

Information Sheet

Burnout

Burnout tends to occur suddenly, after a prolonged period of high stress, and is usually difficult to foresee. It is a state which prevents individuals from functioning effectively in their personal and professional lives. Recognising the early signs of impending burnout, which gradually worsen over time, enables you to take action to alleviate your stress *before* it becomes burnout.

Signs of physical and emotional exhaustion

1. **Chronic fatigue.** Lack of energy and tiredness through to physical and emotional exhaustion, feeling drained and depleted. You may feel a sense of dread for what lies ahead on any given day.
2. **Insomnia.** Initially trouble falling or staying asleep, eventually leading to complete insomnia despite exhaustion.
3. **Impaired concentration or forgetfulness.** Lack of focus and mild forgetfulness, eventually reaching inability to complete work and falling behind as a result.
4. **Physical symptoms.** These may include chest pain, heart palpitations, breathing difficulty, headaches, gastrointestinal pain, dizziness, and/or fainting (all should be medically assessed).
5. **Increased illness.** Higher vulnerability to colds, flu, infections and other immune-related sickness.
6. **Loss of appetite.** Initially, lack of hunger may lead to skipping a few meals. Later, you may lose your appetite altogether and lose a significant amount of weight.
7. **Anxiety.** Initially, mild tension, worry, and edginess. Later, the anxiety may become so serious that it interferes in work productivity and causes problems in your personal life.
8. **Depression.** Initially, mild sadness, occasionally hopeless, perhaps feelings of guilt and worthlessness. At its worst, you may feel trapped, severely depressed, and think the world would be better off without you.
9. **Anger.** Interpersonal tension and irritability through to angry outbursts and serious arguments at home and in the workplace.

NB: If depression or anger reach extreme levels, please seek professional help immediately.

Signs of Cynicism and Detachment

1. **Loss of enjoyment.** Initially, being reluctant to go to work or being eager to leave. Without intervention,

loss of enjoyment may extend to all areas of your life, including time with family and friends. You may try to avoid projects at work or to figure out ways to escape work altogether.

2. **Pessimism.** At first, negative self-talk, or a less positive than usual attitude. At its worst, this may extend to trust issues with co-workers and family members and a feeling that you can't count on anyone.
3. **Isolation.** Initially, mild resistance to socialising. Later, you may be irritated when someone speaks to you, or try to avoid interactions in general.
4. **Detachment.** Feeling disconnected from others or your environment. It can take the form of the isolative behaviours described above, and result in removing yourself emotionally and physically from your job and other responsibilities. You may call in sick often, stop returning calls and emails, or regularly come in late.

Signs of Ineffectiveness and Lack of Accomplishment

1. **Feelings of apathy and hopelessness.** A general sense that nothing is going right or nothing matters. As the symptoms worsen, these feelings may become immobilising, making it seem like "what's the point?"
2. **Increased irritability.** Irritability often stems from feeling ineffective, unimportant, useless, and a sense that you are no longer able to do things as efficiently or effectively. In the early stages, this can interfere in personal and professional relationships. At its worst, it can destroy relationships and careers.
3. **Lack of productivity and poor performance.** Chronic stress reduces productivity, regardless of number of hours worked. This often results in incomplete projects and an ever-growing to-do list. It may seem that as hard as you try, you can't climb out from under the pile.

If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is essential to honestly assess the amount of stress in your life and find ways to reduce it; burnout will not resolve otherwise. You may find our *Approach Info* sheets on Problem Solving and Assertive Communication helpful as you work to reduce your stress.

Credit goes to Sherrie Bourg Carter, Psy.D., the author of *High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout* (Prometheus Books, 2011).