Take a stress test

Excessive, prolonged stress can lead to severe consequences for both wellbeing and physical health if left unaddressed. By

Western Daily Press · 6 Apr 2026 · 18 · CAMILLA FOSTER

WE all deal with varying levels of stress in our daily lives, but at what point does that stress turn into burnout?

For this April's Stress Awareness Month, we spoke to experts to better understand what burnout really means and the five key ways it can affect the brain.

What is burnout?

"Burnout is a syndrome, so is a collection of symptoms, and WHO (World Health Organisation) defines it as an occupational phenomenon," says Dr Elisabetta Burchi, psychiatrist and head of research at Parasym. "If you think about burnout in the workplace, you think about somebody that feels emotionally drained, detached from their own duties and a perception of reduced efficacy in the workplace."

She explains: "When we get a request from our boss we might experience a physiological fight-orflight response, which is the acute stress response that helps make us more capable of adapting to the environment," says Dr Burchi.

"However, when this is repeated over and over again, what happens is that it goes from being an effective, useful response to something that is detrimental to our health and other areas of life."

Dr Matt Rowett, neuropsychiatrist and regional medical director for neuropsychiatry in the north at Cygnet, agrees and adds: "Chronically high levels of cortisol can weaken the immune system and make people become more prone to infections, flu and colds. Chronic stress can also increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and heart attacks."

Self-care isn't a luxury, it's a necessity

Neuropsychiatrist Dr Matt Rowett

Here are five key ways burnout can affect the brain...

1. Cognitive function

"When we are overwhelmed with stress, our thoughts might appear slowed and we might previously have been able to juggle a few things, but now we can't. For example, deadlines and the quality of the work might start to slide," says Dr Rowett.

2. Memory

"Chronic stress can affect our autobiographical episodic memory, which is the ability to remember events from our own life," says Dr Rowett.

3. Emotional regulation

"Chronic stress and elevated cortisol affect our frontal lobes, which are partly responsible for our emotional regulation, drive and motivation," says Dr Rowett.

4. Mental health

"Burnout can have catastrophic

consequences for your mental health because if it's unrecognised by the individual and by the people around them, they can get into this vicious cycle of perceiving that they are failing at the things that are important to them and might start to become depressed," says Dr Rowett.
He highlights how a lot of the symptoms of depression overlap with burnout.
5. Impacts sleep
The brain requires restorative sleep to recover from emotional and cognitive exhaustion, but burnout creates a negative cycle where exhaustion disrupts sleep, which in turn deepens the burnout.
Here some expert strategies for overcoming burnout and getting out of this vicious cycle... Being aware
"Being aware of burnout is a good first step because often people have all these symptoms but don't recognise that they have this syndrome and need help," says Dr Burchi.
Build self-care into your routine
"Self-care isn't a luxury, necessity," says Dr Rowett.
"You have to fight for it because employers want you there to do a job, so won't necessarily think about your welfare."
Prioritise sleep
"Part of that self-care should also be to make sure that you've got a good sleep routine," says Dr Rowett.
"Do something relaxing, like running a bath, so your body is prepared for sleep."
Do a mindful activity
"Doing a mindful activity which consumes your thinking and helps you escape reality for a bit can be helpful," says Dr Rowett.
Consider counselling
it's a
"Counselling provides a space to be able to reflect on things with a safe person," says Dr Rowett.
"You might not be able to tell your employer or partner that you are struggling, but you can say whatever you'd like to your counsellor.