

3 Critical Signs of Burnout

By Dr. Susan Biali Haas as posted on Psychology Today's website

Years ago, I was diagnosed with depression during my Emergency Medicine residency. Given that I was experiencing increasing levels of despair and hopelessness, I believe that diagnosis was partially correct. When I look back, though, I can also see that severe burnout was part of the picture. (Researchers Iacovides et al. have pointed out that the two conditions can overlap.) At the time, unfortunately, no one saw or addressed the burnout.

I ended up quitting my residency and switching to a less stressful practice and a more balanced life. I committed to taking care of myself properly and sought positive activities outside of work, such as dancing and writing. I felt dramatically better – shockingly better, actually – within weeks.

We know now that physicians are at extremely high risk for burnout: It affects approximately 50 percent of us at any given time. In the early days of the research, it was thought that burnout exclusively affected people in the helping professions, such as doctors, nurses, and social workers. It's now established that burnout can creep up on anyone, in any vocation, if they experience a certain combination of difficult circumstances.

When I was suffering from burnout, I wasn't aware of what was going on. You'd think that 80-hour work weeks and too many night shifts would have been a clue. In a way, I was lucky that my work life – and I – fell apart, as I was able to rebuild both in a healthier, comparatively burnout-proof framework.

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Ever since, I have been speaking to groups and organizations about how to recognize, address, and prevent burnout. Every time I teach on the subject, people come up to me wide-eyed afterward, saying, "This is what's wrong with me! I just thought I was exhausted and stressed."

So how do you know whether the challenges you are experiencing are simply everyday work stress or the signs of burnout?

For a person to be diagnosed with burnout, these three components need to be present:

1. Emotional exhaustion.

You feel tired all the time. You don't feel up to facing your workday, even if it's just a normal day. You may wake up every morning with a feeling of dread. Day after day you feel this, and it doesn't lift, even after a week off. It's more than likely that you are dealing with heavy workloads or difficult workplace circumstances that are wearing you out.

2. Cynicism/Depersonalization.

You may have started out as someone who really enjoyed working with people or dealing with clients. Now, you find yourself feeling

increasingly angry and irritable toward them. You have a growing sense of detachment from your work and may even be alarmed by how cynical you've become.

Once, I was speaking to an association of specialist physicians on this topic. There was a rather unfriendly gentleman who sat way at the back (in fact, he warned me, before I went up to give my speech, that he didn't want to be there and would probably leave partway through).

Imagine my shock when the very same doctor called me the next day from the airport on his way back home. He told me that while listening to me, he had been stunned to realize that he was suffering from severe burnout:

My family has been complaining to me for years that I've become this angry, cynical person. I felt terrible about it and didn't know what to do, so I just got more cynical. Now I understand that I'm burned out, and that I need to get help to make some changes. Thank you.

It seems there are so many people out there suffering, in a similar way, unaware of the root cause of these personality changes. (Obviously there can be other causes of personality change and chronic bad moods; given his profession, though, it is quite probable that burnout played a role.)

3. Reduced personal efficacy.

You're losing confidence in your ability to do your job, even though you used to be quite good at it. You work harder and harder, but seem to accomplish less. Your productivity has dropped significantly, and your belief in yourself has fallen along with it.

As mentioned above, you need to be experiencing all three of these components to be suffering from full-fledged burnout. Even if you are just experiencing one or two, pay attention. As leading burnout researchers Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter describe in the article, "There is More to the Job Experience Than Just Burnout," you may initially experience just one of the above profiles, as you head down the road from healthy work engagement to full-fledged burnout.

If you relate to any of the above points or are struggling in your work (or your life), seek the advice of your doctor or a qualified mental health professional such as those at your Employee/Member Assistance Program. I wrote this post to provide useful information on the topic; it is not designed for you to diagnose and treat yourself — leave that to the professionals.

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For additional articles about stress management, wellness and resilience, visit Dr. Biali Haas' website at LearnHowToLiveWell.com.

Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-eap.com.
Your feedback is greatly appreciated!



Caregiver Burnout

If you are a caregiver for a close friend or a family member, then you are at risk for burnout!

HelpGuide.org says:

“Caregiver burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by the prolonged and overwhelming stress of caregiving. While caring for a loved one can be very rewarding, it also involves

many stressors. And since caregiving is often a long-term challenge, the stress it generates can be particularly damaging.”

Symptoms of caregiver burnout:

- Constant anxiety, irritation or anger especially with your patient/family member
- Feeling detached or numb
- Self-critical all of the time
- Neglect/avoid caregiving duties

- Relationship conflicts
- Substance abuse
- Unable to relax

Caregivers need periodic *respite care*, or time off from their demanding caregiving responsibilities. Respite care is all about giving temporary, substitute care for the caregiver’s loved one so that the caregiver may be able to relax and rejuvenate him/herself. Everyone needs time off from stress and responsibilities occasionally!

Continued below

ERS Press

A Publication of
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The Employee/Member Assistance Program can support you with whatever challenges you’re facing. We can help you or your family members get into counseling as well. Call us at (800) 292-2780.

Once you’ve arranged for respite care, try these other suggestions:

- Talk with a good friend, or with a counselor at your Employee Assistance Program. It’s good to get an outside perspective on what’s going on, as well resources and referrals to local agencies and support groups that can assist.
- Communicate with other family members about what’s going on. If they are out of state, and don’t see the family member

very often, etc. it’s entirely possible they have no idea of the amount of responsibility you’ve taken on and can provide additional help and support.

- Treat yourself regularly to small indulgences that help to lift your mood. Whether it’s going to see a movie, eating a cupcake or taking a long walk outside in nice weather, remember that you are doing important work and deserve a reward for your efforts.

If you are someone who is struggling to balance your life, work and family responsibilities, call the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 1-800-292-2780 for *free* and *confidential* support and information.

For free and confidential support and resources call the Employee/Member/Student/Family Assistance Program (800) 292-2780 www.ers-eap.com