

We're here to teach you how you can recover from a state of burnout. We'll provide you with three goal-based tactics to shift your motivation and get on the path to burnout recovery as soon as possible. The recovery plan includes three steps, best remembered by the 3 Rs: **Reorganize, Reframe, and Rebalance**.

- **Step 1:** Reorganize your goal hierarchy to see why you do what you do
- **Step 2:** Reframe the way you approach (vs avoid) your goals
- **Step 3:** Rebalance the types of goals to have more "want-tos", less "have-tos"

As always, these methods are based off of established academic research. Our team of PhDs have gone through a number of papers in the psychology and neuroscience fields. The recommendations come from theories on the psychology of goal-setting, motivation, self-control, and willpower.

## How to know when you're in need of a burnout recovery plan?

Job burnout is a real problem nowadays. Job stress costs the U.S nearly **\$300 billion** a year through employee turnover, decreased productivity, absent employees, as well as medical, legal and insurance fees. It's estimated that over **46% of employees** have experienced or are currently in a state of job burnout.

We can all agree, then, that burnout is dangerous (both in terms of personal well-being and business success). So, first question is: **How do you know if you're burnt out?** What does that even look like?

It's common to feel tired after a long day, or to feel you need a couple extra days off after a month-long sprint to a deadline. But constantly being tired, feeling emotionally drained, having a lack of enthusiasm about the work you're doing, and feeling cynical could be signs of something more serious.

The term burnout was coined in the '70s by **Dr. Herbert Freudenberger** and since then, researchers say it can be broken down into three components:

- **Exhaustion**

- - Characterized by feelings of being overextended, feeling emotionally drained, having trouble sleeping, getting sick more often, struggling to concentrate.
- **Cynicism**
  - - Categorized as a lack of engagement, indifference or distant attitude towards your work.
- **Inefficacy**
  - - Characterized by a lack of belief in your ability to perform your job well. This is also a measure of your satisfaction with past and present accomplishments and predicts a decrease in achievement and productivity.

To begin your journey towards burnout recovery, take this [\*\*scientifically validated burnout test\*\*](#) to see where you lie.

- Scores < 21 indicate low levels of burnout
- Scores 22- 43 indicate medium levels of burnout
- Scores > 44 indicate higher levels of burnout

Whether you're at risk for job burnout or overcoming it, this plan is for you (even if it's for a later time down the road). **The 3 main signs of burnout mentioned above (exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy) are best dealt with through three steps of goal-setting tactics.** These help shift your motivation and realign your purpose to get you back on track:

- **Exhaustion recovery = Reorganizing your goal hierarchy**
  - - Setting up your goals efficiently will give you a clear indication of where to focus your energy.
- **Cynicism recovery = Reframing your approach/avoidance goals**
  - - Determining whether you have an approach or avoidance mindset and learning how to mitigate this is key to changing a cynical mindset.
- **Inefficacy recover = Rebalancing your want-to vs. have-to goals**
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- Finding the balance between things you want to do vs. things you have to do is essential upping your motivation.

You're probably wondering, **“what do my goals have to do with burnout recovery?”**. Effective goal-setting underlies the fundamental aspect of your motivation and keeps stressful situations at bay. If you don't set goals in positive, attainable ways, it will take us into a cycle of stress and negative emotions, hindering your decision-making, breeding a lack of creativity, and eventually making you feel mentally exhausted and burnt out.

Many of us are aware of the importance of goal-setting in terms of productivity, but now with this framework you'll learn how you can take advantage of attainable goal-setting to aid your burnout recovery.

## **Step 1: Exhaustion recovery = Reorganizing your goal hierarchy**

Emotional exhaustion is thought to be the first manifestation of burnout. Reaching this stage you may feel as though your emotional resources are being depleted. This will lead to feeling worried and dissatisfied and could develop into you dreading your daily activities rather than thriving on them. **When this happens, we tend to distance ourselves from our stressors as a means to cope.**

**Here are some of the burnout symptoms and signs of exhaustion:**

- Chronic fatigue
- Insomnia
- Impaired concentration/ forgetfulness
- Loss of appetite
- Anxiety
- Increased illness
- Physical symptoms
  - Chest pain
  - Shortness of breath
  - Dizziness
  - Gastrointestinal pain
- Depression
- Interpersonal problems

Getting to this point is scary **because you become more focused on avoiding losses rather than achieving gains.** So, losing resources is more likely to cause burnout than gaining resources is to mitigate it.

