

Burnout: Practical Psychological Strategies to Cope



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Chronic stress and constant feelings of insurmountable responsibilities can lead to burnout in even the most dynamic and passionate of professionals. Excessive working hours and a lack of time to relax, combined with poor job satisfaction and a lack of control over your environment can lead to experiencing intense fatigue and disengagement.

Burnout is a serious psychological condition that can have a high cost on individuals and the businesses they work for. Research has identified several methods for coping with burnout and its psychological effects.

The Three Components of Burnout

Although burnout is often caused by prolonged periods of intense stress, burnout and stress are not the same thing. Where stress is typified by feeling you have too much to do and experiencing a heightened state of urgency, burnout is just the opposite—feeling that there is nothing you can do and experiencing a dulling of your motivation and emotions.

Psychological burnout is characterised by three distinct components:

- Emotional exhaustion—feeling that your mental resources have been totally depleted and experiencing complete exhaustion
- Depersonalisation—feelings of cynicism and detachment from your work and the people around you
- Ineffectiveness—feelings of low self-worth and the belief that you cannot accomplish anything

Ways of Coping with Burnout

Part of coping with burnout is identifying the warning signs of stress and acting on them before they take their toll. Once you find yourself at the end of your tether with no mental or physical resolve left to continue, rest and time away from work can be the first step to recovery. There are several psychological strategies that can be invaluable in restoring your drive and getting you re-engaged with your life.

Engagement

Psychological literature defines the opposite of burnout as engagement—being totally committed to your work and going about your duties with vigour and determination. Feeling like you are wholly engaged with your work and those you work with, and believing that your actions make a difference, are the polar opposite to the feelings of cynicism and exhaustion that burnout creates.

Restoring your sense of engagement may be a case of examining your job and re-connecting with the reasons you were passionate about it to begin with.

Socialisation is also a vital part of engagement—having people in your workplace with whom you can discuss problems, share successes and enjoy working with provides an effective safeguard against depersonalisation and burnout, so take your friendships and work relationships seriously.

Find the Right Fit

Burnout creates a sense of giving yourself to your job and getting nothing in return. This can be combated by creating a better “fit” between you and your job. This can mean finding the role within your organisation that best suits your personal skills, or areas in your role where you are able to excel. The ideal role is one which challenges you, allows you a level of autonomy and gives you opportunity for progression. Feeding back to your superiors and being listened to and appreciated will also mediate the feeling that your job is akin to banging your head against a wall.

Job Satisfaction

Unsurprisingly, high levels of job satisfaction have been shown to guard against burnout in a range of professions. Job satisfaction acts as a buffer against emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, helping you feel more connected to your work and more in control of its outcomes. There is no shortcut to job satisfaction, but research indicates that personal factors like being proud of your accomplishments and taking responsibility for your work are more important than uncontrollable situational factors like working conditions and company policies. This means that moving towards being satisfied at work starts with changing the way you think.

Conclusion

Burnout is overcome by engagement—re-discovering the reasons you love your job and being proactive in creating a work environment in which you feel supported, effective and proud of your achievements. Workplaces are beginning to realise the importance of engagement and taking steps to create environments where workers feel able to achieve and thrive. Even so, personal factors like social support and individual responsibility are vital in overcoming burnout and remaining passionate and effective in your role.

Key Points

- Burnout is a psychological condition characterised by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and ineffectiveness
- Burnout can be overcome by increasing your engagement with your job role
- Job satisfaction, social support, personal responsibility and feelings of achievement are linked to greater engagement

About the Author:

Angus Munro is a registered clinical psychologist and director of [Angus Munro Psychology](#) in Sydney. He excels in evidence-based therapies for a comprehensive range of Emotional and psychological challenges. One of his passions is engaging, educating and helping people work through all manner of mental health issues to live their best life.

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