root of the problem. Burnout is typically recognised when it is job-driven, but chronic stress can have a variety of causes — financial issues, relationship woes or caregiving burdens, among other things.

Despite popular culture coverage of the issue, burnout can't be "fixed" with better selfcare. In fact, this implication only worsens the problem, because it lays the blame and responsibility on those with burnout and implies that they should do more to feel better, which is not the case. However, some lifestyle choices can make burnout less likely.

Having trouble sleeping, eating more than normal (or less) and frequent headaches are common signs of burnout

Pay attention to lifestyle

Social support, for instance, can help. This could include talking to a therapist or meeting with friends (even if over video calls). It may also help to take advantage of mental health or exercise benefits offered by your employer. If you're suffering from insomnia, talk to a doctor about possible treatments.

Finally, while you may not want to add more to your plate, try to make a bit of time each day for something you love, Dyrbye said.