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170 - Friday Fix: How to Prevent Burnout

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to the Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Now, let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about burnout.

It’s an issue that has been discussed for many years but the pandemic definitely shed more light on it. As some people worked from home and others had to take on lots of extra shifts, burnout has become a hot topic lately.

So I thought it’d be a good time to talk about how to recognize if you’re experiencing burnout, what we can do to prevent it, and the steps you can take if you’re feeling burned out by your job.

Burnout is defined as a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by chronic stress. It can cause you to feel emotionally drained. You’ll likely lose interest in your job and over time, you might grow hopeless, helpless, and resentful.
Being burned out on the job will affect almost every area of your life. It can impact your health, your relationships, and mood outside of the office. So it’s important to prevent it if you can and address it if you notice it’s setting in.

Before we talk about what to do about it, let’s talk about how to know if you’re burned out. It’s more than just having a bad day at work or being frustrated with your job. Here are some of the signs that you may be experiencing burnout:

**Physical health issues.** There are some physical signs that can mimic other conditions, like depression so it can be hard to recognize. Changes to your health may include feeling tired most of the time, getting sick more often, having more headaches and aches and pains overall, changes to your appetite, and changes to your sleep habits.

**Mental health issues.** Emotional signs of burnout might involve feeling like you aren’t accomplishing anything, a cynical outlook, reduced motivation, and feeling helpless and defeated.

**Changes to your behavior.** Behavioral signs of burnout may involve isolating yourself, withdrawing from responsibilities, procrastinating more than usual, taking frustrations out on others, and skipping work or coming in late or going home early.

So those are some of the signs of burnout. Essentially, you’ll feel emotionally drained most of the time and you might feel like you’re ineffective at your job. You might think your employer isn’t giving you the tools you need to do your job well or it might just feel like there are so many barriers to doing good work or so many problems that get in the way of actually getting things done, that it’s hard to accomplish anything.

Some of those problems you face might be accurate (maybe your boss micromanages your work and it gets in the way of getting things done). Others might be self-imposed (like thinking you need to work all the time even though that’s not an actual expectation).

There are really two ways we should be tackling burnout: employers can address cultural issues and policies that promote burnout and employees can take action to address their individual situations.

Let’s briefly talk about burnout on the company level. Two weeks of vacation a year and a free subscription to a mental health app for the entire company is not likely to prevent
burnout if employees are expected to be available around the clock, expectations are unclear, and employees are being bullied or discriminated against.

There are plenty of times when employers need to create a better environment. No matter how mentally strong you are, a toxic workplace will lead to burnout fast.

One of the good things about what we’re seeing right now during the great resignation is that people are becoming pickier about where they work.

So employers will likely have to step up their game when it comes to offering the types of schedules, flexibility, and benefits employees are looking for to be successful.

One thing we know about burnout out is that high salaries don’t prevent it. Many of the professionals who are burning out earn a lot of money. Physicians usually top the charts for the highest burnout rate despite having some of the highest salaries. On the flipside, food service workers and hospitality workers (who usually aren’t known for high salaries) tend to also be at high risk for burnout.

So although employers may try to lure employees in by offering higher salaries, more money won’t prevent burnout and it may not retain employees over the long-term.

But employers can offer jobs that have clear expectations, allow for some autonomy, and make it clear about how to advance. A healthy workplace should also promote a healthy work/life balance that gives you time to step away from the job without guilt or fear that you’re going to miss something if you aren’t answering emails at all hours of the day.

Sometimes, it’s just the nature of the job too that leads to burnout. Child welfare workers who investigate child abuse cases, have a high rate of burnout too. It’s no wonder why. It’s a tough job.

Outside forces can also be a factor. There’s a high degree of burnout with medical professionals (therapists included) and quite often people will say they just can’t stand the paperwork. Sometimes there are lots of hurdles with insurance companies that make it difficult to do the work that is needed to be done.

So you certainly can’t control all the factors that contribute to burnout. You might change jobs or even switch careers. But that’s not always a practical option.
There are, however, things you can do on an individual level to address burnout in the job that you have.

