

Experiencing job burnout? Self-care can help, but it isn't just your problem to solve

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Burnout is a stress response, but it is not a medical condition

—The term was coined in the 1970s

—Experts say self-care can help, but the solution requires changes to the job.

As the pandemic lingers and issues like soaring inflation, the war in Ukraine and [climate change](#) add more stress to our daily lives, people are just plain tired and wondering, am I burnt out?

You very well could be.

While the term "[burnout](#)" is often used colloquially to describe the toll of stress in all areas of life, it refers specifically to the experience of prolonged exhaustion caused by unrelenting stressors at work. Some occupations, like healthcare, have long battled burnout, and the pandemic has served to exacerbate the phenomenon.

U.S. TODAY talked to two experts to bring you what you need to know.

What is burnout?

The World Health Organization added burnout to the International Classification of Diseases Index in 2019. It defines burnout as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."

The WHO clarifies that burnout "refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."

The term became popularized in the 1970s by German psychologist Herbert Freudenberger.

The WHO definition rested in great part on research done by Christina Maslach, a professor emerita of psychology at University of California

Berkeley who developed a way of measuring burnout and wrote a forthcoming book on the topic.

Maslach said there are three main indicators of burnout: Complete exhaustion, cynicism and disconnection with respect to your job, and feeling doubtful about your own competency.

People experiencing burnout become less productive and the quality of their work begins to dip.

Is burnout a medical condition?

The WHO classifies burnout as a syndrome, but it is not a medical condition.

"The [stress response](#) is a normal part of the human condition, it's not a pathology. It's not that something has gone wrong" Maslach said. "But what can go wrong is that when it's a response to chronic stressors, then there is really much less time and ability for people to recover."

"You can't keep running a marathon at a sprint pace," Maslach said. "It just doesn't work."

A heavy workload is often what causes people to burn out. But there are five other areas of work life, according to Maslach, that can equally predict burnout:

- Control: Does a worker have enough autonomy?
- Reward: Does a worker receive social recognition?
- Fairness: Is the workplace fair?
- Community: Is there a toxic work environment?
- Values: Does the work challenge a worker's ethics?

Although burnout itself isn't considered a condition, it can have health consequences.

High levels of stress put you at greater risk of heart disease and can lead to mental health disorders like depression and anxiety.

How do you recover from burnout?

Implementing a [self-care](#) strategy can help, said Johns Hopkins University psychiatry and behavioral sciences professor Neda Gould, who also runs the university's mindfulness program.

"I think the good news is that there can be small adjustments that begin to have a meaningful impact," Gould said.

Gould recommends minor changes like incorporating small five-minute breaks throughout the work day and getting a fresh breath of air, if possible.

"Really having some period of time where you can separate yourself from work, even if for a few minutes," Gould said. "So you can refuel your tank."

But the reality is, experts say, burnout is a problem that cannot be solved by the individual alone. The root of the stress needs to be tackled.

"If the source creating that burnout is work, that burnout is going to remain largely, and so the institution needs to make changes as well to create a more healthy work environment," Gould said.

That can be tough because the predominant attitude, according to Maslach, focuses on helping individuals take better care of themselves.

"But what we really lack is a concerted effort to figure out what would be some of the things that we can do," Maslach said. "That would create a better environment for people to actually operate in. And often that means talking to the people who are actually doing the job and finding out what is driving them crazy and what is going fine."

The rapid changes workplaces were forced to undergo to adapt to the pandemic offers proof that work can be done differently for the benefit of workers, Maslach said.

Some workers, for example, found that working from home reduced major sources of stress. It allowed greater flexibility and control over work, eliminated costly and lengthy commutes and gave some workers the opportunity to better avoid toxic office environments.

Burnout vs. depression

Because the symptoms can have so much overlap, it can be difficult to determine whether someone is burnt out or has clinical depression, Gould said. The only way of distinguishing can be being able to trace the symptoms back to [stress](#) work.

"When a person comes to me with symptoms of burnout, they're often so similar to depression that I use some of the same tools and strategies," Gould said. "But one thing I might add in treatment is helping an individual understand that they are not responsible for their reaction to institutional problems."

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