

Burnout

KEY WORDS

- » Burnout
- » Mental health
- » Pressures
- » Self-care
- » Stress

After looking at the idea of self-care in my last article (Molyneux, 2022), I thought it would be fitting to look at an area closely related, and one which can be a result of lacking self-care — burnout. In this article I will look at a brief history of burnout, as well as the more recent developments in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will then move on to look at some signs and symptoms of burnout, links to burnout in the helping professions and, finally, some ideas of how to address areas of burnout that you may be experiencing.

Burnout has always been a condition most commonly linked to work or employment, but it can also be a result of personal circumstances, often linked to exhaustion brought about by prolonged or repeated stress. The pandemic has only continued the upward trend of burnout in our lives, with 46% of UK workers feeling “more prone to extreme levels of stress” when compared with a year ago (Mental Health UK, 2022).

The World Health Organization (WHO), who added burnout as an occupational phenomenon in 2019, defines burnout as “a syndrome resulting from chronic work-related stress, with symptoms characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job and reduced professional efficacy” (WHO, 2019).

Less than 50 years old and still developing

The first clinical use of “burnout” came in the early 1970s from an American psychologist, Herbert Freudenberger, who borrowed the term from the New York drug scene in relation to the effects of chronic drug use. The term was used to describe a more general emotional depletion and loss of motivation (Freudenberger, 1974). The modern-day use of the term and common signs of burnout now also includes:

- » Feeling tired or drained most of the time
- » Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated
- » Feeling detached/alone in the world
- » Having a cynical/negative outlook
- » Self-doubt
- » Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done

» Feeling overwhelmed (Mental Health UK, 2022)

I imagine that we can all relate to at least one element on this list, whether it be occasionally or consistently. The measure of whether you may be classed as suffering from burnout is if a number of these symptoms are experienced frequently and repeatedly paired with a significant and prolonged impact on your wellbeing and ability to operate.

Many sufferers of burnout have reported feeling dread (or are even unable) to go to work, some form of personal breakdown and heightened emotions outbursts as a result of the prolonged stress. This may be the more severe end of the spectrum, but at the same time, one of the common features of burnout is that we often try to power through the experience, hoping to come out the other side. However, this is an unlikely outcome that will often result in the choice being taken away from us by the ever-building impacts of burnout and being forced to stop either through physical or mental breakdown/exhaustion.

The impact of the pandemic

There are numerous studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our mental wellbeing, and they all point to an increase in emotional distress, and even a specific label of ‘covid burnout.’ The conditions that the pandemic presented to us created a perfect storm for many of the burnout symptoms listed above. Being cut off from loved ones, a loss of hobbies and activities that increased our wellbeing, having to navigate a new world and way of work, on top of the overwhelm of changing and depleting living conditions. There is no

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surprise that 69% of employees working from home during the pandemic were experiencing symptoms of burnout (monster.com, 2021). Not to mention those on the frontline who had to battle the staff shortages, huge increases in demand for care, and poor working conditions as a result of the last two years.

While we may be returning to some kind of “normal” in our daily and working lives, there is still much to battle with, including climate crisis, with political and global disruption and tension including climate crisis, as well as trying to find our feet again in a “new normal” that comes from a global pandemic that affected almost everyone.

Helping professions and burnout

Helping professions are among the highest sufferers of burnout alongside other professions that also have to deal with high stress, emotional engagement or traumatic experience on a regular basis. In a recent health and social care committee report stated:

“Workforce burnout was described by many as the highest in the history of the NHS and care systems and as such, it is an extraordinarily dangerous risk to the future functioning of both services” (Health and Social Care Committee, 2021)

There are several theories about why burnout would be more common in those in helping professions. Firstly, people who may be drawn to work in these professions can often have a higher amount of sensitivity and empathy. Not only does this mean that we may offer more care or go above and beyond our job role for our patients, but it may also mean that we absorb more of the residue from our patients and are impacted more by the people we work with. On top of this, the job role in helping professions can often be quite demanding; often firefighting, repeatedly being with those in deep distress, or because of the many pressures and expectations we may face from not only our patients, but also our employers and colleagues.

Unless there is a very clearly defined plan and commitment to be able to tackle the demands of being in a helping profession, we are likely to experience the impacts of these conditions,

especially over a career of many years. Although the symptoms of burnout may be similar across the board, in the helping professions specifically, we may notice an impact in our ability to be compassionate, patient or caring to our patients. In addition to increased irritability, cynicism and/or a lack of capacity, which all results in offering a service that is the exact opposite of the conditions that are crucial to those we treat.

