- Burnout (Psychology)

Burnout: What's at stake

When living with chronic stress, you must pause for thought to prevent burnout

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Burnout is not just a buzzword, it is a silent epidemic that is eroding wellbeing, productivity and quality of life among the workforce, and high achievers appear to be especially at risk.



A clinical psychologist and occupational therapist of Netcare Akeso Umhlanga's Centre of Psychotherapy Excellence (Cope) team unpack the troubling consequences of unmanaged chronic work stress, emphasising that prevention is always better than rebuilding after crises.

"Burnout is a state of exhaustion — physically, emotionally and mentally — caused by excessive and continued stress. The three main characteristics of burnout are exhaustion, cynicism (which is a negative or detached attitude) and decreased motivation and productivity over a sustained period," explains Claudia van Blerk, Netcare Akeso Umhlanga Cope manager and occupational therapist.

The World Health Organisation recognises burnout as an occupational phenomenon, rather than a medical diagnosis. The Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2025 Report noted a six-point decrease in South African employee engagement levels, with less than a quarter (23%) of respondents feeling engaged at work, and more than a third (36%) reporting daily stress, both key components observed in people suffering from burnout.

Very often, people on the verge of burnout may notice that the same tasks take much longer to complete than before, and even putting in additional working hours often does not translate into achieving what was previously manageable within working hours.

Burnout symptoms may include:

- Fatigue
- Decreased effectiveness in daily tasks
- Frequent physical illnesses or injuries
- Negative thoughts
- Low mood
- Lack of motivation.

"Burnout may trigger or worsen mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Also, burnout that is prolonged or not addressed can very quickly lead to exacerbation of anxiety and depressive-related symptoms," adds clinical psychologist Vashnie Sithambaram.

"These may include, but are not limited to, depressed mood, low motivation, isolation, negative thoughts, constantly feeling on edge or worrying, easily triggered by situations in the environment, as well as psychosomatic symptoms, such as body aches or flu-like symptoms."

She explains that psychosomatic symptoms refer to physical symptoms that are induced by emotional distress, further compromising a person's ability to meet the demands of their daily life.

"If we look at burnout from a systemic point of view, it has a ripple effect. No person exists in isolation, and eventually, the burnout symptoms can cause a person to become disconnected from those around them. Often, this can lead to interpersonal challenges and even conflicts, further exacerbating the situation."

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO RECOVER FROM BURNOUT?

"There is no defined recovery period for burnout, as this is unique to the individual and may depend on various factors," says

Sithambaram.

These factors may be determined by asking the following questions:

• How long have the burnout symptoms been present?

• Does the person consistently find themselves in situations that require them to work under stress?

• Is the person seeking therapeutic assistance? Some therapies can be short-term, and others may require long-term work to address underlying issues that could increase a person's vulnerability to developing burnout in the future.

Van Blerk says that once the point of burnout has been reached, it can be difficult to manage or recover without external intervention.

"In-patient treatment may be recommended, as the multidisciplinary health care professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists and occupational therapists, can help address the underlying concerns holistically.

"Both group and individual sessions are beneficial for people recovering from burnout, although initially it may seem daunting to engage. We find that encouraging participation as much as possible is essential to getting the best out of admission for burnout and the resources available," she says.

"Some typical therapy goals that we work towards in recovery from burnout include developing coping skills, identifying triggers, helping to change negative thought patterns and treating mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression and others that can either contribute to burnout or be exacerbated by chronic stress.

"Once a person has been discharged from in-hospital care, it is vital to continue care on an individual outpatient basis after discharge. Family sessions could also help address underlying triggers or issues that have developed due to the burnout symptoms."

Sithambaram urges working people to consider their work-life balance as a wellbeing priority to prevent burnout from developing.

PSYCHOLOGIST'S TIPS FOR PROTECTING AGAINST BURNOUT

•Surround yourself with a strong support system, both at work and among your friends and family.

• Don't skip self-care activities: take time to rest, enjoy activities that bring out your creative side, exercise, spend quality time with family, and set aside solo time for hobbies and journalling.

• Take care of your physical health and wellbeing, as this directly impacts your mental health and ability to cope with the demands of everyday life.

• Time management: prioritise what's important and tackle the difficult tasks first to avoid procrastination and reduce the constant worry about work not completed

• Seek professional support if needed. Netcare Akeso's crisis helpline is available 24 hours a day at 0861 435 787. Call to speak with an experienced counsellor and explore options for assistance. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) is also available to assist at 0800 205 026 or 011 234 4837.

— Netcare Akeso