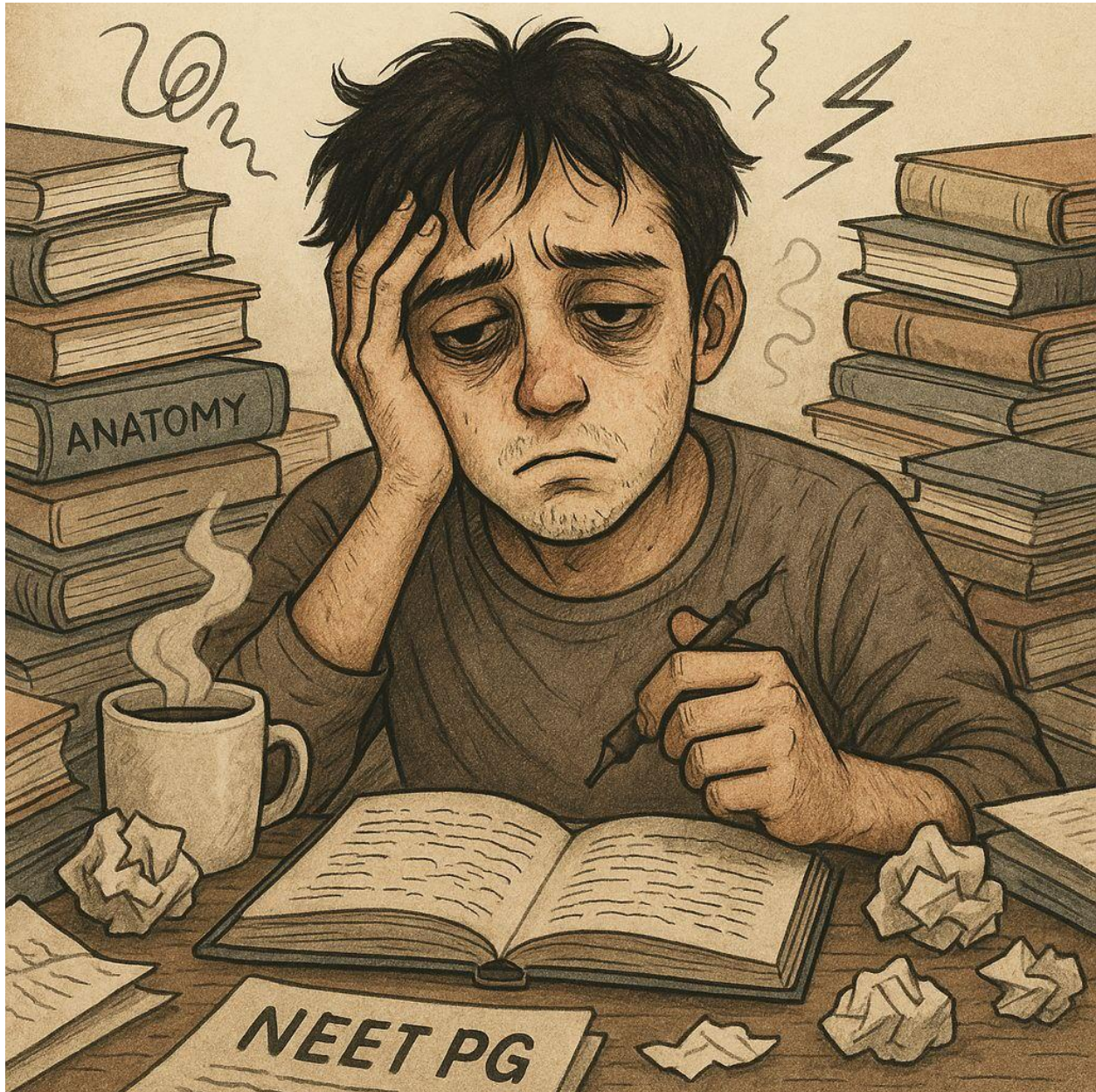


# Shadow Under The Stethoscope: Burnout During NEET-PG Preparation

Preventing Burnout During Your NEET-PG Prep



As my MBBS college times draw to a close with my final year almost halfway through, the friends I made, the horrible vivas we gave, the night spent sleepless (studies and otherwise), all of it leaves my eyes slightly misty. But, something larger and more pressing persists in the back of my mind. And not just me, but of thousands of medical students across the country: **NEET PG preparation.**

19 subjects, an ocean of facts, triads, diseases, syndromes and their treatments. But amongst all of this medical knowledge, a disease quietly slips into the hearts and minds of these future specialists: **burnout**. Worst of all? Very few even acknowledge it, let alone talk about it

Conducted by the National Board of Examination in Medical Sciences (NBEMS), this 200-question, 3-hour-long test is often the deciding factor for many students in their life and career trajectory.

