3 Telltale Signs That You’re Burned Out

Hard work is valued in every culture. But due to our well-intentioned zeal to “do it all” and “have it all,” many of us are living well beyond our stress response. Over time, the demands we put on ourselves can begin to exceed our ability to cope with them and we find ourselves headed for burnout.

Burnout zaps our energy and often leaves us feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, unmotivated, and disconnected. These feelings can undermine our relationships, our career, and our health. But we can learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout. By paying attention to our needs through dedicated self-care, the harmful effects of burnout can be reversed. We can learn how to reclaim and restore a sense of balance, self-worth, and well-being.

Signs and Symptoms of Burnout
Emotional intelligence and behavior change expert Richard Boyatzis believes that the word burnout is a misnomer. Like a chronic fever, burnout has escalating and debilitating physiological, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual effects. When we sacrifice too much for too long and reap too little, we become trapped in what we call the “Sacrifice Syndrome.” Our bodies are just not equipped to deal with this kind of pressure day after day. Over time, we become exhausted. We slip into internal disquiet, unrest, and distress.

The symptoms of burnout can be confusing. Depression and burnout can overlap. They can also be experienced independently of each other. Consulting your healthcare provider and/or a licensed counseling professional can aid you in understanding and addressing your symptoms.

Psychologist Christina Maslach devised a standard test for burnout called the Maslach Burnout Inventory. It focuses on a cluster of three symptoms and how frequently they occur:
• Emotional Exhaustion – feeling drained and used up
• Depersonalization – feeling detached, uncaring, and cynical toward self and others
• Reduced Personal Accomplishment – feeling progressive loss of confidence and competence

Take an Honest Assessment
When we feel overworked and undervalued, feelings of loneliness are inevitable. As we become more isolated and detached, we may also become numb to the warning signs of burnout. Ask yourself these questions to take an honest look at the present state of your body and mind:

• Am I feeling tired and drained most of the time?
• Has there been a change in my appetite or sleep habits?
• Do I experience feelings of helplessness, being trapped, or defeated?
• Do I feel a decreased sense of satisfaction and accomplishment?
• Do I frequently have negative feelings and self-talk that may include thoughts such as: "Why bother?" "Who cares anyway?" "Why doesn’t everyone just leave me alone?"

Answering yes to any of these questions is not an indication of weakness and need not induce feelings of guilt. In fact, turning toward this recognition is a courageous, albeit uncomfortable, first step on the road to facing and coping with burnout.

Seek Support
One of the most debilitating aspects of burnout is isolation. When we feel spent and overwhelmed our inclination is to try to conserve what little energy we have by avoiding others. In order to counter this tendency, begin by consulting with your healthcare provider. It’s also imperative that you let trusted family members and friends know how you are feeling. This will not burden them. It is likely that they have already noticed changes in you and are concerned. When you can share your vulnerabilities with others it serves to strengthen and galvanize those relationships with understanding, safety, and trust.

Restore Balance
Counselor and consultant Ruth Luban describes burnout as a call from one’s core self an opportunity to return to one’s heartfelt values and priorities as a means of getting back into balance.

Set aside some dedicated time to gently explore the following questions:

• What do I need less of in my life?
• What do I want more of in my life?
• What is it time to let go of?
• What relationships are pivotal to my happiness and well-being?
• What would I enjoy doing on a daily basis to de-stress, calm, and center myself?
• If my heart could talk to me, what would it say it needs most right now?
• If I had only a short time to live, whom would I want by my side and what would I want them to know?

Start with Simple Changes
Sometimes we feel wiped out and we don't know where to begin. BJ Fogg, a research psychologist and director of the Stanford Persuasive Tech Lab, demonstrates how to make small shifts in behaviors in order to successfully change habits through his innovative “Tiny Habits” program. Fogg suggests remembering these three powerful words: “Simplicity changes behavior.”

Using his advice, we can build in baby steps of rest and nourishing comfort every day. Acknowledge your well-deserved need for less and try these steps to get started:

1. Meditate on the things you’re grateful for to increase contentment
2. Choose exercises that you enjoy
3. Enjoy yummy, nutritious food as a healing medicine
4. Give yourself permission to take naps during appropriate times that don’t affect your responsibilities

Enjoy More Playtime
The laughter and light-heartedness that results from playtime with people you love is indispensable. Slowing down, accepting ourselves and our limits, and realigning our hearts and minds with what matters most to us will foster the self-compassion needed to love our burnout into nonexistence. Overdoing is out. “It's good enough” is in. Therapist Wayne Muller offers this healing suggestion: “Do what you can, but always remember to have mercy in the process.”

Resources
For more resources to get you back on track and feeling like yourself again, don’t hesitate to reach out by phone to the Ohio Employee Assistance Program at 1-800-221-6EAP (6327) or locally at 614-644-8545, or by email at OEAP@das.ohio.gov.