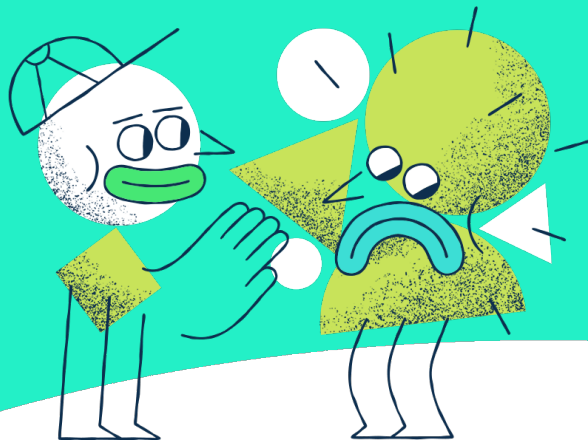


BURNOUT RECOVERY TOOLKIT



WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Long-term stress is often not taken as seriously as it should be, but its cumulative effects can wreak havoc on both our physical and mental health.

Burnout was added to WHO's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) in 2019 and recognised by the NHS as a diagnosable illness shortly after.

Defined as a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress, common symptoms of burnout/chronic stress might include headaches, digestive problems, depression, anxiety, nausea, being 'run down', brain fog, trouble sleeping, and more.

Professional burnout is also characterised by a sense of cynicism related to one's work and dramatically reduced productivity.

If you don't take a break, your body will take one for you.

THE 12 STAGES OF BURNOUT

Going into more detail about the signs and symptoms of onset burnout, psychologists Freudenberger and North outlined the 12 phases of the occupational phenomenon. Although everyone's experience won't follow this to a T, it's important that we know what to look out for in ourselves and others so that we can take preventative/recuperative measures as soon as possible.

The compulsion to prove oneself is a common starting point and tends to affect enthusiastic employees who accept responsibility readily.

You begin to **neglect your own needs**, sacrificing self-care, like sleep, exercise, and eating well.

Revision of values. Family and friends are frequently dismissed, hobbies seem more trivial, and work is your only focus.

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Working harder. Ambition pushes you to work harder as you develop a reluctance or inability to switch off.

Displacement of conflict. Dismissal of any problems related to your behaviour. One may also feel generally panicky or jittery.

Denial. Impatience with those around you mounts - you blame others, seeing them as undisciplined, lazy, and demanding.

Withdrawal. You withdraw from family and friends - social invitations feel burdensome, instead of enjoyable.

Depersonalisation. Feeling detached from your life and your ability to control your life.

Depression. Life loses its meaning, and you begin to feel hopeless.

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12.

Behavioural changes.

Changes to your behaviour are obvious, with friends and family becoming concerned about you.

Inner emptiness or anxiety. Feeling empty or anxious. You may turn to thrill-seeking behaviours to cope with this emotion, such as substance use, gambling, or overeating.

Burnout syndrome. You are unable to cope. You experience total mental and physical collapse - mental health or medical attention is necessary.

GETTING SIGNED OFF

If you recognise yourself as being at the latter end of the above spectrum, we encourage you to consider taking some time off work on the grounds of stress.

Despite possible feelings of guilt or dread in stepping away from work for a while, acknowledging that you're unwell and taking sick leave is the fastest road to recovery and, therefore, in the best long-term interests of everyone.

If you take more than 7 days of leave*, you will need to obtain a fit note (also called a doctor's note or medical statement) from your GP.

In order to obtain a fit note, contact your healthcare provider and book an appointment to discuss your experience of chronic stress/burnout and ask specifically to be issued a note. Your doctor may specify a period for your absence from work, or they may ask to see you again at a later date to assess your stress levels and whether you're fit to return to work. You are entitled to statutory sick pay for an absence of 28 weeks.

* Please note, you are legally entitled to 7 days of sick leave without having to supply a note. If you request a note within these first 7 days, your healthcare provider may ask you to pay a fee. Once this time has elapsed, you will not be required to pay for a fit note.

RECOVERY

It's impossible to be prescriptive when it comes to recovering from burnout. Everyone's journey back to wellness looks different and takes as long as it takes. However, there are a few general recommendations we can make to help you, slowly but surely, find your feet...

Be gentle with yourself.

Right now, it will be extremely difficult to summon the energy to leave your bed/sofa/take a shower, etc. And here, we encourage you to listen to your body - without guilt or self-judgement.

Practicing self-compassion and taking what you need (time, space, rest) is not by any means indulgent. With mental ill-health, it can be difficult for us to recognise ourselves as unwell, but you are sick and should treat yourself / have expectations of yourself accordingly.



Ask for help.

If you have dependents or usually take on the responsibility of running a shared household, the...

above may be difficult. In these instances, it is vital that we communicate plainly and ask for help – from our partner, family, good friends, or close neighbors.

Though this may feel uncomfortable at first, you will probably be surprised by how many people would be happy to help if you let them know you were struggling and needed a bit of practical support. Though we cannot rely on others for everything, outsourcing some of the domestic burden during this time can help you get the rest you need in order to recover.