Whether they diagnose diseases looking at stained slides, or perform community outreach programs to the underserved or perform life-saving or life-improving interventions, the rank achieved in this one exam is a major factor in deciding a doctor's method of delivering care.

With such immense pressure on such young shoulders, it is of no surprise that this herculean undertaking is emotionally taxing, mentally exhausting and, sometimes, even physically detrimental.

Other than the NEET-PG exam itself, the societal pressure to be a high-ranker, the personal pressure to be a specialist in a coveted field and, often, possible previous financial struggles, make this examination an even tougher battleground for its aspirants. Its competitive, its bloody, its brutal and its relentless.

All this pressure and competition cause students to become afflicted with a psycho-somatic condition known as **burnout syndrome**. According to the ICD, burnout "is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." It has three dimensions to it:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
2. Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
3. Reduced professional efficacy

## **Causes Of Burnout Syndrome In Medical Students During NEET-PG Preparation**

It is no wonder that our current medical system is stretched to its limits trying to provide for our vast & growing population's healthcare needs. This leads to an ever-increasing demand for specialists who can bridge this widening chasm between demand and supply. And all this comes

to a chokepoint: NEET-PG examination. Let's look at some causes of burnout during this preparatory phase:

- 1) The Massive Syllabus: This exam tests its aspirants on 19 subjects: Anatomy, Physiology, Biochemistry, Pathology, Pharmacology, Microbiology, Preventative & Social Medicine, Forensic Medicine, Surgery, Medicine, Obstetrics & Gynecology, Pediatrics, Otolaryngology, Ophthalmology, Orthopedics, Dermatology, Psychiatry, Anesthesia & Radiology.

The questions range from discrete factoids which have no discernable connections to any other concept, to specific values of biological parameters up until, but not limited to, massively complex clinical scenarios which can be misdiagnosed if the aspirant misses a single statement or finding.

And it does not stop there, as any recent advances in the medical field & updates in management regimens can also crop up as unexpected questions in the paper.

In this regard, there is a tool that can help you in your preparation by narrowing your focus like that of a laser and prevent accumulation of needless facts & stress: **Reflex App** – designed by a doctor for doctors. It provides you with **thousands of PYQs for NEET-PG & INICET**, along with tests series which closely emulate the questions and the recurring patterns in these exams.

- 2) The Sheer Competition: According to the latest NEET-PG data, 2.42 lakh doctors duked it out in this arena in 2025, an increase from 2.28 lakhs from last year. And this trend shows no signs of slowing down as those who did not qualify for a government PG seat are highly likely to try again next year, leading to a further increase in the number of aspirants.
- 3) Limited Number Of Government PG Seats: As of 2025, there are 73,157 post-graduate seats in India. Out of which 33,416 are the sought-after seats in government PG institutes; the rest belong to private institutes where the fees are unattainable for a massive population in the country.  
And the number in coveted clinical branches reduce even further, leading to further competition for an ever-shrinking number of seats in the face of ever-increasing number of aspirants.
- 4) Mock tests: While mock tests are a useful tool to assess your level of preparation for NEET-PG, identify weak points, adjust your strategy to strengthen them & improve your overall scores; some students make these score their sole focus and let them determine their mental health and emotional state. Needless to say this is a very dangerous proposition, especially when your entire career may hinge off this one exam.



