

Societal pandemic burnout: A COVID legacy

Burnout is what happens when you have reached your limits mentally, emotionally, and physically. With billions of the world's populations now in lockdown as COVID-19 sweeps the globe, burnout is still very much around—but it looks a little different right now. Coping with a pandemic can feel overwhelming and exhausting and leave you feeling drained or anxious or perhaps even both.

Many have lost jobs, while those lucky enough to keep them have to do so while working in the confines of home, some simultaneously balancing family pressing needs, such as childcare. Daily life has been completely uprooted, and now, we juggle a constant onslaught of dilemmas we have never dealt with before: Should I disinfect my groceries? Are cardboard packages safe to touch? Can I hug my kids?

The response to COVID-19 is a marathon, not a sprint. Physicians and other health professionals are desperately needed during the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also represent one of the populations at most risk of burning out as they are experiencing surges in care demands, equipment challenges, ongoing risk of infection, physical isolation, longer hours, increasing stress levels, and an extreme risk of burnout.

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Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Burnout in the course of dealing with a pandemic can make you feel emotionally drained and unable to function in the context of many aspects of life. Burnout can lower your motivation and cause you to feel helpless, hopeless, and resentful.

It may appear to show up suddenly during the recent weeks of dealing with the social isolation brought on by the pandemic. Most of us are no strangers to stress and anxiety; however, when this is a sustained event, it can be overwhelming—especially in a pandemic, where there is a high level of stress being prolonged over a period of time without respite or opportunities to carry out the simple tasks of normal life.

Simply put, burnout shows up when you are exhausted because of excessive and prolonged stress.

Some signs of burnout include feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, lacking energy, empty and unmotivated, and unable to meet your daily demands. You may feel an increase in irritability, notice increased conflict in your relationships, or feel like you want to crawl into your bed and never get out. You feel stuck, exhausted, and hopeless.

This may even be accompanied by physical symptoms—they may have back aches, headaches, and maybe even a loss of appetite. Sleep might be disrupted, and you may become reclusive even during social distancing. You may have difficulty getting things done, and you may be struggling with working from home. Your confidence may be affected, and you may feel like you cannot cope. This is in addition to feelings of helplessness—like there is no way out of this situation.

We have to first be aware that we are becoming burned out as this can creep up on an individual. One way to reduce the potential for burnout is to reach out to others rather than withdraw. Here are some tips regarding its identification and mitigation:

- It is important that we have a strong social network to call on and people to talk to when we are going through difficult times. While you have to socially distance, there are many virtual methods to connect.
- Connect with family, friends, and work colleagues. Working from home and socially distancing does not mean being alone.
- While working from home, it is important to try to socialise with co-workers, so you do not feel isolated. Those “water cooler moments” at work are more important than you might think.
- Exercise is also important to boost energy and mood. Doing some cardio, waking, or even weight training or other exercise activities can help to lighten the mood.
- Try to find something in the work you do that you feel is interesting and helps you gain more of a purpose and value. This can be quite helpful in giving people hope and helping them to become more engaged at work.
- Eating healthy is also an important way to stay healthy, mentally and physically, and can prevent burnout. A balanced diet, eating more fruits and veggies, minimising sugars, and reducing foods that can

negatively affect your mood such as alcohol and caffeine, particularly if consumed in excess, can help minimise the effects of burnout.

- It is also important to note that, if it seems that it is more than burnout that is being experienced, and it has progressed into a mental disorder such as a mood or anxiety disorder, it is important to seek professional help.

We all experience stress during crises. When stress builds up, it can lead to feelings of extreme exhaustion and being overwhelmed, also known as burnout.

Signs of burnout	Tips for sustaining your well-being and preventing burnout
Experiencing feelings of sadness, depression, failure, helplessness, or apathy	Meet your basic needs—eat, drink, and sleep regularly
Becoming easily frustrated	Take breaks—pace yourself and take appropriate rest (to do something comforting, fun, or relaxing)
Blaming others or feeling generally irritable	Stay connected through regular check-ins with your colleagues, family, and friends
Feeling disassociated, indifferent, or apathetic	Support your colleagues through regular peer consultation, mentorship, and collegial support

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Isolating or disconnecting from others, even virtually	Communicate—clearly and in an optimistic manner
Practicing poor self-care	Respect differences—recognise that some people need to talk, while others need to be alone, and recognise these differences
Feeling tired, exhausted, or overwhelmed	Stay updated—rely on a few trusted sources of information. Limit your media exposure
Using negative coping strategies	Avoid negative coping strategies such as excessive intake of caffeine, sugar, alcohol, or drugs

In summary, it is important to watch the early warning signs of career burnout, such as feeling withdrawn, sleep disruption (either sleeping too much or too little), loss of appetite, low mood, and feeling somewhat helpless in the situation. If you start to see some of these signs, put the strategies in gear and start working toward a healthier balanced lifestyle to prevent it from becoming worse.

Remember, practicing good self-care will do wonders for many facets of your life, both during work and home life—which today often take place in the same environment.

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