

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Keeps Burnout Going?



Description

Most people go through periods where they feel tired or unhappy at work. However, if your job leaves you feeling emotionally exhausted, beyond the point of caring, or unable to function normally, you might be experiencing burnout. Key signs of burnout include:

- Feeling exhausted and drained – emotionally, mentally, and physically.
- Becoming more distant, disinterested, or detached from your work.
- Finding it difficult to cope with the demands of your job.
- Losing interest in your colleagues, customers, or activities outside of work.
- Having an increasingly negative, cynical, or pessimistic attitude toward your work.
- Feeling less productive, enthusiastic, or effective in your role.
- Struggling to concentrate, remember things, and pay attention.
- Problems with your mood, sleep, or health (e.g., headaches or stomach pains).

Research studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for burnout. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

CBT models of burnout suggest that several things keep burnout going once it starts. The *What Keeps Burnout Going?* information handout describes some of these key factors, which act to maintain burnout, illustrating them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for burnout. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

Instructions

Suggested Question



One interesting way of thinking about burnout is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of burnout. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?

References

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Towey-Swift, K. D., Lauvrud, C., & Whittington, R. (2022). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for professional staff burnout: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of controlled trials. *Journal of Mental Health*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.2022628>

What Keeps Burnout Going?

Working in an environment where you face overwhelming demands can be extremely stressful. If these stresses become too great or go on too long, you might reach the point of burnout. Burnout leaves you feeling emotionally exhausted and negative about your work. When this happens, you might try to manage the situation by continuing to overwork, or feel so exhausted and cynical about the situation that change seems impossible. Either way, the stress of work continues to exhaust you.

Emotional exhaustion can make you protective of what little energy you have left. You might withdraw from other people and stop doing things you enjoy outside of work. Burnout can also lead to sleep problems which stop you from getting the rest you need. Social isolation, poor sleep, and doing less of what used to make you happy makes it harder to recover from exhaustion. Without opportunities to recharge your strength and internal resources, you continue to feel burned-out.

Working in a stressful environment

Not being able to recharge

What keeps it going?

Burnout

Coping in unhelpful ways

Having negative thoughts about yourself and your work

When you feel emotionally exhausted, you try to cope in any way you can. This might include distancing yourself from your colleagues or clients, cutting off emotionally at work, avoiding stressful tasks, or soothing yourself in other ways (e.g., drinking alcohol).

Unfortunately, coping strategies like these can lead to more problems that add to your stress, including strained relationships, negative feedback, backlogs of work, and less productivity. As work-related stresses start to multiply, so does your level of exhaustion.

Emotional exhaustion can make you think in negative ways. This might include worrying about the future (e.g., whether you will be able to continue working), criticizing yourself (e.g., for finding things difficult), or dwelling on past events (e.g., negative interactions you have with your colleagues or customers).

Negative patterns of thinking make you feel more burdened, reduce your sense of accomplishment, and can make your other difficulties worse. This adds to your emotional exhaustion and makes you feel ineffective and unmotivated.

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