

Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Services

Advice and guidance

Burn-out



Coventry City Council

www.coventry.gov.uk/ohsw

Introduction

Burn-out is a psychological term for long-term exhaustion, rather than a formal medical diagnosis. Stress and burn-out are separate variables.

Symptoms can include:

- Exhaustion
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Lack of concentration
- Irritability
- Frustration and anger
- Cynicism
- Detachment
- Loss of confidence
- Depression
- Loss of interest in social activities

Who experiences burn-out?

Anybody can suffer from burn-out although it is more prevalent in the caring professions and teaching.

Some contributory factors leading to burn-out

Everyone is essentially an individual, therefore, there will be differences in how one experiences burn-out. The amount of stress we need to be productive and the amount of stress that causes us to be unproductive can be as individual as our own personalities. However, there are some core elements, which can lead to it:

- Consistently feeling that there is a no-win situation
- Lack of recognition or being valued by others
- Isolation at work (perceived or actual)
- Value conflicts (i.e. money versus service delivery)
- Role conflict (idealism versus reality)
- No clear objectives
- Overwork (although in some cases not delegating and time management could be factors)
- Low job satisfaction
- People who have perfectionist traits may be more at risk
- Work/life imbalance

If causal factors are not dealt with at an early stage, the individual is most at risk of burn-out when they experience all three of the following symptoms.

- 1 The person becomes chronically exhausted, physically and mentally.
- 2 A sense of cynicism and negative detachment from work.
- 3 A feeling of ineffectiveness and devaluing one's own work.

What can be done about burn-out?

The emphasis should be on prevention, so recognising the early signs of stress is important. Often we do see these early changes in ourselves but choose to ignore them, thinking they will pass. Sometimes we will rationalise, by saying to ourselves, "I have always been able to do this before", or see others as coping and question, "Why can't I".

Discuss stress related to work with your manager or line manager. If they are not made aware of your issues and stress, then they won't be able to help you.

Sometimes, individuals are reluctant to open up because they feel they will be judged as “not coping.” In fact, it is in the interest of the organisation to support and retain its employees, which is why we have a stress policy in place.

Listen to other people

Often people project an image, which does not match their inner turmoil. However, people who know us well such as partners, friends, and close colleagues may be the first to notice signs of withdrawal and apathy. They may also be recipients of our increased frustration and anger.

Making changes

We can all identify times when we have said “Yes, but”, which is a common defence mechanism because situations seem so complex and unchangeable, however, by not addressing issues can mean that looking at strategies for change does not happen either. A way forward is to look realistically at what you do at work and see what changes you can make to improve your situation. Changes do not need to be major to make a difference even small steps can have a significant impact on morale. This can then be a springboard to becoming more proactive about taking further decisions to improve the situation.

Another problem might be that some individuals may have set extraordinarily high standards for themselves. They may be very self critical and therefore feel they may lose their identity by conceding even to themselves that they are struggling to cope. Preserving one’s own health is sensible, positive and not in any way a sign of weakness. Not addressing signs of burn-out at an early stage only leads to a downward spiral in health, resulting in time off work and other consequences.

Work life/balance

Look at work and home because stress at work can impact on home life and vice versa and aim for a better work/life balance. The reality is that there are jobs where taking work home is a fact, but working beyond early evening means it is more difficult to disengage the mind, thus affecting the ability to relax and sleep.

Reframe your sense of self so that you don't allow your professional or work role to consume your energy to an unhealthy level. Develop outside interests and thus be able to switch off from work is a much healthier way of being.

Take the opportunity to discuss how you feel with a counsellor. The Occupational Health and Counselling Unit provides a confidential service. Our team of professional counsellors is knowledgeable about the organisation and the types of stresses employees experience and can offer advice and strategies to move forward.

You should also seriously consider a visit to your GP if you feel you are exhausted to the point where you are struggling to cope.



Further information:

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