This idea comes from the conservation of losses theory in psychology. The research suggests this arises because of our bias toward giving a larger weight to negative events than positive ones. In fact, **work demands** (negative aspects of your work) are strongly related to emotional exhaustion whereas **work resources** (positive aspects of your work) are not. In other words, while the negative aspects lead to burnout, the positive aspects don't necessarily protect you against it. Your emotional resources aren't going to be replenished through the positive, but they will be depleted through the negative. **Therefore, dealing with the negative aspects head on is going to be far more beneficial here than simply using positive "band-aid" fixes.**

So this looks like getting rid of some of the negative aspects or extra tasks that are leading you off course. Goal research (called the "**entropy model of uncertainty**") explains that as the number of obstacles in the pursuit of your goal increases, the level of uncertainty and inefficiency increases. You want to drive down uncertainty and inefficiency to ensure that you aren't filling your time with unnecessary tasks within these goals in order to minimize your emotional exhaustion. **It starts by creating and organizing a goal hierarchy.**

When creating your hierarchy you want to have your major goal at the very top of the chart, followed by layers of subgoals. See the image below. As you move down the chart, be sure to get more and more specific about the tasks that need to be done in order to attain the major goal. This will take some thought. Be sure to include every single task you need to complete with the major goal having a greater number of possible behaviors and situations, and the bottom layers of subgoals affecting the smallest subset of situations. As you can tell, the major goal will influence a larger part of the experienced world compared to minor goals which deal with various and specific actions closer in time.

Below is an example of what your chart could look like. Don't limit yourself to the number of levels and sub-goals you see in this graph as they will differ with every goal.

Once you have finished organizing your goals in this way, take a look and make sure they are all as specific as possible. Remember, there shouldn't be any additional steps you're taking to complete your major goal. EVERYTHING should be listed. This will give you a birds-eye view of all the steps you need to take to ensure your major goal is likely to be achieved.

With your hierarchy constructed, the next thing to do is to **find the inefficiencies**. Is there a faster path to that major goal? Are there any steps you can take out? Research shows that if you don't find the most efficient path to your goal, you could increase uncertainty and anxiety which increases likelihood of goal failure. Pinpoint all the unnecessary steps and be sure the line running from all your subgoals to the top major goal is as direct as possible.

The last thing you should do is **determine your perceived attainability** of your major goal and each subgoal (how likely are you to complete that task/ achieve that goal?). If you have low perceived attainability for your major goal or any higher-level subgoal, this will also increase the possibility of not reaching your major goal. This will lead to greater inefficiency and expended energy which can take you on a trip to emotional exhaustion.

Remember this sequence for Step 1: Organize the hierarchy → find the inefficiencies → determine task attainability.

An efficiently organized goal hierarchy with attainable steps is the first step to burnout recovery. The next steps ensure that this recovery is lasting and generalizable.

## **Step 2: Cynicism recovery = Reframing your approach/avoidance goals**

Cynicism is thought to develop because the depletion of your emotional resources leads you to have an overly negative impression of things. **You start to distance yourself from stressors in order to cope**, which then leads to disengagement and feelings of doubt/distrust. Here are some of the burnout symptoms of cynicism:

- Pessimism
- Isolation
- Lack of motivation

- Loss of enjoyment
- Detachment
- Feelings of meaninglessness

Again, going back to the conservation of losses theory, when you reach the point of cynicism you are more concerned with avoiding the negative rather than gaining positive. In this state, "losses loom larger than gains" and you begin to see the world around us as traps of possible punishment rather than opportunities of possible reward. This way of thinking is detrimental as it can have a negative effect on our motivational dispositions for avoiding losses and approaching gains — playing an important role in burnout. **It comes down to your two major systems of motivation.** They include:

**Approach motivation (promotion focused):** This system seeks rewards and goals and is generally associated with feelings of well-being. Essentially these people 'play to win' and are motivated by the presence or absence of positive outcomes. There is evidence of this in clear patterns of brain activity: There is greater activation in the left-frontal part of the brain for approach motivation and approach behavior.

**Avoidance motivation (prevention focused):** This system is associated with avoiding the negative. It is sensitive to threat, punishment, failure **and is generally associated with burnout**. These people don't play to win but rather they play to *not* lose and are motivated by the presence or absence of negative outcomes. As you may have guessed, avoidance motivation and behavior is associated with greater right-frontal activation of the brain.

This idea is known as the approach-avoidance motivation theory and is rooted in primitive and potentially unconscious decision-making processes. **These two systems (approach vs. avoidance) are thought to have evolved separately and are regulated by two different brain systems — behavioral activation system (BAS) and behavioral inhibition system (BIS), respectively.**

From an evolutionary perspective, there is value for both of these systems. The approach system (BAS) is essential for growth whereas the avoidance system is necessary for directing us away from danger (BIS). The avoidance system is only really beneficial in the

short-term and is involved with lower task involvement and enjoyment, suggesting a relationship with cynicism.

Some researchers believe these systems are more trait-like in that you have a predisposition to use one system more than the other, and there is no way in changing that. However, more recent research has suggested these systems are more state-like, in that they are amenable to change depending on the situation and training. In other words, **burnout recovery happens because of the brain's plasticity function: Moving from right-frontal activation (avoidance) to left-frontal activation (approach)**.

**Cynicism recovery happens by reframing the motivational system into one that is more approach driven — versus avoidance driven.** You can do this in the following way.

