

Avoiding Burnout

Counselling Service Tip Sheet



“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 extracurricular activities is a challenge and students are now more at risk of burnout than ever before due to ever increasing and competing demands.

Burnout is something almost everyone faces at some time. Its chief symptom is a feeling of powerlessness that brings inertia and even despair. Its chief 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. Individuals on the road to burnout often start to feel exhausted as a result of excessive demands, which may be self-imposed or external, such as demands from family, jobs, study, friends, value systems or society. This then 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 and 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. 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.

What are the signs?

It is important to look out for the signs of burnout and take control before it takes hold. 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's, 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 meaningless

Who is most at risk?

Those who are in nurturing roles, caring for others in their family/work or those 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. Those 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. Recognizing 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.

See also our tip sheet on Managing Stress.

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.

See also our Tips for Successful Time Management.

If you feel you may be heading for burnout or in the midst of a burnout slide, ECU Counsellors are available to help you talk things through and develop your options.

References

More information is available from:

- Counselling Tip Sheet: Managing Stress
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Balancing Life and University
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Tips for Successful Time Management

Acknowledgements

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

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