

Avoiding Burnout

There are 24 hours, 1,440 minutes, 86,400 seconds in each day, yet there never seems to be enough time to get everything done!

Sound familiar? Attempting to balance study, work and other activities is always a challenge. There's a strong chance of burnout when you have loads of competing demands.

Burnout is something almost everyone faces at some time. Its main symptom is a feeling of powerlessness that brings inertia and even despair. The best cure is taking action!

What is burnout?

Burnout is a condition that can evolve slowly over a period of prolonged and gradual stress. When it begins to occur, a cycle can be detected. If you're on the road to burnout you'll often start to feel exhausted. This might be due to excessive demands that are self-imposed or external ones, like family, jobs, study, friends, value systems or society.

What can happen?

Burnout depletes your energy and sense of coping. Your immune system can start to break down and, because of fatigue or illness, you need more sleep and energy. Your ability to meet these demands can suffer. For instance, you may feel too tired or ill to attend classes or complete assessments on time. Eventually your motivation, attitude and behaviour are impacted, leading to possible anxiety and/or depression.

What are the signs?

Burnout doesn't just happen overnight – it is a cumulative process with small warning signals along the way, which, if left unattended, may develop into a more serious psychological concern.

Signs of burnout can include:

1. An intense compulsion to prove (strive for control).
2. Withdrawal from others, observable behaviour changes.
3. Depersonalization, emptiness, depression.
4. Exhaustion.
5. Denial – estrangement from own feelings.
6. Stress, anger, frustration, irritability, neglected needs, moodiness.
7. Guilt and low self-esteem.
8. Interpersonal problems.
9. Health problems – colds, flu, sleep problems, headaches.

10. Possible substance abuse in attempts to self medicate the increasing anxiety and depression.
11. Declining study or work performance.
12. Feelings of meaninglessness.

Who is most at risk?

People who are in nurturing roles, caring for others in their family/work, or who are isolated and feel a need to fill their lives with others to feel accepted and valued, can be at particular risk for burnout. People who are perfectionists or who are struggling with issues of their own identity may also be at high risk.

How to beat it

Coping successfully with stress is the key to avoiding burnout. The most common functional methods include:

1. Being realistic – developing a realistic picture of yourself and setting realistic goals.
2. Knowing what you're feeling and why.
3. Recognising your individual symptoms of stress and burnout.
4. Asking for help when it's needed.
5. Developing a structural and personal support system, e.g. a supportive routine and friends you can go to when needed.
6. Maintaining an active personal/social life outside of study.
7. Taking 'time-outs' when you need them.
8. Maintaining a regimen of proper nutrition and physical exercise.
9. Developing self-therapies, such as meditation or relaxation methods to regularly discharge stress and anxiety.
10. Learning to say "no" to additional demands on your time and emotions.
11. Reassessing your values and pacing yourself.

How to prevent it from happening at all

For any uni student, good preparation is the best key to preventing burnout. A planner or timetable can help you see where your time goes and how you balance social activities with work/study related tasks. Include eating, sleeping and having fun as important things to do.

When trying to balance all the demands on your time, step back and assess how workable things are and what can be delegated or eliminated.

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Want to chat to someone?

For a confidential – and free – chat about your general situation, please contact our ECU Psychologist, or the Psychological Counselling Support Team service to make an appointment at any of our campuses.

Alternatively, you can discuss study techniques and tips with a Learning Adviser in our Academic Skills Centre.

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