

# The COVID Curveball

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Recognizing and  
Overcoming  
Workplace Burnout



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# INTRODUCTION

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With the rise in remote work this year, some studies have shown that more than 69 percent of employees feel as if they are experiencing burnout symptoms while working from home. Although the American workforce has been craving flexibility in their careers, the COVID-19 curveball pushed this into reality, giving us little time to plot our destiny on our own terms.

Many companies are planning to continue some degree of remote work for the foreseeable future. Our revised reality is here – and here to stay for a while.

For many, working from home may mean working longer hours and our bodies pay the price. We can easily slip into workplace burnout if we are not careful and burnout can have serious consequences for both our physical and mental health.

# WHAT IS BURNOUT?

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Burnout is a type of work-related stress that can lead to a state of physical or emotional exhaustion. It is your body's response to extended or chronic job strain and can cause a series of physical and mental conditions. It can zap your energy and can leave you with a lack of motivation feeling that no sign of relief is in sight.

## Burnout can manifest itself in three ways:

- **Emotionally:** Increased irritability, anger, confusion, or the tendency to feel easily overwhelmed.
- **Physically:** Back pain, neck pain, eye strain, headaches, stomach aches, low energy, feeling tired, or experiencing digestive problems.
- **Feeling ineffective:** You do what it takes to get by, but you never feel as if you are making progress.

## What Causes Burnout?

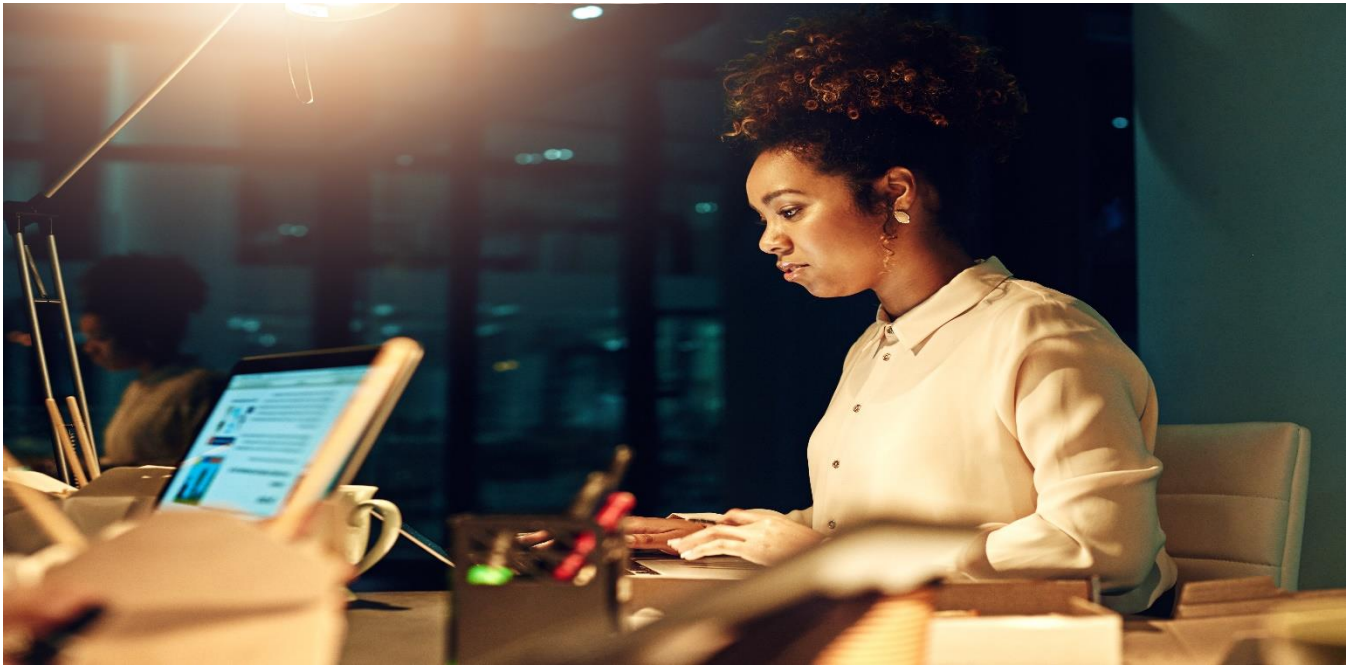
Many factors can contribute to job burnout and those factors will vary from person to person. There are, however, common aspects that can be identified as burnout and stressors at work. Bear in mind that at any point in your career, you can experience one or more of these factors. Most are temporary career setbacks. There is a difference, however, between the exhaustion you feel at the end of a long workday and the feeling of perpetual lethargy.