- 5) Pedal-to-the-metal approach: Many students begin their preparation for this mammoth task by going for an all-cylinders-firing, pedal-to-the-metal approach, aiming to study for 6-8 hours a day on top of their other curricular and co-curricular obligations. As noble as their intentions are, a large majority of these students end up exhausting themselves before they make any substantial progress. Mainly because they have not built the mental stamina & fortitude required to handle this ocean of knowledge & it's proper application. After that, they end up taking a "break" which can extend itself from a few days to entire months of no preparatory progress.
- 6) Familial & Societal Pressure: A considerable chunk of MBBS graduates are first-generation doctors, hailing from families where they are seen as their financial & generational savior. This pressure to be a specialist doctor, and to complete their PG from a limited number of government seat, places another heavy burden on shoulders carrying the weight of their own hopes and dreams, all of which collides into a massive arena that is NEET-PG.

## Symptoms & Stages Of Burnout Syndrome

This often manifests itself in various psychological and physical ways:

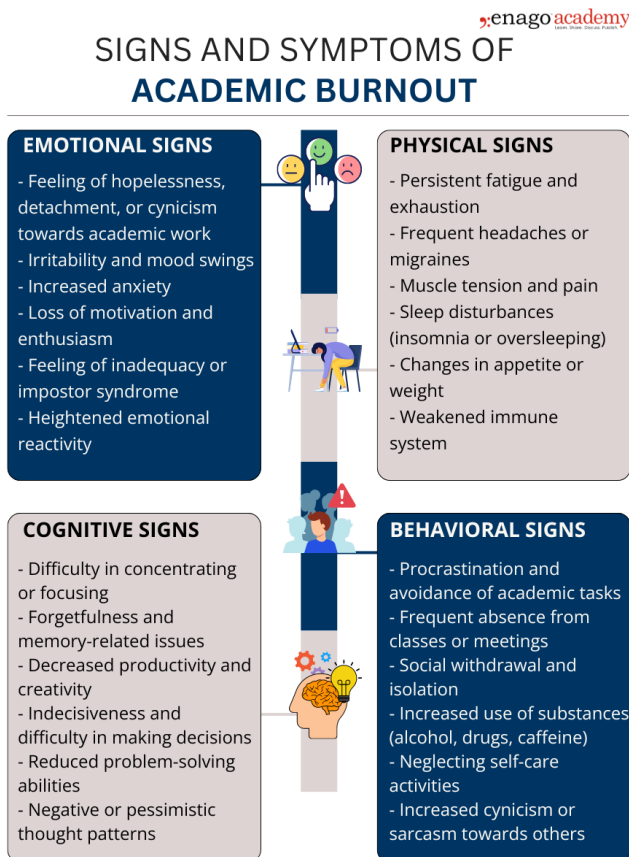
- Persistent exhaustion
- Sleep disturbances such as insomnia or feeling tired even after sleeping
- Headaches
- Muscle pains
- Stomach aches & nausea
- Loss of motivation
- Feelings of disconnection from work and interpersonal connections
- Increased negative outlook/cynicism
- Reduced performance
- Social withdrawal
- In some extreme cases, substance abuse

There are stages to this condition:

- 1) The first stage is characterized by stress arousal (heightened state of physiological and psychological alertness a person experiences in response to a perceived stressor), poor concentration, memory lapses and irritability.
- 2) The second stage shows a state of maladaptive behaviors such as avoidance, tardiness, social withdrawal by not attending classes or ward postings.

- 3) The third stage is marked by further decline in mental state leading to anxiety, depression, apathy, or even suicidal ideation; resulting in the disappearing act, low productivity, fits of rage & difficulties in facing examinations.

If you see someone near you or known to you, please guide them to the interventions outlined further in the blog.



## Prevalence Of Burnout In Medical Students

A study by [Bhugra et al.](#) (2021), conducted to assess the prevalence of burnout in almost 2,900 medical students from 9 countries, including India, revealed a worrying fact that an average 77% of students report feeling exhausted and 77% students report feeling disengaged from their work and academics.

Another meta-analysis by [Almutairi et al.](#) (2022) performed a systematic review on this phenomenon. It drew from 9 different electronic databases to pool the estimates. It showed a prevalence of 38% for feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Older & female students were shown to be at a greater risk for developing this syndrome.

