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Burnout: what it is, how it manifests and how to prevent it

Burnout is a disorder now common in educational and work environments. Let's find out what it is, what triggers it, symptoms, and strategies used to prevent it

School and work environments have become more hectic and demanding than in the past: there are more tasks and more deadlines at an increasingly fast pace. All of this overwhelms employees and students, putting them in a constant state of anxiety. When people are mentally and physically exhausted from enduring long periods of stress, it can lead to burnout. Burnout has been classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a diagnosable disorder and can consist of a **constant feeling of exhaustion, estrangement, or cynical or negative feelings toward one's work or course of study and reduced performance**. It is important to be aware of the signs that may indicate the emergence of burnout in order to prevent it and advocate not only for ourselves but also for those we work or study with. Fortunately, there are signs that can help you know if your students and employees are on the brink of burnout.

The 3 dimensions of burnout

According to social psychologist Christina Maslach, a leading expert in the study of burnout, there are three key **dimensions** of this malaise: **overwhelming fatigue**, **feelings of cynicism and detachment from work**, and a **sense of ineffectiveness** and **lack of accomplishment**.

1. **Fatigue**

Exhaustion is a mixture of physical, cognitive and emotional fatigue that results from "moving blindly" for too long. Let's give an example to better understand: in a company, exhaustion usually results from a 24/7 work culture, excessive workload or unrealistic deadlines. Or from not having the skills, training or resources to do the job. This kind of exhaustion is profound, and a good night's sleep or a two-week vacation is not enough. Concrete changes are needed in the workplace or study or at the organizational level.

Feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and overloaded over a prolonged period of time can and most likely will have a negative impact on a person's personal life and overall well-being, such as in family relationships, with friends and colleagues. So if you feel exhausted, begin to dread going to work, and your motivation and performance drop, you may be showing signs of burnout.

2. **Cynicism**

Cynicism is another key component of burnout. Cynicism can also be described as **depersonalization, demotivation**, or **loss of commitment**. Burnout can lead sufferers to mentally withdraw from the work environment and those around them. It can also lead to negative feelings toward the training environment, colleagues and the workplace in general, negatively impacting the entire team and organization. Signs of cynicism can be **lack of participation**, bad-mouthing other students or colleagues, or **no longer taking pride in what one does**.

3. **Ineffectiveness**

The third component of burnout is ineffectiveness, or feeling **incompetent** and **unproductive**. As human beings, we crave the feeling of satisfaction of achieving a goal, of learning and knowing that what we are devoting ourselves to has a purpose. This feeling of satisfaction plays a huge role in our emotional well-being. However, when people feel exhausted, they may come to believe that they cannot accomplish what they should and may begin to feel **unmotivated and frustrated**. This can often

happen in a workplace where there is a lack of support for good results, a **lack of feedback and meaningful recognition**.

The 5 stages of employee burnout

Before exploring what the signs of burnout are and how to prevent it, it is important to try to understand how a person can get to this point. In fact, understanding the stages that lead to burnout can help detect it early and avoid reaching the final stage of habitual burnout.

According to Winona State University, there are **five stages of burnout**:

1. **The "honeymoon" stage**

When you start a new job, activity or project, you usually feel motivated, productive, creative, energetic and enthusiastic. In the first phase of burnout, you may begin to notice **increased stress levels** related to this new role or task, which is perfectly normal when starting something new.

2. **The onset of stress**

In the second stage of burnout, you may notice some common signs of stress and the **loss of initial enthusiasm and positivity**. Some telltale signs are irritability, avoidance of decision making, reduced productivity, forgetfulness, sleep problems, anxiety, headaches, teeth grinding, and changes in appetite.

3. **Chronic stress**

The third stage of burnout is chronic stress. In this stage, **stress levels are very high** and more pronounced symptoms such as procrastination, failure to meet deadlines, panic, constant fatigue in the morning, physical discomfort, mood swings, apathy, cynical attitude, increased drug and alcohol use or other escapist activities, and withdrawal from social situations may occur.