## Left unchecked job burnout can have significant consequences, including:

- Excessive stress
- Fatigue (Physical or Mental)
- Insomnia
- Sadness, anger, irritability, or mood swings
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes
- Vulnerability to illnesses

# SIGNS THAT YOU MAY BE SUFFERING FROM BURNOUT

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Waking up feeling exhausted, pessimistic, or ineffective rarely happens overnight. Burnout is the result of heightening issues over a set period that generally culminates into a feeling of having reached a breaking point.

Stress will always be inevitable in the workplace, but the more you ignore the stressors in your life, the more likely it is that you will hit burnout.

Like any health issue, the earlier you can recognize the signs of burnout, the better chance you have of recovering or avoiding it altogether.

# MAJOR SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

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## **No control or not having enough control over your work.**

Constant impossible workloads with little or no change in your routine will make you feel ineffective and depleted of your energy. Remember, you should control your work and your work should not control you.

## **Excessive time pressures with no break from deadline to deadline.**

What makes deadline pressures stressful are thoughts about what can happen if we do not meet them. If you miss one deadline, you eventually end up missing your next deadline until it all gets out of hand and you are in continual catch-up mode with no end within reach.

## **Lack of managerial support or a boss who is a micromanager.**

A micromanager will watch your actions closely and provide frequent criticism of your work. When there is someone constantly looking over your shoulder, it is easy to feel that you do not have any control over your job, leaving you feeling unsupported.

## **Lack of clear roles and responsibilities.**

Unclear roles and responsibilities impact work performance because you feel like you spin wheels every day. It is a recipe for confusion. If you do not have a clear direction, it will feel impossible to meet your goals.

## **Poor time management skills.**

Time management skills allow people to organize their work and personal life efficiently without the pressure of scrambling to complete work or sacrificing work quality.

## **Unable to disconnect in your off-time.**

While we all get tired, the constant fatigue associated with burnout is a different feeling altogether. The United States workplace is notorious for encouraging a 24/7 environment. American workers take fewer sick days and less vacation time than workers in many other countries. We even pride ourselves on working crazy-long hours



every day. Our love for technology has made it so that we are connected every moment of our lives. No matter where you are, your work is right there with you in the form of your smart phone.

**Not being able to say 'no,' or saying 'yes' to anything and everyone.** Most of us want to make people happy. Our nature is to make everything turn out well and to create a smooth path in our relationships. We fool ourselves into thinking that we can be all things to all people and constantly saying "yes" to whatever arises will create impossible workloads.

**Chronic fatigue and physical and emotional exhaustion.** The first thing you might notice when you are burnt out is that you are tired all the time. But it is not only your body, you may be suffering from mental exhaustion as well. This sort of mental exhaustion can manifest itself physically and can increase your vulnerability to cold and flu, nausea, and headaches. Learn to honor and listen to your body. Your body tells you much if you take the time to listen.

**Increased pessimism.** You may begin to feel pessimistic or disconnected from your coworkers, friends, and family. Even the most positive people can be left feeling jaded about their environment.

**Making excuses to get out of work.** Are you calling in sick or looking for excuses to get out of work on a regular basis? You can only avoid work for so long before it catches up to you.

**A lack of accomplishment and feeling ineffective at work.** Once your burnout reaches a certain level, you may feel apathy or lazy. You may continually ask yourself 'What's the point of what I am trying to do?' One of the biggest workplace motivators is seeing progress on meaningful work. You will lose your motivation when you feel like you can't make a difference no matter what you do. Frustration and anger over your lack of productivity magnifies into a sense of hopelessness.

# HOW TO COMBAT BURNOUT

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Work can make your body feel exhausted, but burnout consumes your inner spirit and soul.

Burnout recovery starts when you prioritize yourself and your health over the work and relationships that are burning you out. If you want to combat burnout, the first step is to understand the factors that contribute to it. Know pushes you to your breaking point. Without addressing each of these factors, you will always be at risk of burning out.

Burnout does not have to be a life sentence and while it can feel insurmountable, it is your body throwing up signs that something is out of line and needs to be corrected.



## TOP TIPS TO OVERCOME BURNOUT

**Have a specific place designated for work.** If you are working from home, have a designated workplace if possible. When you can have an area allocated to work, it will create some barrier to your private life. If that is not possible, try to rearrange your area to create a small space designed for work and one that feels like a different area than your personal living area. Consider partitions or rearranging your furniture in a manner that creates a private space.

**Track your stressors.** Burnout comes from persistent work stressors. The more stressors you continually have, the higher your risk of burnout. See the worksheet below on tracking stressors.