Here are five big things you can do to prevent and address burnout:

1. **Accept appropriate responsibility for mistakes without shaming yourself.**

Research shows a huge factor that contributes to burnout is excessive self-blame. A physician who thinks, “It’s my fault my patient didn’t take their medication every day” is going to burnout faster than the physician who thinks, “It’s my job to educate patients. It’s their job to take action.”

Keep in mind that there will be times when you make mistakes—but being overly hard on yourself isn’t helpful. When you find yourself thinking, “I’m a bad person,” remind yourself that you’re still a good person even though you may have made a poor choice. That shift in thinking can go a long way toward helping you learn from your mistakes rather than be reduced by them.

2. **Create a rich life outside of work.**

Whether you’re an entrepreneur or you work for a company, your work can consume you if you’re not careful. Creating a healthy, rich life outside of work was tough during the pandemic. There weren’t a lot of places to go and things to do outside the house. And many people worked from home which blurred the lines between work and play.

It’s important to engage in activities outside the office that have nothing to do with work. Beware of the tendency to come home and complain about your day to family or friends. The more you talk about work outside of work, the more power you give it over your life.

If you feel pressure to constantly be available by phone or email outside of working hours consider where this pressure is coming from. Do you feel like you need to do this to show that you’re dedicated to work? Or has your boss told you this is a requirement?

Set healthy boundaries for yourself.

If you’re tempted to spend lots of hours working outside of regular office hours, you’re putting yourself at high risk of burning out. And you might not necessarily be more productive. Humans are only productive so many hours per day.
And the more you work, the less time you’ll have to address your stress. The more stress you have, the less productive you’ll be. It’s a vicious cycle that is important to break.

3. Address workplace issues as they arise.

If you feel like there’s a barrier at your job that prevents you from being effective, it’s important to address it. That may mean talking to your manager about having so many meetings in your schedule that you don’t have time to work. Or it may involve talking to someone about the fact that you don’t have the resources you need to do your job.

Obviously, speaking up doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ll create change. You might be told that it’s your company culture to attend 6 hours worth of meetings a day or that you should be able to do your job despite the lack of support.

But sometimes, we just imagine that these things are going to happen and we don’t speak up or ask for help. After all, that’s one of the signs of burnout—being helpless. When we’re helpless, we don’t do anything to fix the situation. Even if we see potential opportunities to create change, we don’t bother trying because we assume it won’t work.

So it’s important to recognize our tendency to become helpless and to take action—even if you think there’s little chance of something getting better. You won’t know until you try. So address workplace issues as they arise.

4. Have hope for the future.

Studies on burnout have found that hope plays a big role. If you have hope for the future, you’ll be less likely to burnout.

Of course, it’s tough to have hope when you’re in the middle of burnout. Fortunately though, there are things you can do to develop hope—even when you’re feeling a bit hopeless.

Think about a time in the past when you had hope about something and it happened. Reminding yourself of this example can give you hope again.
Another strategy to develop hope is to instill hope in someone else. Telling someone else that you think something good will happen or just cheering them up about something can help you feel better—and a little more hopeful about your own future.

You may also want to watch how much negative news you’re consuming. Media outlets and social media channels might be talking about worst case scenarios that drain you of hope. So limit how much bad news you’re consuming.

5. Develop resilience.

Research shows the other major factor that can combat burnout is resilience. Fortunately, we all have the ability to develop skills and tools that help us to grow more resilient.

People often ask me about whether mental strength is the same thing as resilience. The answer is no.

Resilience is about bouncing back from hard times, like failure or difficult circumstances. Mental strength is about thinking, feeling, and doing your best not just in hard times but in good times as well.

Generally, I don’t think we should just equip ourselves with skills that prepare us for worst case scenarios. Fortunately, though, many of the same skills that help you develop resilience can also help you grow mentally stronger when you practice them on a regular basis.

Many of the skills we discuss on the Friday Fix episodes can help develop resilience, like practicing self-compassion and having healthy coping skills to use when you experience uncomfortable emotions.

So those are five things that can help prevent and address burnout. Accept appropriate responsibility without shame, create a rich life outside of work, address workplace issues as they arise, have hope for the future, and develop resilience.

You can also reach out for professional help if you’re experiencing burnout. A licensed mental health professional, either online or in-person, can assist you in making positive changes that can address burnout.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.
Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who says he’s the poster child for burnout), Nick Valentin.