

It's beginning to look a lot like burnout: How to take care of yourself before the holidays start

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It's getting towards the time of the year when you might feel more

overwhelmed than usual. There are work projects to finish and perhaps exams in the family. Not to mention the pressures of organizing holidays or gifts. Burnout is a real possibility.

Burnout is defined by the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) as having three main symptoms—exhaustion, loss of empathy and reduced performance at work.

Australian [research](#) argues for a broader model, particularly as the WHO's third symptom may simply be a consequence of the first two.

So what is burnout really? And how can you avoid it before the holidays hit?

More than being really tired

The Australian research model endorsed exhaustion as the primary burnout symptom but emphasized burnout should not be simply equated with exhaustion.

The second symptom is loss of empathy (or "compassion fatigue"), which can also be experienced as uncharacteristic cynicism or a general loss of feeling. Nothing much provides pleasure and joie de vivre is only a memory.

The third symptom (cognitive impairment) means sufferers find it [difficult to focus](#) and retain information when reading. They tend to scan material—with some women reporting it as akin to "baby brain."

Research [suggests](#) a fourth symptom: insularity. When someone is burnt out, they tend to keep to themselves, not only socializing less but also obtaining little pleasure from interactions.

A potential fifth key feature is an unsettled mood.

And despite feeling exhausted, most individuals report insomnia when they're burnt out. In severe cases, immune functioning can be compromised (so that the person may report an increase in infections), [blood pressure](#) may drop and it may be difficult or impossible to get out of bed.

Predictably, such features (especially exhaustion and [cognitive impairment](#)) do lead to compromised work performance.

Defining burnout is important, as rates have [increased](#) in the last few decades.

'Tis the season

For many, the demands of the holidays cause exhaustion and risk burnout. People might feel compelled to shop, cook, entertain and socialize more than at other times of year. While burnout was initially defined in those in formal employment, we now recognize the same pattern can be experienced by those meeting the needs of children and/or elderly parents—with such needs typically increasing over Christmas.

Burnout is generally viewed according to a simple stress-response model. Excessive demands lead to burnout, without the individual bringing anything of themselves to its onset and development. But the [Australian research](#) has identified a richer model and emphasized how much personality contributes.

Formal caregivers, be they health workers, teachers, veterinarians and clergy or parents—are [more likely](#) to experience burnout. But some other professional groups—such as lawyers—are also at high risk.

In essence, "good" people—who are dutiful, diligent, reliable, conscientious and perfectionistic (either by nature or work nurture)—are at the [greatest risk](#) of [burnout](#).

Six tips for avoiding seasonal burnout

You may not be able to change your personality, but you can change the way you allow it to "shape" activities. Prioritizing, avoiding procrastination, decluttering and focusing on the "big picture" are all good things to keep in mind.

Managing your time helps you regain a sense of control, enhances your efficiency, and reduces the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities.

1. Prioritize tasks

Rank tasks based on urgency and importance. The Eisenhower Matrix, [popularized](#) by author Stephen R Covey, puts jobs into one of four categories:

- urgent and important
- important but not urgent
- urgent but not important
- neither urgent nor important.

This helps you see what needs to be top priority and helps overcome the illusion that everything is [urgent](#).

2. Set realistic goals

Break down large goals into smaller, manageable tasks to be achieved

each day, week, or month—to prevent feeling overwhelmed. This could mean writing a gift list in a day or shopping for a festive meal over a week. Use tools such as calendars, planners or digital apps to schedule tasks, deadlines and appointments.

3. Manage distractions

Minimize [distractions](#) that hinder productivity and time management. [Research](#) finds people complete cognitive tasks better with their phones in another room rather than in their pockets. People with phones on their desks performed the worst.

Setting specific work hours and website blockers can limit distractions.

4. Chunk your time

Group similar tasks together and allocate specific time blocks to focus on them. For example, respond to all outstanding emails in one stint, rather than writing one, then task-switching to making a phone call.

This approach [increases efficiency](#) and reduces the time spent transitioning between different activities.

5. Take breaks

A [2022 systematic review](#) of workplace breaks found taking breaks throughout the day improves focus, well-being and helps get more work done.

6. Delegate

Whether at home or work, you don't have to do it all! Identify tasks that

can be effectively delegated to others or automated.

To finish the year feeling good, try putting one or more of these techniques into practice and prepare for a restful break.

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