

BURNOUT

WHEN THE FATIGUE DOESN'T GO AWAY

A clear guide to signs, causes, and steps toward recovery

1. How to tell burnout apart from “normal” tiredness

1.1. Official definition

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon—related to chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Three elements appear frequently:

- intense physical and emotional exhaustion;
- mental distance from one’s job, or negativism/cynicism related to one’s job (you want to “run as far away as possible” from anything work-related);
- a sense of reduced professional efficacy: feeling you’re no longer good at what you do, that you don’t matter, or that “no matter how much you give, it’s never enough”.

1.2. Normal tiredness

Normal tiredness shows up when:

- You’ve had busy days, many responsibilities, maybe a few nights with less sleep

- You feel drained, but you recover with rest: a calmer weekend, a few nights of good sleep, a break from certain tasks
- Even if you're tired, the things you like can still bring a little joy: a book, a film, a walk, a conversation with someone you love.

The overall feeling is: “I’m tired, I need to stop for a bit and catch my breath, but I know I’ll bounce back.”

Normal tiredness is a sign you need a break—not that there’s something “wrong with you” as a person.

1.3. Burnout—when tiredness becomes something else

Burnout is no longer just “I worked a lot.” It’s a prolonged exhaustion that affects your body, your emotions, and how you see yourself.

Common signs include:

- **Constant exhaustion:** you wake up tired, you go to bed tired, and it feels like there’s no moment in the day when you truly recover. Sleep and weekends are no longer enough
- **Detachment or cynicism:** the things you used to care about (work, people, personal projects) start to feel meaningless. You may become sarcastic, irritable, or completely uninterested
- **A sense that you’re not good at anything anymore:** you feel like you’re getting everything wrong, that you’re not doing enough, that you’re “defective.” Even your achievements become invisible to you
- **A body that’s always tense:** tension, aches, palpitations, a tight stomach, frequent headaches. It’s as if your system is on guard all the time
- **Difficulty concentrating:** it’s hard to focus, to finish simple tasks, you forget what you were doing
- **Withdrawal:** you don’t feel like talking to anyone, you postpone messages, you isolate.

You don't have to check every box to be affected. Burnout often creeps in over time—until you find yourself asking: **“When did I become like this? Where did I lose the person I used to be?”**

1.4. How to tell the difference in everyday life

From time to time, you can ask yourself a few simple questions (you can write them down too, if that helps):

1) After real rest (a freer weekend, a few nights in a row of good sleep), do I feel noticeably better?

- If yes, it's more likely accumulated tiredness
- If no—and the emptiness/exhaustion stays—it may be a sign something deeper is happening.

2) Do the things I used to enjoy still bring me joy?

- Normal tiredness still leaves room for small pleasures
- Burnout wipes them out—or turns them into “I feel nothing.”

3) Am I “just tired,” or am I starting to feel like I have no value?

- Burnout often hits self-image: it's not only “I'm tired,” it becomes “I'm not good for anything.”

4) How long have I been like this?

- Normal tiredness is linked to a clear period and eases up
- Burnout stretches over weeks and months, without seeing the way out
- You don't need to label yourself. It's enough to observe honestly:

“Does what I’m living right now look more like normal tiredness... or like an exhaustion that doesn’t go away?”

Once you recognize burnout, it helps to understand what fuels it—so you can recover without self-blame.

1.5. Why Burnout Happens (Common Causes and Risk Factors)

Burnout does not appear suddenly.

It develops gradually, when stress becomes chronic and recovery is repeatedly postponed.

Some of the most common causes and risk factors include:

- **Prolonged overload** — constantly having too much to do, with too little time or support
- **Lack of control** — feeling unable to influence decisions, priorities, or pace
- **Unclear roles or expectations** — not knowing what is enough, or when work is “done”
- **Value conflict** — being forced to work in ways that go against your values or sense of meaning
- **Lack of recognition or reward** — emotional, financial, or relational
- **Perfectionism and people-pleasing** — tying self-worth to performance or approval
- **Chronic emotional labor** — caring for others while neglecting your own needs
- **Insufficient rest and recovery** — being constantly “on,” even outside working hours.

Burnout is not a personal failure.

It is often a signal that your environment, expectations, or boundaries have been unsustainable for too long.

