

Burnout: the darker side of stress

The word burnout often gets lumped in the same category as stress. Burnout and stress are two very different things. Nalisha Patel explores the difference between the two, whether you are at risk and what to do about it.



We are all familiar with this emotion called stress. Most of us use this word to describe some element of our working day or home environment. We are used to that subtle yet overwhelming feeling of having too much to do and so little time.

The biggest difference between stress and burnout is that, with stress we can take ourselves out of a stressful situation after some time and come back renewed and rested. We can usually see an end to a stressful situation and we work under stress knowing we will be fine at the completion of this period. Stress can feel more physical than emotional.

Burnout on the other hand is where a person or situation can no longer be tolerated. It is a state of complete emotional and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged, unrelenting and intense stress. There is no give or ease up.

Business owners are often at high risk of burnout, due to long hours and a never ending "to do" list.

If you are constantly trying to meet demands and feeling overwhelmed for a long period of time, your body will start responding by shutting down. You start losing interest or motivation in everyday activities, you also have a drop in energy and start experiencing physical symptoms such as sleeplessness, irritability and unhappiness.

Other burnout characteristics include feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, weight-loss or weight-gain and a feeling of detachment and isolation.

Often having a short break or rest period is not enough to bounce back after an extreme level of stress. You will feel quite flat and disengaged from life. Burnout is strongly associated with psychological symptoms. When running our own business, we don't take the break our body and mind deserves. This leads to working inefficiently and possibly not enjoying the process.

So how do you know if you are a candidate for burnout?

As burnout does not happen overnight, you may not be aware that your lifestyle or state of mind is leading you there. It is important to be aware of changes in your body and mind.

An interesting difference between burnout and stress is that you are usually aware when you are under a lot of stress. Burnout on the other hand creeps up slowly over months and you are usually unaware that you are starting to have the symptoms. It could even take another person to point out changes in your personality and general demeanour.

How to prevent or treat burnout

Do what works for you. If you are in a job that leaves you flat, seek more projects or a job that excites and challenges you, rather than one that works against your personal strengths. If managing your own business, focus on your strengths and delegate areas that you don't enjoy. Stress from doing a job that is not compatible with your skill set can leave you feeling helpless and prone to burnout.

Identify any major causes of stress and start tackling them. Identify those aspects you can change and try to accept those you can't.

Take care of your body and mind. Regular exercise, a healthy diet, plenty of quality sleep and time management are necessary to stave off burnout and stress.

Slow down. Try to be more in the moment rather than living in the future. Many things are beyond our control, so know when to ease back and let things slide.

Watch for signs. Know that stress and burnout are signals from your body to slow down. Listen to them as soon as feelings and symptoms start to arise and you should bounce back a lot faster from any stress.

Above all, know that you can get help and how you are feeling emotionally and physically does not have to be a way of life. Prevention is better than cure, so ease back, practice self-management and you will help prevent excessive stress or burnout.

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