**Redefine work expectations.** Set and manage a reasonable work schedule. If you are working from home, try to maintain a similar work schedule to what you had before. If you find yourself working 10-12 hours or more a day, you can only sustain that schedule for a certain amount of time without exhaustion setting in. Work with your manager to revisit work expectations and set expectations around response time. If you are that person who responds instantly to emails, they will come to expect it. Instead, set specific and realistic 'office hours' during the day where you'll answer emails and be available for chats.

**Note:** If you are a manager, check-in with your employees and see what you can do to head off having a staff that is on burnout mode.

**Set screen limits.** This is a close cousin to the above. Working from home blurs our work life and our private life. At the end of your workday, log off. If you do not, you will feel as if you are working 24 hours a day. And, stop working on weekends. Do what you can to finish your work during the week. Of course, if you are a freelancer and you have more flexibility in your schedule, weekend work may be suitable. The point, however, is that you need limits so that hours, days, weeks, and months do not run together without some sort of break. If this means coming to an agreement with your boss on response time, so be it. Your private time must stay private so that you are productive during the work week.

**Don't get sloppy with your routine.** Just because you are not going into work does not mean you should give up your routine. Routines help our brains feel good. Rules and structure might seem stifling and burnout-inducing, but the opposite is generally true. An evenly structured daily routine minimizes fatigue, FOMO, and feeling overwhelmed. So, rise at the same time, do not dress in crappy clothes, eat lunch at the same time, and maintain your exercise schedule.



**Reevaluate and update your goals.** When the new year started, you may have had a solid plan with specific goals for the year. Then we were thrown a COVID curveball. Do the goals you set in January still make sense for you today? It is a myth that says goals are set in stone. Focus on progress, not just the end goal. We change and life changes. Goals are meant to be evaluated so make sure they track with our needs. And, if you don't have a long-term plan, focus on today. Concentrate on your small wins and what you can accomplish now but keeps you on a path of growth.

**Fill your “commute” time with a different venue.** Are you able to create an activity that fills in your old commute time? Can you take a walk? Go for coffee? Have something that creates a transition from waking up to diving right into work.

**Limit social media.** Not only are we in a year of a pandemic, it is also a highly emotional election season. Excessive amounts of time on social media or watching the news will exasperate any symptoms of burnout you are already experiencing.

**Keep your health as your top priority.** Alcohol consumption is up and physical exercise has been down during the pandemic. Regular physical activity will help you keep the pounds off, will protect your overall health, and will give you a sense of better mental health. Try relaxing activities that make you happy. Or, explore new regimens that can help with stress such as yoga, meditation or tai chi. Not only will they give you a break from work, regular physical activities will help you to better deal with stress.

**Take your vacation.** Work from home doesn't mean you should not take vacation. Time away from work provides the distance you need to relax and destress.

**Introduce meaningful or fun activities into your life.** What can you do outside of work that will make you feel more excited about life? Find a project that spurs your excitement and reduces boredom. Take time to have fun and give your brain a time to relax. Don't forget to take the time to reconnect with your spouse, partner, or your family.

**Make sleep a priority.** Being well-rested isn't only important for your energy levels—it is critical for overall health. It may be tempting to binge-watch your favorite show till the wee hours of the morning, but studies have shown that our bodies need sleep for our overall health. Be consistent with your sleep schedule and do not underestimate the power of a good night's sleep.

**Find a support network of people you trust.** A social network is a precious resource. While your network can include your close friends and family, it is a good idea to find support with people who might be more familiar with your situation – and outside of work. This could be coaches or mentors —anyone who may be able to help you gain perspective and combat your burnout.

**Evaluate your career options.** Is this something that you can discuss with your boss or Human Resources so that you can work together for solutions? Do you see a way that your job will allow you to be the best version of yourself? Your career should allow you to leverage your strengths so that you can perform at your peak. Temporary downturns can be corrected. If you find that the organization or your role no longer aligns with your values or your interests, you have a decision to make about your future. Look at your long-term perspectives and then ask yourself if you have a hopeful vision that things will change. If the prospects for reviving your career are not positive, it might be time to move on.

**Create a ritual to separate work from non-work hours.** An end-of-the-day ritual is the best way to tell your brain and body that that you are leaving work at work. It helps you relax and recuperate so that the stressors stop compounding. An end-of-the-day ritual might look like this:

1. An hour before your workday ends, take a progress check. What did you cross off the list and what is a priority for the next day? If you take the time to do this at the end of the day, you can start your next day with a clear understanding of what needs to be done. Don't focus on what you didn't do. Remember the progress that you made.
2. Create a sense of personal control by detaching from the workday by signing out of all your work devices.
3. When you have signed out and logged off, spend a few minutes relaxing your mind and body by spending a bit of time alone before you connect with your personal obligations for the evening.
4. Dedicate time – even if a few minutes to something you enjoy every evening. If you have a family that needs you, this might sound impossible. But, certainly, can't you take a few minutes even if it means listening to some of your favorite songs?

