

# Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

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With the persisting work responsibilities and our rapid lifestyles, we have all experienced work stress at some point of our lives. Paired with the general uncertainty in the time of Covid-19, tasks may seem stressful and overwhelming, leaving us feeling stuck, drained and helpless.

This is a common occupational phenomenon that was identified by World Health Organization (WHO) as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”

### It characterized Burnout by three dimensions:

- Declined energy or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and
- reduced professional performance

## Stress – you’re not alone

If you feel stressed, you are not alone. A study of over 4,000 people conducted by the Mental Health Foundation, found that 74% of UK adults have felt so stressed at some point that they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope; while in the workplace, in Ireland, 2 out of 5 workers admitted to suffering stress and anxiety, with a third reporting more stress than two years ago. (Employee Protection Index, Friends First, Behaviour & Attitudes 2018. Mind Matters: Resilience in the Workplace, Vhi Health Insights Report 2018)

For others still working during the pandemic, either in shops, logistics or from home and with a higher risk of infection and related health anxiety, burnout may take a different form, but the feeling is the same.

**For some of the differences between stress and burnout, see the [helpguide.org](https://helpguide.org) article in the references section.**

**So how does burnout occur and how do we prevent it?**

## How do I detect it and why does it occur?

**It’s important to note that stress or anxiety don’t always mean burnout.** Only when we constantly feel stressed even outside of the working environment can we consider it burnout. It may occur due to work stress or too many responsibilities, excessive workload, or it could be due to other factors that include lifestyle and personality traits.

Burnout can cause physical problems too; headaches, stomachaches or intestinal issues. We may feel alienated from our work and activities, feeling overly frustrated and cynical about our work conditions and the value of it.

Burnout may also lead us to feel negative about our tasks, viewing them as disproportionately difficult to do, resulting in reduced work performance.

Normally, burnout occurs when we overwork ourselves to a point where we’re unable to cope, feel exhausted and negative towards our tasks.

But with the current pandemic, many people are under the pressure of working from home, with employees feeling the need to be more responsive and productive, which means they may work more hours than they should, whilst also having to multitask, including parenting and home schooling children.

Although we all know that work-life balance is key, we often do not realise that at times we either have too much on our plate or are trying to spin too many plates at the one time. This is why it is important for us to be aware of and take a step back to reflect on how we are feeling.

## Compassion Fatigue

Another element of burnout is **compassion fatigue**.

With the current pandemic, hearing stories and trying to be there for our loved ones may leave us feeling emotionally drained and detached from others. We may experience frustration, hopelessness, difficulty concentrating and wanting to isolate ourselves, or reach out for support which is currently unavailable.

The people who are at most risk of compassion fatigue during Covid-19 are social and health workers, with 30% of them feeling low compassion levels (see references).

It is normal to feel like this in an unprecedented situation. Experiencing such feelings doesn’t mean you should judge yourself and feel bad, it simply means you’re human. It is

important to remember to be kind to yourself and acknowledge that we are all trying to do our best in the current very challenging circumstances.

Here are some tips to help us deal better when such feelings arise:

## Tips to help us prevent burnout and compassion fatigue

When we reach burnout or compassion fatigue, every problem feels unsolvable, any interaction may seem exhausting and summoning the motivation to help yourself is not an easy task. But we find that breaking problems down into smaller steps might be helpful and actually doable. Here are some actions you can take in order to prevent burnout.

### Root out the problem

Sometimes it is not easy to put your finger on what is exactly causing the frustration. It is important, therefore, to pause and simply reflect on why we feel that way. Keeping a journal to write down your feelings may help, or sometimes taking time and space to yourself is a good way to get grounded, reconnect and regain perspective.



### Take care of yourself

Simple changes can go a long way to making us feel better. Keeping up good habits such as physical activity and healthy eating can go a long way in making us feel better. We know working out is not especially appealing when you feel exhausted or burnt-out, but it can improve the way you feel and lift your mood.

Try to exercise 30 minutes a day – if it helps you can break it into 3 short workout sessions. You can take a 10-minute walk, try out a new recipe or do some yoga stretches. Such activities will make you more energetic and will lift your mood. Another factor that affects your mood is what you eat.

Maintaining a healthy diet is one important way to control your mental and physical state. Though sweets and sugary snacks, together with refined carbs, can provide immediate comfort or a sugar high, minimizing their consumption will benefit your body and general feeling in the longer term.

## Reach out to other people

Having one connected and meaningful conversation a day with people we care about can reduce our stress and make us feel better. At this time, it may not be easy to meet personally with friends and family, but a heart-felt call may be enough to make us feel heard and supported. Your listener can also be a trusted co-worker you have a good connection with and can understand what you're going through.

## Change the way you view your job/task

What your job means to you has a great impact on burnout. Hating what you do or finding it meaningless can leave your day with a bitter taste. Seeing a purpose in what you do, any kind of purpose, can help you get through the day with a better feeling. Same thing goes for other tasks; find the things you enjoy and find meaning in no matter how insignificant they may seem. It can be as simple as having a laugh with your friends from work or a treat you like getting from the grocery shop.

## Finally, remember to prioritize yourself

This can be a good opportunity for you to take a look at how you usually treat yourself. Do you put something else before your own happiness? Make sure you don't neglect yourself. It is important to set boundaries and learn to say "no". Disconnect from your work for a while, put your laptop aside and stop going through your emails. Instead, take some time for yourself doing something you enjoy, find a new hobby or use this time to simply relax.

## Sources of information and further reading:

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/stressed-nation-74-uk-overwhelmed-or-unable-cope-some-point-past-year](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/stressed-nation-74-uk-overwhelmed-or-unable-cope-some-point-past-year)

[www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm)

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[www.who.int/mental\\_health/evidence/burn-out/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/)

[www.yourhealth2.co.uk/stress-management/10/Burnout-prevention-tips.html](http://www.yourhealth2.co.uk/stress-management/10/Burnout-prevention-tips.html)

[www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/high-octane-women/201407/are-you-suffering-compassion-fatigue](http://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/high-octane-women/201407/are-you-suffering-compassion-fatigue)