4. **Burnout**

The fourth stage is the actual burnout. When you reach this stage, the situation is severe **and it is often not possible to continue working normally**. You may feel empty, pessimistic, suffer from physical ailments such as chronic headaches, stomach problems, and increased susceptibility to illness, social isolation, behavioral changes, and getting stuck in a cycle of negative thoughts.

5. **Habitual burnout**

The final stage of burnout is habitual burnout. At this stage, the symptoms of burnout are now a **constant** in your life. You may notice signs of depression and **chronic** physical and mental fatigue. When burnout reaches this level, sufferers may need to seek medical attention and may ask for leave to recover.

Signs that indicate burnout

Burnout has recently become a **diagnosable disorder** (in 2019), so it is a serious problem and must be treated as such. Some studies have found a link between burnout and other negative physical and mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, high blood pressure, heart problems, sleep disorders, and increased drug and alcohol use. In addition, those who suffer from burnout often report feeling alienated, which has a negative impact on both relationships and career prospects. An article published by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter explains some signs of burnout that you can learn to recognize:

- **Isolation and alienation**

People who suffer from burnout often experience a sense of alienation from work or study activities. This stems from the fact that they feel so stressed and overwhelmed that they feel the need to disengage as much as possible from the activities they have to perform, as a coping mechanism.

- **Physical symptoms**

Burnout is essentially chronic stress, and the physical symptoms that can result from a high-stress lifestyle are already well known. If you suffer from burnout, you may experience headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances, and an increased susceptibility to illnesses such as colds, flu, and infections.

- **Feeling emotionally exhausted.**

Experiencing burnout can affect an individual's emotional well-being. One may feel drained, overly cynical or negative and tired even after a long rest. Burnout can also lead to mood swings or feeling more emotional or sensitive than usual.

- **Decline in performance.**

Burnout can make it difficult to perform the simplest daily tasks. You may notice a lack of motivation, reduced creativity, difficulty concentrating, and performance that is not up to your usual standards.

- **Memory loss.**

Those suffering from anxiety or a high-stress environment may also experience mild memory loss. Being stuck in a thought loop, burnout sufferers tend to forget other tasks, events, or conversations.

How to prevent burnout

Schools and companies are becoming increasingly sensitive to this topic, particularly after the covid pandemic negatively impacted the mental health of millions and millions of people worldwide. As a diagnosable disorder, medical attention should be sought if burnout symptoms emerge, however, companies and schools are adopting strategies to help students and employees prevent burnout from emerging. Below we look at some of the most common strategies:

1. **Create safe environments**

Each person is different and experiences learning or work differently, so it is important to encourage people to share their individuality by freely expressing their thoughts and sharing their problems. Creating a safe environment that conveys **trust** makes it easier to ask for help with whatever problems you are facing. This is probably one of the most widely used methods by schools and companies as a first step in preventing the emergence of burnout.

2. **Encourage study-life balance**

Time is of the essence to recharge and relax. Even those who study or work **must have time for themselves**, to meet friends and family, engage in their hobbies, and rest up for the next day of study or work. Avoiding **overloading** oneself with work or study in a short period of time is one of the key components to avoid burnout. It is important to make room for study plans and work schedules that give space and importance to personal time while safeguarding the work or learning experience. One effective method to avoid the feeling of overload is to create a library of **microlearning** content. This provides an opportunity for students to refresh their memory on specific topics and lighten the cognitive load, and for employees to have the information they need to perform their tasks at their fingertips at all times.

3. **Do periodic checkups.**

It is common to check the performance of employees and students to ensure that they maintain a certain level of productivity. At these times you can also make room to share the **emotional state** they are in and offer **personalized support** if possible. This will make it possible to assess not only their performance but also their stress levels so that signs of burnout can be detected early. In addition, students and employees will appreciate your interest and be more willing to discuss their problems in the future.

4. **Make room for group activities**

Schedule one day a week or month to do group activities with students and employees is a great way to create **discontinuity** from a routine that can lead to burnout. Group activities such as sports, trips, games, and team-building activities can be done. This not only gives them an opportunity to take a break from their duties, but they can also **bond** with their peers in a way that would not have been possible in an academic or professional setting.