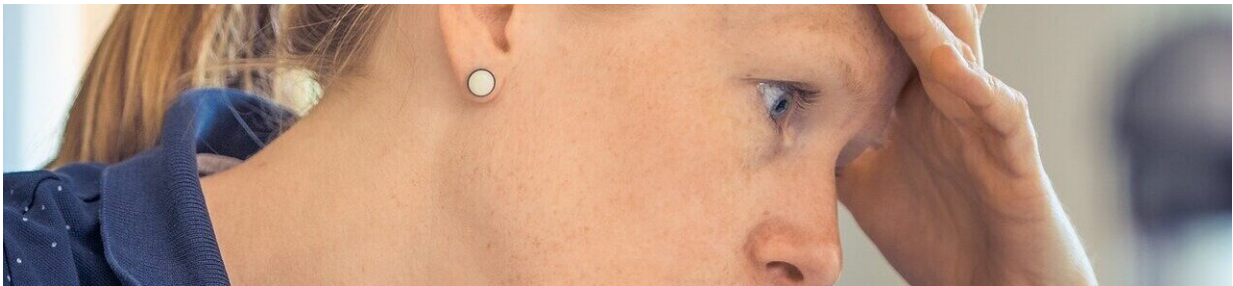


Burnout can exacerbate work stress, further promoting a vicious circle

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Stress and overload in the workplace are increasing worldwide and are often considered a cause of burnout. Indeed, a new study shows that work stress and burnout are mutually reinforcing. However, contrary to popular belief, burnout has a much greater impact on work stress than vice versa. "This means that the more severe a person's burnout becomes, the more stressed they will feel at work, such as being under time pressure, for example," said Professor Christian Dormann of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU). Employees suffering from burnout should be timely provided with adequate support in order to break the vicious circle between work stress and burnout.

Symptoms of [burnout](#) include exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced performance. "The most important burnout symptom is the feeling of

total exhaustion—to the extent that it cannot be remedied by normal recovery phases of an evening, a weekend, or even a vacation," said Dormann. "To protect themselves from further exhaustion, some try to build a psychological distance to their work, that is, they alienate themselves from their work as well as the people associated with it and become more cynical," added Dr. Christina Guthier. She conducted the study as part of her doctoral thesis in Dormann's research group and was awarded with the dissertation prize of the Alfred Teves Foundation in 2020. The study has recently been published in *Psychological Bulletin*.

For the joint publication with Professor Christian Dormann and Professor Manuel Völkle of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Christina Guthier evaluated 48 longitudinal studies of burnout and work stress comprising 26,319 participants. The average age in the initial survey was about 42 years, 44 percent of the respondents were men. The [longitudinal studies](#) from 1986 to 2019 came from various countries, including predominantly European countries as well as Israel, the U.S., Canada, Mexico, South Africa, Australia, China, and Taiwan.

Stopping the downward spiral and reducing the effect of burnout on work stress

The results challenge, or at least relativize, the common perception that work stress is the driving force behind burnout. "Burnout can be triggered by a work situation, but that is not always the case," Dormann pointed out. Once burnout begins, it develops only very gradually, building up slowly over time. Ultimately it leads to work being increasingly perceived as stressful: The amount of work is too much, time is too short, and work stress is too great. "When exhausted, the ability to cope with stress usually decreases. As a result, even smaller tasks can be perceived as significantly more strenuous," explained Guthier, the first author of the article. "We expected an effect of

burnout on work stress; the strength of the effect was very surprising," she noted. The effect of burnout on perceived work stress can be somewhat mitigated if employees have more control over their own work and receive support from colleagues or superiors.

According to Dormann, a new research area is emerging on the basis of this unique data because the strong boomerang effect of burnout on work stress has not yet been investigated. Key questions that need to be addressed are: how can the effects of burnout on perceived work [stress](#) be reduced and how can the development of this vicious circle be prevented? Dormann and Guthier suggest that the place to start is with management behavior. Employees should have the opportunity to give feedback on their [work stress](#) at any time and be appreciated. Last but not least, proper recovery could also help to stop the downward spiral.

More information: Christina Guthier et al. Reciprocal effects between job stressors and burnout: A continuous time meta-analysis of longitudinal studies., *Psychological Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000304](#)

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