2. What you can do, in a supportive, psychology-informed style (not medical)

Important: This guide is for informational purposes and does not replace medical or psychological care.

If you feel overwhelmed or unsafe, reach out to a licensed professional or someone you trust.

What you can do, at your own pace:

2.1. First step: name what's happening

Instead of:

“I’m broken, I’m lazy, I can’t do anything anymore.”

you can try:

“I’m deeply exhausted. My body and mind are telling me I’ve carried too much, for too long.”

That small shift reduces guilt and creates a little space for self-care.

2.2. Real micro-breaks, not just scrolling

You don’t need a sabbatical year to start recovering. You need small, real moments where you’re no longer in “I function for everyone else” mode.

That can mean:

- 10–15 minutes a day where you don’t do anything “productive”: you sit with a cup of tea, look out the window, listen to calming music
- a short walk, without an objective—just to change your environment
- 5 minutes to write down how you feel, without hunting for instant solutions.

What matters isn’t the duration. It’s that the moment is for you—not “one more duty.”

2.3. Kind but firm boundaries

Burnout often appears where:

- you say “yes” by reflex
- you feel responsible for everything
- it’s hard to disappoint anyone

You can start with:

- one small “no” per week to something non-essential
- postponing tasks that aren’t urgent
- a simple sentence:

“I can’t take this on right now. I need to finish what I’m already doing.”

You don’t have to become a different person overnight. One small step back toward yourself is enough.

2.4. Basic care—the things that seem “banal”

When you’re exhausted, even “simple” things become hard. Still, they matter:

- somewhat regular meals (even if they're simpler)
- hydration
- gentle movement (a few more steps, a stretch, taking the stairs)
- a somewhat steady bedtime.

They aren't magic solutions, but they're the basic bricks your body tries to stand on.

2.5. Don't carry everything alone

Burnout can make you close in and feel ashamed of what you're experiencing. That only deepens the emptiness.

It can help to:

- talk to someone you trust (a friend, partner, colleague) and say directly:

“I can't do it the way I used to. I need help / understanding / time.”

- look for communities or resources where people talk honestly about exhaustion, without judgment;
- when close support isn't enough, consider a psychologist—not as a “luxury,” but as protection for you.

2.6. A closing thought

Burnout doesn't say you're weak. Often it says the opposite:

- that you carried too much, too well, for too long,
- without enough support and space for yourself.

You don't need to prove to anyone that you can endure. You're allowed to slow down, set boundaries, say "enough for today." You're allowed to seek help. You're allowed to rebuild your life around what keeps you whole—not only useful.

3. When it's important to seek specialized help

Burnout can be serious—especially when it affects your health, sleep, or ability to function.

Consider reaching out to a licensed therapist, psychiatrist, or primary care doctor if you notice any of the following:

- Your symptoms persist for weeks and do not improve with rest
- You feel constantly overwhelmed, numb, or emotionally shut down
- You experience panic symptoms, intense anxiety, or frequent emotional breakdowns
- Sleep issues become chronic (insomnia, early waking, or exhaustion even after sleep)
- You notice a significant impact on your physical health (blood pressure changes, headaches, chest tightness, stomach issues)
- You have thoughts of self-harm, or thoughts like "I don't want to be here anymore"

If you are in immediate danger or feel unable to keep yourself safe, contact the emergency services number in your country or seek urgent local support.

In these moments, guides, books, and conversations can help—but they aren't enough. A specialist can see the whole picture and help you rebuild long-term balance.

3.1. How to prepare for a conversation with a specialist

If you decided to seek help (family doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, psychotherapist), it's normal to feel emotional or not know where to start.

This can help:

1) Write down:

- since when you've felt this fatigue that doesn't go away;
- the hardest symptoms to carry (sleep, crying, irritability, "I don't recognize myself," concentration problems, etc.);
- what you've already tried (vacation, reduced schedule, talking to your manager, lifestyle changes).

2) Write 2–3 questions you really want to ask. For example:

"How can I tell if it's only burnout or also depression?"

"What can I do concretely in the next month so I don't get worse?"

3) If talking is hard, you can show this guide to the specialist and say:

"I recognize myself in many of the things here, and I don't know how to manage on my own anymore."

