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Three components of burnout

Photo illustration by Becky Harlan/NPR Whether working from home or not, many people are feeling burned out during the coronavirus pandemic.

BACKGROUND

- A national survey done on all sectors of health care with 2020 burnout revealed that present health care system contributes to burnout.
- The main reasons behind that are increased workload, understaffing, increasing expectations from patients and families and sensory overload (Canadian Nurses Association & Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, 2020).



A new survey found that nearly 90% of respondents in more than 40 countries felt that their work lives were getting worse during the pandemic. And more than 60% felt that they were experiencing burnout often or very often. Workplace burnout was a growing problem in many professions even before the pandemic. For example, burnout has been common among physicians and health care workers for years. In 2019, the World Health Organization brought some attention to the issue by defining burnout as a syndrome associated with chronic stress at work that goes unmanaged. It's important to address burnout because it has serious consequences for individuals' mental health — it's a risk factor for depression, substance abuse and even suicide. Burnout can also be contagious and often affects entire workplaces. We asked some of the top experts on the topic for tips to recognize and address burnout in oneself and in the workplace. Here's what they told us. Burnout is more than you think. Psychologist Christina Maslach of the University of California, Berkeley has been studying job-related burnout since the 1970s. She says burnout is more than the exhaustion that people think defines the experience. In fact, burnout has three components. One is the exhaustion — physical and emotional — you feel when you've been too stressed at work for too long. But burnout also comes with a feeling of cynicism about work. "You know, it's ... "take this job and shove it" sort of thing," says Maslach. "And you begin to switch from trying to do your very best all the time to do the bare minimum." The third component, she says, is when you start to blame yourself for it. "Thinking, 'What has gone wrong with me?' 'Why am I not good at this?' 'Why can't I handle it?'" Spot the signs of burnout and regain some control. One way to catch the early signs is to make a daily practice of asking yourself multiple times during your workday how you are feeling, says Dr. Jessi Gold, a psychiatrist at the Washington University in St. Louis. "It can even be helpful to sort of note your mood throughout the day," says Gold. "Like, 'Every time I have a meeting with so-and-so, I feel horrible, and then every time I'm with this person or doing this thing, that's where I find most meaning.'" Lack of control is one factor in causing burnout, so knowing those things can help you find ways to reduce the more stressful parts of your job or find ways to buffer the stressful bits with things you enjoy. For people working from home during the pandemic, Gold suggests creating a workday routine like you had when you worked from an office. "Get up at the same time, get dressed," she says. "Sometimes even pretend-commute. So get up, go for a walk, like you would go for a commute." This helps put boundaries between work and life and helps you have some control over your day. Know when you're working too much. A heavy workload is another big risk factor for burnout, says Maslach. "You have way too much to do. You don't have enough resources to actually do the job well. You don't have enough time." As a result, your brain and body are perpetually stressed and after a while are unable to perform as well. So it's important to take breaks, says Dr. Gaurava Agarwal, a psychiatrist and well-being coach with Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine and the director of physician well-being. We need to make sure "we are resting and calming our brain down because brains aren't designed to work this hard, this long, chronically," he says. "And so taking that five minutes in an hour or one day a week to your ability to recuperate is going to be a big part of dealing with that exhaustion." Employers and managers need to address burnout. Workplace culture has a huge impact on burnout, says Maslach. The absence of reward or recognition in the workplace, lack of social support or a sense of community, and the presence of unfairness, bullying and discrimination increase risk of burnout. That's why Maslach and other researchers say that burnout is a systemic issue and that organizations need to take a systemic-wide approach to addressing it. For example, a 2019 National Academy of Medicine report on burnout in the health care industry recommended that organizations address the root causes of burnout, say by making workloads more manageable, by providing incentives for more collaboration and teamwork, and by creating an organization-wide culture where employees feel safe. Agarwal also encourages leaders in workplaces to talk openly and compassionately about burnout, especially now, during the pandemic. "By being transparent, by being compassionate, by showing grief, leadership, what you're doing is you're building the sense that we are in this together and we are going to get through this together," he says. "And we have frankly gotten through difficult times before. So what happens is people start leveraging those experiences. And in some ways, that's the heart of resilience." The podcast portion of this episode was produced by Andee Tagle. We'd love to hear from you. Leave us a voicemail at 202-216-9823, or email us at LifeKit@npr.org. For more Life Kit, subscribe to our newsletter. I. Han S., Shanafelt T.D., Sinsky C.A., Awad K.M., Dyrbye L.N., Fiscus L.C., Trockel M., Goh J. Estimating the attributable cost of physician burnout in the United States. *Ann. Intern. Med.* 2019;170:784-790. doi: 10.7326/M18-1422. [PubMed] [CrossRef] [Google Scholar]2. Simonato G., Simpson S., Reid C. Burnout as an ethical issue in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy*. 2019;56:470-482.



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Stress	X ²	X ² cri α = .05	D
Individual	12.95	12.59	R
Family and future	8.35	12.59	F
Team	2.71	12.59	F
Overall	8.82	12.59	F

Stress	X ²	X ² cri α = .05	D
Individual	3.62	9.49	F
Family and future	4.87	9.49	F
Team	4.07	9.49	F
Overall	2.17	9.49	F

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Burnout measure	M	SD	Min	Max	Minimum	Maximum
Emotional exhaustion	54.8	33.5	30.5	11.7	54.8	0
Depersonalization	30.7	26.0	30.0	0.0	30.7	0
Lack of work satisfaction	38.0	33.3	30.1	16.7	38.0	0
Overall measure	36.4	33.8	33.8	16.7	36.7	0

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