

# Burnout

A Thrive Worldwide Resource

**“You usually don’t realize you’re burned out until afterwards. For example, I like reading as a past-time, but I remember a time when I sat down to read and I couldn’t get past a few sentences before my mind just turned off—that’s when I realized something was really wrong.”**

Have your energy levels been low for a while? Have you felt disconnected from your passions and motivations?

Have you lost interest in things that used to excite you or the desire to be among friends? This information sheet explains what burnout is, what its causes are, and some tips for preventing it or begin recovering from it.

## WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout is “A state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship that failed to produce the expected rewards” Herbert Freudenberger (psychologist who coined the term “burnout”).

Pines and Aronson define it as “A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long

term involvement in emotionally demanding situations”.

“The word burnout speaks to the part of us that wants to burn on with the fire of life, love, passion, challenge and meaning and it describes our devastation when that fire seems to have burnt itself out”-Dina Glouberman (see resources below)

While there are a lot of similarities between burnout and stress, burnout usually takes place over a longer period of time; has a way of sneaking up on us, and works away at the meaning and motivation parts of our life. With stress, adjustments and rest may be sufficient to get back on track. Burnout however, threatens the existential purpose that produces the energy and desire to overcome stress.

## WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

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Pioneering psychologists Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter identified six risk factors for burnout:

1. Mismatch in workload
2. Mismatch in control

3. Lack of appropriate rewards
4. Loss of a sense of positive connection with others in the workplace
5. Perceived lack of fairness
6. Conflict between values

Do any of these six factors resonate with you? In the aid world, we may experience extreme emotional overload as a byproduct of primary, secondary and vicarious trauma associated with direct work with needy populations. We may become progressively disillusioned when our team breaks down (or there are breakdowns in the structures above us) and has become ineffective in carrying out tasks. This may be compounded by a lack of control or decision-making authority even though field workers and have first hand information about needs.

## PREVENTING BURNOUT

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In 1975 health care experts described people with burnout as “inoperative”—it is a place where you are forced to stop. However, it is likely more common for people to

experience what Marjory Foyle (1986) calls 'brown out', a useful metaphor for people working in underdeveloped contexts. Our 'power' is reduced, but we're not out completely. "Lessons learned in brownout can be of life-changing importance. Often, there is even an encouraging aspect to brownout: it may indicate that we have done a good job." Brown-out may also be guiding you towards becoming more of who you naturally are; your skills and interests, or nudging you into developing a crucial life skill like assertiveness, or grittiness, or feeling centered during times of uncertainty. Resisting or ignoring these signs may lead to burnout if we don't pay attention. Below are a few tips to consider in staving off full-blown burnout.

Don't be a sponge. As empathic and compassionate people working directly with needy populations, we put ourselves at risk for vicarious trauma and becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Everyone has a different threshold for exposure to trauma and finding your

balance will be an importance task. Monitor your feelings, set limits, and establish a routine with a supervisor or mentor.

Manage stress. Get some new strategies and learn more about your stress responses. Try new time management strategies, or work routines. Exercise and connection with people are a staple in any good stress management plan. While stress and burnout are different, prolonged and unnecessary stress will have a negative impact on how you process the deeper, existential questions of purpose and meaning.

Keep your expectations in check. Depending on any given deployment or contract, you will need to adjust your personal expectations. What are the pros and cons of a perfectionist personality? What is reasonably achievable given the circumstances?

Talk with your manager. Do a job analysis and write down parts of your job that work against your wellbeing and see

what reasonable adjustments can be made. When your manager is causing a distressing workplace, find a way of communicating this directly. If your manager isn't receptive, then take the issue higher. Working in a toxic environment and systematic dysfunction can be a major contributor to burnout; if positive changes aren't forthcoming, look for alternatives.

Engage in constructive conflict. Learn how to communicate effectively with team members in navigating difficult topics or decisions. Avoiding conflict may allow resentment to take seed.

Cooperate with feelings of burnout and perceive them as opportunities for self-discovery. Watch your thoughts and feelings with curiosity, and ask what the feelings are trying to teach you.



