

Playing with *fire*

IS AN OVERLOAD OF WORK
OR STRESS DRIVING YOU
TOWARDS BURNOUT?

According to the American Institute of Stress, up to 77% of people regularly experience physical symptoms of stress, with 73% regularly experiencing psychological symptoms. It's no wonder modern society feels like this – we're continually pushed to excel in our careers and have Pinterest-worthy family and home lives while juggling a multitude of tasks and chores. So where does this leave most people? Burnout, the physical and/or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress, is plaguing society, leaving men and women feeling constantly fatigued, overwhelmed, exhausted (both emotionally and physically), and depressed. Life's problems, which are usually easily navigated, suddenly become insurmountable, everything looks bleak, and it's difficult to find the energy to care for or help yourself. Manifestations that all contribute to the high amount of anxiety and depressive disorders are reported to be on the rise. While symptoms may be similar to those experienced during stressful situations, burnout occurs over a longer period of time and may culminate in a health disaster such as a panic attack or suicidal thoughts.

Contributing personality?

Marléne Nunes, a life coach and physical fitness professional based in Cape Town, says burnout risk factors can be a combination of career, lifestyle and personality characteristics. The latter can contribute to how you experience and internalise stress, making you more or less predisposed to burnout. 'People with perfectionist tendencies, people who are "pushers" and "people pleasers", are ideal candidates for burnout,' says Marléne. They tend to take on too much, they can't say no or must do everything themselves, leading to a life that's packed to the brim, and leaving no breathing room or space to just be. Similarly, pessimists and those who tend to have a negative outlook are also geared towards experiencing symptoms of burnout.

Marléne adds that trauma, especially childhood trauma, can also play a huge role in how individuals adjust to stress. 'In fact,' she continues, 'in any destructive behaviour – like pushing yourself towards burnout – there's often a story behind the action, a fear that drives the individual towards this behaviour. People form beliefs about themselves around experienced emotions borne from a specific event or series of events, and take these formed beliefs through into adulthood. It's almost like a survival instinct.'



Symptoms of burnout

Psychologically, burnout presents in a variety of manners, usually under three umbrellas, and is mostly experienced as an emotional state of disillusionment, depression and disconnect:

- **Emotional exhaustion**, where deep fatigue and feelings of being emotionally drained and overwhelmed become all consuming.
- **Depersonalisation**, where a loss of self and identity takes over.
- **Diminished personal accomplishment**, where a loss of confidence and competence in what you usually enjoy or were good at becomes less appealing

Physically, illness and depletion of your immune system are possible side effects. Or you might feel ill and achy for no medical reason.

How do you know whether you're suffering from burnout? Do you struggle with the following:

- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty getting up in the morning, feeling constantly exhausted
- Have difficulty falling asleep at night, even though you feel tired
- Lack of libido
- Over eating, especially high-sugar, processed foods and caffeinated drinks
- Lack of self-care
- Incoherent speech (all of a sudden)
- Lack of interest in social events or friendship groups
- Substance abuse
- Anger – internalised or open
- Feelings of depression
- Irrational behaviour
- Physical aches and pains
- Inability to handle seemingly normal, simple tasks that may be viewed as immense obstacles

While you may be encouraged to talk with your healthcare professional, medical examinations and tests may bring up no physical results, leaving you bewildered as to why you feel so emotionally and physically run down.

Burnout triggers

The American Institute of Stress points to job pressure as the number one stress factor for individuals in the US, closely followed by financial pressures, health, relationships, and even media overload. Marlène adds that competitive working environments and peer pressure are also triggers for burnout, while 'coping' with life changing events and continuing as 'normal' can also put undue stress on individuals. In fact, she continues, burnout is often triggered by an accumulation of events and experiences, traumatic and emotional that, like an unsorted filing cabinet, can fill a person's psyche until it reaches maximum capacity, with just one more added piece of paper causing the whole thing to explode. 'When we disconnect from our emotions, especially if they're too painful to handle, we go into

survival "freeze mode" (I feel nothing, I am shut down),' explains Marlène. 'This can culminate in individuals reaching a breaking point where the burnout hits and causes them to snap, so to speak – whether in an emotional breakdown or aggressive outburst.'

From a life coach perspective, Marlène adds that burnout can also occur when individuals work towards a certain life goal, only to discover that this isn't aligned with their true values and beliefs. While chasing a high-end career, for example, you can lose yourself along the way, becoming fatigued by your daily routine if it no longer fulfils your life purpose or values. This disconnection can be extremely stressful, and is why so many successful people end up collapsing or losing everything they've accomplished.

Take back control

So if you think you may be suffering from burnout or you're at breaking point as a result of an exhausting career combined with an extremely busy home life, and relationship problems on top of everything, what should you do to take back control and minimise the stress factors?

'Firstly, being aware that something is wrong is a good place to start,' says Marlène. From here you can begin exploring the triggers that might be causing your burnout. 'Knowing what triggers the behaviour is a key element to work through. What beliefs are at the

heart of the behaviour: "I am not good enough/smart enough/rich enough. I can't let them down. I have to keep going." These are all things we say to ourselves to continue pushing ourselves,' explains Marlène. Learn to manage your stress or to change the stressful situation, especially if it's part of your workplace. Re-evaluate your priorities and adjust your life accordingly; find coping mechanisms that work for you, whether it's with the aid of a therapist or life coach, or discovering what truly makes you happy and letting go of the rest.

5 tips to avoid burnout

SELF-CARE: Take time out to look after yourself and prioritise your happiness.

DELEGATE at home and work, to make your busy schedule seem more manageable.

LEARN TO SAY NO.

ASK FOR SUPPORT when you need it.

LOOK AFTER YOUR HEALTH AND WELLBEING: ➤ Exercise regularly as a stress reliever and mood booster. Embrace practices such as yoga or pilates to restore balance and harmony. ➤ Support your mood and motivation by eating a healthy diet to sustain your energy levels, instead of looking for quick-fix solutions in caffeine and sugar. ➤ Turn to mindfulness and find joy in daily activities, to reduce stress in the moment. ➤ You might opt to go the medical route or seek alternative therapies to help you cope. ➤ Above all, be accountable and take responsibility for your own happiness.

Contact Marlène at info@selfandmore.co.za for integrated trauma healing. Marlène is also a tension, trauma and release (TRE) and quantum energy coaching (QEC) provider.