

STRESS VS BURNOUT

Spotting the Difference and Understanding Why They Happen



Stress and burnout, though often used interchangeably, represent distinct experiences that can profoundly impact our physical and emotional well-being. While stress is a common response to life's challenges, burnout is a more profound state of physical and emotional exhaustion, typically stemming from prolonged, unmanaged stress.

Stress isn't always a negative reaction. It's often known as *eustress*, which can enhance alertness and goal achievement. For instance, a project deadline can sharpen your focus. On the flip side, stress leads to feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, this is referred to as *distress*.

What determines whether stress is positive or negative depends on various factors, including how you interpret the stressor, your emotional resources, and the potential for support. For instance, the same deadline that helps one person focus might cause anxiety for another. Similarly, a workload that motivates one person may distress someone else.

Exposure to ongoing stressors can lead to chronic stress, especially if you don't effectively manage stress early on. Chronic stress occurs when the stress response is consistently activated over an extended period or repeatedly.

Burnout is considered a form of prolonged distress.



According to research, burnout consists of three components...

- 1 Exhaustion.**
You're drained physically, mentally, or cognitively (or all of the above). Even rest doesn't help revive you.
- 2 Cynicism.**
You bring a sour mood to work, feel uninterested, and are often irritated, short-tempered, and detached from your team.
- 3 Inefficacy.**
You struggle to meet work demands despite knowing you were able to in the past.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE... IS IT chronic stress or burnout?

STRESS

Physical Symptoms

Headaches • Fatigue • Muscle tension • Sleep disturbances

Emotional Symptoms

Irritability • Anxiety • Mood swings • Feeling overwhelmed

Cognitive Symptoms

Difficulty concentrating • Forgetfulness • Racing thoughts • Negative thinking

Behavioural Symptoms

Social withdrawal • Increased use of substances (caffeine, alcohol) • Changes in eating habits

BURNOUT

Physical Symptoms

Chronic Fatigue • Frequent illness • Difficulty sleeping

Emotional Symptoms

Loss of enjoyment in activities • Detachment • Hopelessness • Cynicism

Cognitive Symptoms

Difficulty concentrating • Forgetfulness • Reduced creativity • Feeling disillusioned about work

Behavioural Symptoms

Decreased job performance • Detachment • Increased absenteeism • Escapist behaviours (overeating, excessive TV watching) • Social withdrawal



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Where does burnout come from?

Burnout often stems from your job. But anyone who feels overworked and undervalued is at risk for burnout, from the hardworking office worker who hasn't had a vacation in years, to the frazzled stay-at-home mom tending to kids, housework, and aging parents. But burnout isn't caused solely by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors can contribute, including your lifestyle and personality traits. What you do in your downtime and how you look at the world can play just as big of a role in causing overwhelming stress as work or home demands.

Work-related causes

- **Perceived lack of control.** Feeling like you lack autonomy, access to resources, and a say in decisions that impact your work and professional life.
- **Lack of recognition.** If the rewards you get from your job, both external and internal, don't match the effort and time you invest, it can make you feel like the payoff isn't worth it.
- **Pressure.** The pressure to perform, especially when involved in high-value projects, can build up over time.
- **Ambiguity.** Unclear job expectations and high levels of role conflict, which occur when employees are asked to complete tasks or achieve goals that are incompatible with each other are draining.
- **Lack of support from managers.** Employees deserve constructive feedback, fairness, and transparency in decision-making. Without the appropriate support, stress may become unmanageable.
- **Boredom.** Doing work that's monotonous or unchallenging can be a silent precursor to burnout, manifesting as disengagement, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished motivation.

lifestyle-related causes

- **Lack of balance.** Working too much, without enough time for socializing or relaxing.
- **Lack of close, supportive relationships.** Without emotional support and understanding from connections, workplace stressors become more challenging to navigate, increasing feelings of isolation and reducing resilience.
- **Too many responsibilities, without enough help.** The imbalance between the workload and available support leads to heightened stress levels, exhaustion, and a sense of being overwhelmed. Over time, the lack of help can erode an individual's capacity to cope.
- **Mismatched values.** If you highly value something that your company does not, your motivation to work hard and persevere can significantly drop.
- **Unhealthy habits.** Poor sleep, inadequate nutrition, and a sedentary lifestyle compromise physical well-being, leading to fatigue and diminished resilience to stress. Unhealthy choices can also impact cognitive function, impairing concentration and decision-making abilities, further exacerbating the risk of burnout.

Personality traits can contribute to burnout

- **Perfectionistic tendencies.** The relentless pursuit of flawlessness creates unattainable standards, fostering chronic stress, self-doubt, and a constant fear of failure. This mindset increases pressure and hinders the ability to find satisfaction in achievements.
- **Pessimism.** Negative self-perception and a bleak outlook weaken resilience, challenge motivation, and fuel a cycle of negativity.
- **Need for control.** A reluctance to share responsibilities increases workload and limits the capacity to manage and cope with demands.
- **Type A personality.** The relentless drive to accomplish goals and a constant sense of urgency increases stress levels and often lead to overcommitment.



Sources: [PsychCentral](#) | [National Library of Medicine](#) | [HelpGuide.org](#) | [WebMD Health Services](#) | Images by Unsplash