**Create a Sunday wind-down practice.** Monday. Moan-day! The very word sends an array of negative emotions scurrying through the hearts and minds of people across the land. Monday has become universally known and accepted as the most depressing day of the week but it also impacts your Sundays. There is a significant mood swing that is experienced on Sunday that wreaks havoc on your weekend.

1. If you have Monday morning work anxiety, be sure to take care of as many dreadful details that you can on Friday afternoon. Clear your desk, review your calendar for the next week, and handle any small projects that are due Monday morning. When you walk into your office on Monday, walk into a clean office with no small tasks hanging over your head. Your only goal at that moment is to grab that cuppa joe and get busy meeting Monday head on!
2. Have a hard stop at 4:00 on Sunday and shut down. By the time 4 p.m. rolls around, make sure everything is complete. Have the house cleaned, your work done, and make it a point to stop checking emails. Just enjoy it. It's time to relax. Maybe this means a special dinner or just opening a bottle of wine and watching a movie, but the important thing is that you stop and

have a smooth Sunday evening. If you work late into the evening on Sunday, you'll never be rested on Monday.

**Don't be afraid to seek out help.** Because burnout can become chronic if left unaddressed, it can manifest itself in other ways that can severely impact your physical and mental health, not to mention putting your professional growth at risk. Being in the middle of a pandemic can only magnify those feelings. You do not have to go it alone. Honor your body and mind. There's no shame in seeking out professional help before you feel too overwhelmed. If you have access to an employee assistance program, take advantage of relevant services that are offered. You do not have to go it alone.



# SELF-EVALUATION

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## Step 1: Self-evaluation

If you are uncertain whether you are facing a period of stress or on the verge of burnout, be on the lookout for these signs. How many times are you answering 'yes' to the below?

- Do you like the person you see in the mirror? YES  NO
- Have you become cynical or critical at work? YES  NO
- Is there something you would rather be doing? YES  NO
- Do you drag yourself to work and have trouble getting started? YES  NO
- Have you become irritable or impatient with co-workers, customers, or clients? YES  NO
- Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive? YES  NO
- Do you find it hard to concentrate? YES  NO
- Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements? YES  NO
- Are you increasingly disillusioned about your job? YES  NO
- Are you using food, drugs, or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel? YES  NO
- Have your sleep habits changed? YES  NO
- Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints? YES  NO
- Do you wake up tired even if you go to bed early? YES  NO
- Are you moving more slowly than usual and taking longer to get ready in the morning? YES  NO
- Do even small tasks feel like they take more energy than you can afford? YES  NO
- Are you dreading what lies ahead today and tomorrow? YES  NO
- Do you feel like nothing you do at work matters? YES  NO
- Is it harder to connect your daily tasks to a meaningful goal or a larger vision? YES  NO
- Does it feel like there is more work than you can realistically do every day? YES  NO
- Are you overwhelmed with responsibilities to the point where you don't want to do anything? YES  NO
- Do you feel sick when Sunday evening rolls around and you know you have to face work in the morning or does every day feel like Monday morning? YES  NO
- Do you have a boss who is supportive? YES  NO
- Do you have a boss who is a micromanager? YES  NO

Step 2: What are your top stressors?

What are your top stressors or triggers that leave you feeling out of sorts? For example, are you faced with unrealistic deadlines or constant interruptions? Perhaps you have a boss who is making unreasonable demands on your out-of-office time. Be honest and list your top stressors.

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2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

Step 3: Thinking about the list above, what would you say most contributes to your burnout at work...be specific?

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Step 4: What would you say are the underlying critical variables that affect your enjoyment of your work? For example, is your heavy workload because you have a demanding boss that believes all people should work a 12-hour day? Or, do you have seasonal upswings that mean longer hours? It is important to know what is temporary and what can be corrected.

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Step 5: What would you say most contributes to your joy at work? It's also important to have a balanced view of work. Know what stresses you and know what you enjoy. This reflection exercise will help you if you think it is best to move on. You'll know what to look for in your next role because you will know what you love and what you want to continue to do.

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Step 6: What could you do differently at to lessen your burnout? Brainstorm as many ideas as possible.

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Looking at the list above, what are the three biggest steps you can take today to lessen your burnout?

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Step 7: Now, What WILL you do differently right now to empower yourself in your current work situation? List the specific actions you will take to minimize your burnout.

1<sup>st</sup> Action:

By when:

How will you hold yourself accountable?

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By when:

How will you hold yourself accountable?

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By when:

How will you hold yourself accountable?

## About the Author

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