Take that same list of goals that you put together for the first tactic and lump them into approach focused and avoidance focused tasks. See the table below for how to split up each type of goal.

Once you have done this, it is time to reframe any of the avoidance-based goals into approach-focused goals. See the table above for an example of how to change avoidance-focused goals into approach-focused goals. Research has shown that simply reframing your avoidance-focused goals into approached-focused ones leads to less procrastination and promotes success and excitement for the tasks at hand.

Now keep in mind that you may look at your list and think that some of these goals would be better off to remain in the avoidance-focused category. That's ok, but it will require an additional step. You will want to set implementation intentions for these goals in order to avoid the possible negative consequences of the avoidance.

To set an implementation intention, you are going to give details about how to solve the problem by giving specific details. This intention is structured as follows:

**IF** {situation} **THEN** I will {behavior}

Plan (with intention) the actions you will take when the situation arises. For example, "if my startup falls below a certain threshold in



expendable revenues, I will reach out to investor X, investor Y and investor Z. I will deliver X pitch and I will do it within X number of days.”

Avoidance goals are generally more difficult goals, and you see them as more unlikely to attain so setting these intentions increases the likelihood that you will reach your goals.

### **Step 3: Inefficacy recovery = Rebalancing your want-to vs. have-to goals**

Inefficacy was originally thought to be the final stage of burnout. However, there is some evidence that suggests it might develop in parallel to the other dimensions. This stage involves feeling inadequate. **You start believing that you're unable to complete your work.** You have a lowered sense of what you can accomplish and how much you can accomplish. Here are some of the burnout symptoms of inefficacy:

- Lack of productivity
- Declining performance
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Increased irritability

How do you get to this point, and how do you get out of it?

Psychology can help us explain this through theories of self-control and willpower. Self-control (or what we sometimes call willpower) is the ability to override thoughts and emotions so that you can vary your behavior from moment-to-moment. Some researchers believe that self-control is based off of limited resources which become exhausted after use. This means that the more you stop yourself from eating ice-cream, the harder it will become throughout the day to resist any future temptations, leading to more personal failures and feelings of inefficacy.

**However, more recent science is suggesting that you fail in your abilities of self-control not because you are unable but because you're unwilling.** Rather than you having a finite willpower resource that is depletable, the revised theory – which is called the process model of self-control – **says that a failure of control is due to a lack of motivation and an imbalance in goals.** Most important, whereas the



initial depletion theory leaves little in the way of change, the process model is the opposite: you can alter these internal states.

**Here's how it works:** initial instances of mental effort (i.e. "have-to" tasks; e.g. working to meet a deadline of a task you aren't proficient in) lead you to prefer instances of leisure or more rewarding activities (i.e. "want-to" tasks; e.g. scrolling through social media).

**When you fail in your self control (scroll through social media before you've met your deadline) it's because you're motivated to keep an optimal balance between have-to and want-to tasks** — in this case there are too many have-tos. If you lack this balance, you'll be more likely to fail which leads to feelings of inefficacy. **The way to resolve these feelings, and to recover from burnout, is to find the ideal balance between your have-tos and want-tos.**

Let's go through a little organizational activity you can perform to ensure balance of want-to and have-to goals throughout your day. As the theory goes, when you work hard at Time 1, it leads to less control on 'have-to' tasks at Time 2. However, this is improved if you are motivated to perform the Time 2 task or if you enjoy the Time 1 task. Therefore, performance on a task tends to suffer after completing a task for too long, but returns to normal when we've been rewarded by our efforts. **Meaning, motivation and changes in task framing, moderately deplete and reduce future failures of self-control.**

With this in mind, we're going to go back up and look at your goal hierarchy (from Step 1). At each level (starting from the bottom) you are going to rank each task based on your motivation toward them. Are these tasks enjoyable (want-to tasks), or are they obligatory and requiring more mental effort (have-to tasks)?

Once you have done this, look at the balance between these two different kinds of tasks. If there are more want-to tasks, then you're in a good spot! Remember, you stay motivated with want-to tasks. If there are more have-to tasks, then what you should do is create a small list of want-to tasks that you'd like to do throughout your day until you have roughly the same number of each. Remember, you're trying to accomplish your goals while avoiding a lull in motivation, therefore these want-to tasks are preferably related to your goals. However, they can also be short mental breaks doing simple,

enjoyable things like going for a walk, grabbing a coffee, scrolling through social media for 5 minutes, etc.

Now that you have an equal number of want-to and have-to tasks at each level of your hierarchy, alternate these tasks with each other so that for every have-to task, you follow it with a want-to" task. You should rank the have-tos based on priority and try to get higher priority tasks finished first. This shift in organization will help you get work done while minimizing any lack of motivation. If you are having any feelings of inefficacy, this will get you back on track by adding value and productivity to your day. You will be operating with **greater efficacy** in the tasks you do because you will be successfully exercising your self-control.