You don't have to "impress" the doctor or psychologist. Their role is to help you bring order to what you're living, not to judge you.

3.2. What's better to avoid when you're in burnout

When you're at the end of your strength, it's tempting to look for quick fixes. Unfortunately, some things not only don't help—they can make it worse:

- Alcohol or “sleeping pills” without medical advice. They may numb things for a moment, but they don’t solve anything and can add new problems on top of exhaustion.
- Increasing amounts of coffee/energy drinks “to make it through.” They squeeze out the last bit of energy, and your body pays the bill later.
- Beating yourself up with labels like “lazy / incapable.” Burnout isn’t a character flaw—it’s a sign you’ve carried too much, for too long.
- Making major decisions on impulse (quitting, ending relationships) right in the middle of collapse. It’s normal to want to “throw everything away,” but it’s safer to talk first with someone you trust or with a specialist.
- Isolating completely. You may not have energy for many people, but one person you can speak to honestly can make a big difference.

You don’t have to be “perfect” here either. Any small step toward caring for yourself matters.

4. Kind questions for yourself when you feel you’re at the end of your strength

The purpose of these questions isn’t to “evaluate” or judge yourself—it’s to listen to yourself. You can read them in your head, or write down answers if you feel like it.

4.1. What does an ordinary day look like for you right now?

- Where do you feel the tiredness most—in your body, your thoughts, or your emotions?

- Is there a time of day when you feel most strongly: “I can’t do this anymore”?
- What do you tell yourself in your head, in the hardest moments?

Sometimes simple answers to these questions reveal how much you’re actually carrying.

4.2. When was the last time you felt truly rested?

Do you remember a day when you woke up and felt: “Today I actually have energy”?

What was different then compared to now? (schedule, people around you, worries, expectations of yourself)

We’re not looking for a perfect “before.” Just a comparison—so you can see how your daily life has changed over time.

4.3. What would your body tell you right now, if it had words?

You can think of it like this:

“If the tension, aches, palpitations, insomnia could speak, what would they tell me?

Please stop for a moment? Please don’t ignore me anymore?”

It doesn’t mean you abandon responsibilities. It means you adjust them so you don’t break yourself in the middle.

4.4. What have you learned to always put before yourself?

Ask yourself:

Who do you push yourself for the most—work, family, “so I don’t disappoint anyone”?

What happens to you when everyone else is okay? Do you still look at your own needs?

This isn’t about blame. It’s about noticing whether you disappeared somewhere along the road from your own list of priorities.

4.5. What would be the hardest thing to let go of for a while?

Maybe:

- perfectionism (“it has to be perfect or it’s not worth it”),
- the need to control everything,
- or the fear that if you say “I can’t anymore,” others will see you differently.

Here you can simply write:

“It would be hard for me to let go of... because I’m afraid of...”

Just recognizing it is already a step toward healing.

4.6. What do you secretly wish would change?

If you could change one single thing in the next months to make life a little easier, what would it be?

What would “more space for me” look like, concretely, in your real life?

You don’t have to know how to make the change. It’s enough to see where you need a small opening.

4.7. If you wrote a letter from your exhausted present self to a more rested version of you...

Imagine a very short letter:

“Dear me,

Here, where I am now, I feel...

I’m afraid of...

I need...

I hope that one day I can...”.

Not to dramatize—just to put your truth into words.

When you see it written, it no longer looks like “laziness.” It becomes what it is: a cry for help from someone who carried too much.

5. A short recap

- Normal tiredness passes with rest. Burnout remains, even when you try to rest.
- Burnout doesn’t mean you’re weak. Often it means you carried too much, too well, for too long.
- You’re allowed to slow down, set boundaries, talk to someone, ask for help.
- You’re allowed to seek specialized support (doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist) when you feel you can’t do it alone. That’s responsibility toward your own life.

6. Sources for inspiration and information

This guide is for informational purposes and does not replace professional evaluation or treatment.

For further reading, you may consult these reputable sources:

WHO (ICD-11 / Burn-out FAQ):

<https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon>

APA (Workplace burnout):

<https://www.apa.org/topics/healthy-workplaces/workplace-burnout>

Mayo Clinic (Job burnout):

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>