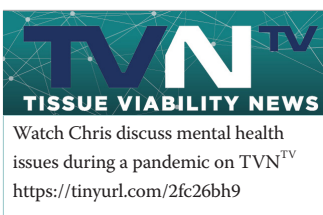
So, what do we do?

I believe the first step in this chain is to check in with ourselves to see if we notice any significant changes in our approach to work and life, as well as spending some time to look at how we are relating to those around us, and ourselves. If we notice significant changes, for the worse, in any of these areas and also maybe recognise significantly reduced capacity, a changing relationship with work and increased exhaustion and/or cynicism, we may have spotted the first signs of burnout. Of course, some of these things are a natural reaction and manageable level for the world we live in, but if you notice more significant changes and a severe reduction in your offering, this can be a helpful prompt to think about making some changes, whether it would be classed as burnout or not.

If you are still not sure if you would class your current position as burnout, there are a number of options to get a second opinion; whether that is visiting your GP or using work resources (Employee Assistance Programmes [EAPs], mental wellbeing team etc), seeing a Therapist to talk through and explore your current position or even taking some online tests just to gain some insight, may help bring some clarity to your current situation and the potential risks and severity of it.

Although I have covered many areas and approaches to self-care in my last article (Molyneux, 2022), I will mention a few other areas that may not have featured so heavily in the last piece of work, and that may also be more specific to burnout itself (although the article may still be a good place to start for some ideas of offering more care to yourself).

As mentioned, a changed relationship with work can often be a symptom of burnout (while also potentially being a cause of it too) so it may be helpful to reflect on your current work situation or



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Speak it through with a friend. Sometimes, when you are in a heightened emotional state, it can be hard to make a fair and accurate assessment. However, it could still be helpful to see if there are changes that can be made at work to offer yourself some more support. If it seems that work is adding unreasonable pressures or demands, then this could be a clear cause of burnout, as well as an indication that a change may be worth considering.

Here are a few ideas of areas that you may be able to change at work:

- ▶▶ Setting boundaries and saying ‘no’. This can sometimes be a hard pursuit to practice or begin. We may also feel like there is nothing we can say no to and must do everything that we are asked. While this can be true to an extent, it can also often be the case that we are standing in our own way in relation to this and the outcome may be different to what we expect. We may feel that we are letting others down, not fulfilling our role or slacking, but the reality is often better than we think and received with support. And if not, then it may be time to reconsider your current position or speak to a staff member you trust
- ▶▶ Ask for help from colleagues or at least begin a dialogue. Similar to above, these things may seem daunting (and for good reason) but if you are able to speak with someone you trust in the team and be open about your situation and needs (including support or delegation), then you are taking the first steps to put down some of the potentially unnecessary weight on your shoulders. Again, this can be a hard task at first but just try dipping your toe in with something that feels semi-comfortable and you may be surprised by the result!
- ▶▶ Make use of your work support services. This could be an in-house wellbeing team, Psychotherapists, EAP or Pastoral Support. If these things feel too big and personal to take to a colleague, speaking to someone confidentially who is not a direct connection in the team may help you speak out your difficulties and get some further support and input. Employers have a requirement to provide support where necessary, so do some research into what’s available and if you are not comfortable with one, there will likely be other options available.
- ▶▶ Assess your working role and commitments. This may be looking deeper into both your own commitment and expectations of self (i.e. are they realistic, achievable and fair? — would you expect them of a friend?) or it may be looking at the demands being placed on you by your employers (are they also realistic, achievable and fair and do they match the job description of your role?) This area could also go further to exploring whether this job fits your current needs and interests or whether it is time for a small or big change.

As cliché as it is, the standard practices of eating well, getting a good amount of sleep and exercise, mindfulness/meditation, as well as creating good social connections are also relevant here. These areas have been explored and prescribed extensively elsewhere so I won’t go into further detail around these here, but we all know they keep getting suggested for a reason, right?

Conclusion

There are many ways that signs of burnout can be addressed and ideally begin to be changed for the sake of your own wellbeing. What I have explored above and in my last article hopefully gives you some ideas to begin this exploration in both areas for reflection and consideration, as well as a few changes that could be considered to support you going forward. I do not want to make out that any of the suggestions I have made are easy or straightforward, but I do believe we owe it to ourselves to at least give it some thought and consideration and maybe take the first small step to creating a better work and life balance for not only ourselves, but also those around us. 

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