Speak to someone.

When experiencing mental ill-health, we always recommend speaking to someone about your thoughts and feelings – be that a trusted friend or family member, or a professional counsellor or therapist (over-the-phone therapy services, such as [BetterHelp](#), might be most suitable for you during this time).



Don't check your emails.

Whilst you're signed off from work we implore you **not** to look at your inbox. This will not give you the sense of control you might be looking for. Checking your work emails during this time will likely trigger feelings of anxiety, exasperating your already exasperated nervous system and impeding recovery.



Journal.

As you begin to feel a little better, we recommend journaling.

Diarising your day-to-day experiences (in whatever way that feels natural to you - this should not be a source of stress) can help you process some of your more challenging thoughts and feelings. As a creative endeavour it can be a mediative process and, because of this, feel rejuvenating in some small way. Plus, journaling can help you identify happiness triggers as you emerge from exhaustion – nourishing activities that may be important stress management tools as you move forward in your journey.



Mood-boosting nutrition.

What we eat influences our mental and physical health. Therefore – if you have the bandwidth, or if someone is cooking for you over this period – ensuring there are some mood-boosting foods in your diet can help support your wellbeing at this time.

As always, there is no need to be precious about how you eat (food is a source of joy as well as nutrition), but it may be helpful to be aware of the below:

- Avoid too much white sugar as this can cause sharp spikes and drops in your blood sugar – the drastic fluctuations impeding cognitive function and mood.
- Dark leafy greens (kale, collard greens, Swiss chard, spinach, bok choy, rocket) have been associated with a lower risk of depression and psychological distress.
- The cacao found in dark chocolate is tied to improved mood and cognitive performance.
- Avoid too much caffeine (tea, coffee, certain sodas) as it can impact your sleep and its effects mimic a stress response.
- Foods high in magnesium (pumpkin seeds, almonds, spinach, avocado, banana, soy) are thought to play a role in fending off anxiety.
- Omega 3 is important for brain health: that's mackerel, sardines, anchovies, and herring for meat-eaters, and flax seeds, pumpkin seeds, and walnuts for veggies.

REAPPROACHING WORK

If the thought of returning to work is too overwhelming right now, please feel free to leave this section for now and come back to it at a time you feel more prepared.

HOW YOUR EMPLOYER CAN HELP

As you prepare to return to work, discussing some [reasonable adjustments](#) with your employer is likely necessary.

Some of the below measures may already be on the organisation's agenda, but we suggest having a think about what a healthy return to work looks like to you and bringing whatever feels most helpful to the conversation:

- returning to work gradually, for example, by starting part-time
- temporarily working different hours
- performing different duties or tasks
- having other support to do your job. For example, more dedicated support from a manager, regular priority or workload reviews, and outsourcing some responsibilities to a new hire or contractor.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

SEPARATE YOURSELF FROM WORK

It's surprisingly common, how for many of us our sense of identity is intertwined with our jobs. When this is the case, our perceived failures at work can easily become internalised as personal failures – diminishing our self-esteem and often causing us to compensate by working even longer and harder.

As we approach work anew, detaching our personal identity from the job reduces the stakes when it comes to our professional lives and takes some of the more existential pressure off our work. This may require work with a qualified therapist as there can be deep-rooted issues behind how we see our self-worth.

SET BOUNDARIES

Are you, historically, the first person to jump in and help out? Do you find it hard to say no when someone asks something of you?

To prevent us from taking on more than we can handle (and this may be limited in the early days of our return to work), we need to put some boundaries in place.

Whether this is at home or at work, sometimes we simply need to learn to say no. We don't need to give various excuses as to why it's a no, simply saying this is not something you can help with/get involved in at the moment as you have too many other priorities.



PROACTIVELY MANAGE STRESS

As you know better than most, stress isn't something we can ignore and hope it goes away. It requires us to acknowledge it and take steps to alleviate it.

We can proactively manage our stress by practicing self-care. Self-care means any action we take to intentionally bolster our physical, mental, or emotional wellbeing. It's how we re-energise, refuel, and 'fill our cup.'

Different folks will find different activities nourishing and so we've included a mix of self-care activities you may want to consider below.

1. Taking a walk outside.
2. Meditating or practicing mindfulness.
3. Taking a relaxing bath or long shower.
4. Going to the gym or an exercise class.
5. Team sports.
6. Learning something new.
7. Spending time in nature.
8. Cooking and baking.
9. Crafting or creative activities like painting, knitting or drawing.
10. Journaling and creating time for reflection.
11. Giving gratitude; identifying the things we have to be grateful for.

Name a couple of activities that might help you manage stress in the future:

We can also increase our general resilience (to stress and mental ill-health) by doing what we can to stay 'well.' This means eating nutritious meals, getting regular exercise, getting enough sleep, and making time for social connection.

THE FINAL WORD

The road to recovery from burnout can be long and is not always linear. It's okay if you have relapses, where your mental health and energy levels decline again, even after you've started to feel better. Please know that this is entirely normal and, in the end, only temporary – this too shall pass.