## How Can We Help?

Being medical students, we hear a phrase quite often: “Physician heal thyself.” While this phrase is supposed to evoke a sense of responsibility and service even in the face of personal struggles, this insidious demon is not something one can tackle all on their own. Here are some steps which have been proven to be effective to not only reduce the symptoms of burnout syndrome but also help prevent it from occurring in the first place:

- 1) Developing Mental Resilience: Resilience is defined as “the ability to cope mentally and emotionally with a crisis or to return to a pre-crisis state quickly.” According to a study by [Kiss et al.](#) on Hungarian medical students on protective factors against burnout found that students with higher mental resilience & internal motivation scores showed higher protection against burnout-associated academic performance drop. Some methods to build mental resilience are:
  - a. Practicing meditation and mindfulness
  - b. Embracing small discomforts and gradually taking on bigger challenges
  - c. Practice an acceptance mindset
  - d. Practicing positive thinking and gratitude
  - e. Learn from your past
- 2) Make Time For Your Hobbies: Pick up that dusty guitar staring at you from the corner of your room or watch your favorite season of your favorite show or make that art piece you have been putting off for so long. Whatever makes your mind happy, do that for some time. Life is too long to stay stressed forever, and too short to not stop and take a breather.  
Doing so not only gives your brain respite from being taxed by your academics, but may allow your brain make new connections which may help bridge old & new concepts, making your study process easier & more enjoyable.
- 3) Get plenty of physical exercise: Physical activity has been proven to have multiple benefits for the body: increased cardiovascular capacity, decreases cortisol levels, decrease incidence of hypertension and dyslipidemia amongst a host of other benefits.  
It also has a positive effect on the brain by increasing the level of endorphins, dopamine & serotonin aka happy hormones, which are responsible for the elevation in your mood and reduce stress levels.
- 4) Healthy nutrition and hydration: As medical students, we read about innumerable conditions where maintaining adequate nutritional and hydration status are a major part of the management. Similarly, ensure that you have a balanced diet consisting of food from all food groups: cereals, pulses, dairy, meat (if non-vegetarian), fruits and vegetable. Along with that ensure that you have enough water through the day to maintain focus and keep your hydration on point. Include foods like almonds, walnuts, berries, green leafy veggies like spinach to boost brain function and keep that edge sharp.

- 5) Build healthy connections & interpersonal relations: Having a healthy support system can help you manage stress more effectively, provide a much needed break from thinking about the exam & make you focus on the present, thus grounding you in reality. Not to mention, time with the boys or your girls is the thing you will recall, not which table from which subject you left during your preparation.
- 6) Pace yourself: Remember this, your progress is the only progress you need to monitor. What others do during their NEET-PG prep is not your concern. So learn to take it easy. Break your larger goals into smaller actionable steps, track your progress and most importantly, be patient with yourself. Small, consistent, meaningful progress will take you much farther than yo-yo'ing between a sudden burst of effort followed by a drop in productivity.
- 7) Take breaks: If you ever feel the symptoms of a burnout approaching: stop yourself right there. Remember that you are human. Someone with limits to what they can do without breaking themselves into pieces. Take a dedicated time off from your preparation & use it to recharge your academic, mental & emotional batteries. Use these breaks strategically to give yourself adequate rest and relaxation to attack your goals afterwards.

## Conclusion

Being 'too exhausted to study' is not an excuse; for a lot of people it is a real condition. This burnout can lead to you falling behind in your NEET-PG preparation to become the best possible doctor you can be.

As medical students, all of us face immense pressure in our everyday life & academics. We need to learn how to accept, assess & respond to these stressors in a healthy and productive way. Because we are not only doctors, but also humans with dreams, ambitions and aspirations to fulfil.

If you feel any symptoms or signs coming on, please don't ignore them. Listen to your body. It has evolved over millions of years to give you the best shot at survival.

Listen & adapt to the stresses you face in life. Learn to rely on your loved ones, friends, peers & know when to ask for help.

Strategize effectively keeping all variables in mind to ensure that you are not stretched beyond your limits. Use apps such as Reflex to hammer in the most asked questions & volatile topics to ensure that you are as sharp as the scalpel you will wield to cut through the competition.

It would be an understatement to say that NEET-PG is a tough examination. But there are ways to make it easier & bolster your chances of cracking through this bulwark of competition. And it all starts with you.

If you can remember one thing from this blog, let it be this: **IT'S A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT.**