

# 12 Signs of Burnout: How to Tell and What to Do About It

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Burnout is than just stress. It's not a recognized medical condition but rather a syndrome of symptoms caused by unmanaged work-related stress. Unfortunately, it is becoming a more familiar part of our working landscape. It tends to be more common among healthcare professionals and teachers.<sup>1</sup> In a 2023 Work in America survey, 57% of workers reported symptoms associated with [workplace burnout](#).<sup>2</sup>

Learn more about burnout in this article, including how to spot its signs and symptoms and recover from it.



## What Is Burnout and How Bad Is It?

### Common Signs of Burnout

Below are some of the most common signs and symptoms of burnout, which can help you determine if you or someone you care about is experiencing it.

#### 1. Exhaustion

Exhaustion is one of the most recognized symptoms of burnout and is considered the "core" of the syndrome.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Feelings of Dread and Lack of Motivation

You can also feel a sense of dread and demotivation associated with your work (or school, or caregiving) when you're burned out.

According to the Work in America survey, 26% of workers in the United States don't feel motivated to do their very best, and 18% have a feeling of being ineffective.<sup>2</sup>

## 3. Your Mind Wanders

You may find your mind wandering while you're at work, making focus and completing your assigned tasks difficult.

## 4. Difficulty Sleeping

Burnout can also affect sleep quality. Sleep and burnout may have a bidirectional relationship, meaning that it can make sleep quality poor and that poor sleep quality can lead to burnout.<sup>7</sup>

[Improving your sleep](#)—through strategies like mindfulness and sleep hygiene—could help with burnout symptoms.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Inconsistent Appetite

Your appetite could also be a sign of burnout. You may find yourself skipping meals and having no appetite at all, or you may be mindlessly eating comfort foods, even when you're not hungry.

According to one study, frequent consumption of healthy foods—like low-fat dairy, vegetables, fruit, berries, and white meat—was associated with lower levels of burnout.<sup>8</sup> However, it's unclear whether following a healthy eating pattern prevents burnout or burnout itself leads to less healthy eating habits.

In either case, it seems that there is an association between burnout and the food we eat, so a change in your eating habits could be a sign of oncoming burnout.

## 6. Cynicism and Irritability

Cynicism and irritability are important symptoms of burnout.<sup>3</sup> You may think negatively about your work or be more irritable. According to the Work in America survey, 19% of American workers experience irritability or anger with their co-workers and customers, which is a sign of burnout.<sup>2</sup>

## 7. Feeling Useless

Feeling useless is another sign of burnout. Burnout affects your efficacy at work, or in other words, your ability to get the work done.<sup>3</sup> It can lead to a vicious cycle of feeling useless and like you can't do anything right.

## 8. You're Depressed

Burnout and [depression](#) have overlapping symptoms, such as impaired concentration and loss of interest in what you're doing.<sup>9</sup> Studies have also found a strong correlation between burnout and depression, meaning that these two conditions often occur at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

## 9. Frequent Headaches

Headaches are another possible sign of burnout. In one study of 3,406 participants, 65% of participants with burnout experienced frequent headaches. This was compared to 41% of those who did not have burnout, making headaches a possible physical symptom of this syndrome.<sup>11</sup>

## 10. Gut Pain

Gastrointestinal (gut) symptoms can be physical signs of burnout. In the previously mentioned study of 3,406 participants, the following gut symptoms were reported among people with burnout:<sup>11</sup>

- 64.5% had stomach pain
- 57.2% had constipation, loose bowels, or diarrhea
- 63.5% had nausea, gas, or indigestion

In all cases, this was significantly more than the participants who did not have burnout, indicating that stomach symptoms could be a sign of burnout.

## 11. Turning to Other Comforts

When you feel burned out, you may turn to other comforts as a coping mechanism. These comforts aren't always healthy and could include reliance on alcohol, drugs, comfort foods, overexercise, and more.

## 12. Vision Changes

Changes in your vision are a possible sign of burnout. According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, stress over a long period can raise the [intraocular pressure](#) (the pressure inside the eyeball) and lead to vision symptoms such as:<sup>12</sup>

- [Blurred vision](#)
- Dry eyes
- Eye strain
- [Eye twitching](#)
- [Floaters](#)
- Light sensitivity
- [Tunnel vision](#)
- Wet eyes

# Burnout vs. Depression: Are They the Same Thing?

A significant difference between burnout and [depression](#) is that burnout is related to overwork and stress, whereas depression can affect all areas of your life. Burnout and depression are different, but they do have some overlapping symptoms, including:<sup>1013</sup>

- Extreme exhaustion
- Feeling down
- Reduced performance

Burnout is not a medical condition but rather a syndrome that occurs when you are chronically stressed at work.<sup>3</sup>

Depression, on the other hand, is a serious mood disorder that affects your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

It's possible to have burnout and depression at the same time, but it's also possible that burnout could be misdiagnosed when you really have depression, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Getting an accurate diagnosis is essential to getting the most helpful treatment.

## How to Recover From Burnout

Recognizing that you're experiencing burnout is the first step toward recovery. Below are suggestions for recovering from burnout.

### Rethink Your Screen Time

[Excessive screen time](#) is bad for your health and increases symptoms of depression and lower self-esteem.<sup>14</sup> For people with burnout, screen time may also be linked to overworking—whether working on the go or monitoring work emails to come in at all hours of the day.

Setting boundaries and consciously reducing screen time may help with burnout symptoms.

### Focus on Self-Care

Self-care practices can be an essential tool for dealing with burnout. People who are burned out are often asked to do too much in their workplaces without enough thought given to their emotional health.

Try to carve out time outside of work for things that make you feel better and more like yourself, such as hobbies, time with loved ones, rest, or exercise.

### Take a Break

Taking a break can be one of the most powerful tools in recovering from burnout. These work factors often trigger burnout:<sup>15</sup>

- Conflict with supervisors or co-workers
- Emotional labor
- Poor working hours, such as long shifts, night shifts, or overtime
- Role conflict and ambiguity
- Unrealistic overload of work

Taking a break from work—whether that's quitting overtime work, taking a one-week vacation, or taking a multi-month sabbatical—can all help you cope with the effects of burnout.

## Be Open to Change

Be open to change in your work and home life. Burnout is not usually a problem with you as an individual; it's a sign of a systemic issue in your employment. Sometimes, the best thing you can do for your health is to leave the environment that is causing you burnout and find a new working environment that will foster your mental health.

## Talk With a Mental Health Professional

Consider talking with a [mental health professional](#) about your experience with burnout. Even though burnout isn't considered a medical condition, it can significantly impact your quality of life and contribute negatively to your mental health. A mental health professional can help you develop coping skills and ways to relieve stress.

## How Long Does Recovering From Burnout Take?

The length of time recovering from burnout takes depends on whether you're still exposed to the environments and expectations that caused the burnout in the first place. Recovering from burnout takes longer if you're still in an environment that is overworking you.

## Summary

Burnout can be challenging to identify because it's become common in American working life. Signs and symptoms range from exhaustion and lack of motivation to headaches, blurry vision, and gut problems. If you're struggling with burnout, consider talking to a mental health professional so you can rule out the possibility of depression. A mental health professional can also help you develop coping strategies and next steps for recovering from burnout and returning to feeling like yourself.