**Perceive feelings of burnout as opportunities for self-discovery.**

## **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT**

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- Low energy and exhaustion that isn't alleviated by sleeping
- Depression and low mood  
Social withdrawal and disconnection from others
- Difficulty in focusing and memory problems
- Loss of meaning and feelings of emptiness
- Hopelessness
- Loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyable
- Cynicism
- Coping strategies that don't work like they used to
- Less productive: working harder, achieving less
- Deflecting challenges, or responding aggressively

- Escaping behaviors (casual sex, alcohol abuse, junk food, excessive TV/movies)

It is normal to experience some of these symptoms from time to time. It's when they are enduring and decreasing our functioning that we should be concerned. But how do you know whether it's time to dig-in and persevere and when it's time to re-assess, reflect, rest or get a change of scenes? Angela Duckworth writes about grit being a combination of passion and perseverance, and how effort ultimately counts for more than talent. She writes that outstanding achievement comes from: Interest, Practice, Purpose, and Hope. Are you in a place where you can prune off the stressors and energy drainers in your life and work to recover your passion and dedication, or is it time to recognize the end of a road, stave-off deeper burnout, and find some new shoots? And of course, it usually isn't as binary as this...

The tricky thing about burnout is that it's very hard to know what you need to recover; is it an

extended leave with reflective rest and recuperation, or a pressing-in with determination?

## **DO I HAVE BURNOUT?**

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If you have reached burnt or feel close to burnout, keep reading....this is for you. The first thing to remember about recovering from burnout is that you can't put it on a timeline. Most research indicates that people will find their way out of burnout between 6 months and 2 years—but there are plenty of examples of it taking shorter or longer. Recovery starts with accepting that you are burnt out and learning how to have self-compassion.

Recovering from burnout may include some pampering, but real recovery comes with making good life decisions that have felt too hard to make in the past. Escaping tactics (substances and other addictions) have served their purpose to get you here, but now it's time to regain control and take steps in moving your life in the direction you want.

Get support to make the hard lifestyle changes to recalibrate your natural energy. This is where you need to tailor your own path to recovery. And these decisions must be made from a place of self-confidence and deep value of yourself. Examples of steps are:

- Joining an AA meeting
- Taking time off work / getting a sick note
- Establishing a workout routine or other health/wellbeing plan
- Meeting with a life coach or counselor
- Taking an intentional retreat
- Re-examining your friend group

There are so many paths to finding the support you need. For most of us, the first and most important thing is to swallow some pride and ask some tough questions.

As you “cocoon” and prepare for the next steps, reflect on:

- Connecting with core values
- Recalling motivating passions, and specific moments where you felt “on-purpose” or in “flow”.

- Creating boundaries and space for your journey to unfold authentically
- Working with someone to develop a life purpose statement that makes you smile and sigh in relief.

If you’re feeling on the edge of burnout or already burnt-out, reach out to a trusted friend, colleague, mentor, or to Thrive Worldwide, who can provide counseling or coaching services from people who understand and have personal experience in international humanitarian aid and development.

**“Things fall apart, when it’s time to rebuild”**

## RESOURCES

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### Books

- Alessandra Pigni’s book: The Idealist Survival Kit: 75 simple ways to avoid burnout. See more resources on her website at: <http://mindfulnext.org/>
- Dina Glouberman: Book: The Joy of Burnout.

- Maslach, Christine (1982). The cost of caring.
- Goodreads.com has a great list of books on this topic

### **Self-assessments (not for diagnostic purposes)**

- Maslach Burnout Inventory: [This PDF](#) asks you to rate 22 questions about burnout symptoms and their frequency. Use this tool to gain self-awareness of your burnout level, not for diagnosis. If you have concerns please contact a qualified counselor or psychologist.
- Professional Quality of life is a self-assessment that measures 3 constructs: Compassion Satisfaction, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout. [Take the 30-item questionnaire and score yourself](#). It may be helpful to process and reflect on your scores with a professional counselor or psychologist.
- Headington Institute: [Are you showing signs of burnout?](#)

### **Short clips**

- 3-minute clip on stress and burnout by MSF: [youtube](#)
- Dina Glouberman: 3-minute youtube clip: <https://youtu.be/cRsMJZ4BYc>

### **Podcast**

- [The history of rebellion](#). A cross-generational conversation about the inner work of sustainable, resilient social change with Krista Tippet, Parker Palmer and Courtney Martin
- [Understanding burnout](#). NPR 2006.

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