

The Difference Between Stress and Burnout

A Recent Study



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In 1974 Herbert Freudenberger coined the term *burnout*. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) reached a milestone, officially classifying it as a medical diagnosis, including the condition in its *International Classification of Diseases*, the handbook that guides medical providers in diagnosing conditions. It describes burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Three symptoms can help you recognize it: “feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”

The Difference Between Stress and Burnout *

It appears that burnout is now officially a chronic workplace crisis, which the COVID pandemic exacerbated. I don’t need to reiterate here the impact the pandemic has had on healthcare and veterinary workers; rather, I want this important article and the recent research to help us understand the crucial difference between stress and burnout. NEXT week I’ll outline some ways that managers and leaders in veterinary and healthcare can alleviate some of the pain impacting our organizations.

First, we must recognize that burnout isn’t the same as stress and that those experiencing burnout can’t cure it by taking an extended vacation, slowing down, or working fewer hours. Stress is one thing; burnout is a totally different state of mind. Under stress, you still struggle to cope with pressures. But once burnout takes hold, you’re out of gas and you’ve given up all hope of surmounting your obstacles.

When you're suffering from burnout, it's more than just fatigue. You have a deep sense of disillusionment and hopelessness that your efforts have been in vain. Life loses its meaning, and small tasks feel like a hike up Mount Everest. Your interests and motivation dry up, and you fail to meet even the smallest obligations.

Here are the primary signs:

- Disillusionment/loss of meaning
- Mental and physical fatigue and exhaustion
- Moodiness, impatience, and being short-tempered
- Loss of motivation and a reduced interest in commitments
- Inability to meet obligations
- Lowered immunity to illness
- Emotional detachment from previous involvements
- Feeling efforts are unappreciated
- Withdrawal from coworkers and social situations
- Hopelessness, and a helpless and depressed outlook
- Job absenteeism and inefficiency
- Sleep deprivation
- Foggy thinking and trouble concentrating
- Surveys show that more than 60 percent of work absenteeism is attributed to psychological stress and stress-related burnout. According to a 2018 survey, 40 percent of 2,000 employees said they were considering quitting because of burnout. Experts estimate that burnout translates into a loss of anywhere from \$150 to \$350 billion annually for U.S. businesses. That's a chilling statistic for any manager, especially in a tight labor market: that your employees can't put their best foot

forward and out of desperation cut corners, call in sick, or quit—all in an effort to survive burnout.

New Research/2020 Is Work Stress the Driving Force Behind Burnout?

- "The most important burnout symptom is the feeling of total exhaustion—to the extent that it cannot be remedied by normal recovery phases of an evening, a weekend, or even a vacation," [said researcher Christian Dormann](#), who led a study at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. "To protect themselves from further exhaustion, some try to build a psychological distance to their work, that is, they alienate themselves from their work as well as the people associated with it and become more cynical."
- The results of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz study questions the common notion that work stress is the driving force behind burnout. The research team analyzed 48 longitudinal studies (a total number of 26,319 participants) of burnout and work stress from 1986 to 2019. The sample was mostly comprised of males (44%) with an average age of 42 years from countries around the world.
- The chicken-and-egg findings show that stress and burnout are mutually reinforcing. However, contrary to popular belief, burnout has a much greater impact on stress than vice versa. "This means that the more severe a person's burnout becomes, the more stressed they will feel at work, such as being under time pressure, for example," said Dormann. "Employees suffering from burnout should be timely provided with adequate support in order to break the vicious circle between work stress and burnout."
- The results challenge the common perception that work stress causes burnout. "Burnout can be triggered by a work situation, but that is not always the case," Dormann points out. Once burnout begins, it develops gradually, building up slowly over time. Ultimately it leads to work being increasingly perceived as stressful: The amount of work is too much,

time is too short, and stress is too great. "When exhausted, the ability to cope with stress usually decreases. As a result, even smaller tasks can be perceived as significantly more strenuous," explained [Christina Guthier](#), the first author of the article. "We expected an effect of burnout on work stress; the strength of the effect was very surprising," she noted.

This research has implications for how major organizations address job stress and burnout. The researchers suggest that when employees feel like they have a degree of control over their work and receive support from colleagues and superiors, the effect of burnout on work stress potentially can be minimized. What can companies do to break the chicken-and-egg cycle and reduce the effects of burnout on work stress? The researchers suggest the place to start is with how managers run their teams. It's important that employees have the opportunity to give feedback to the higher-ups at any time and that management heed their call to provide adequate time for employees to recover from this cycle to mitigate the downward spiral.

NEXT WEEK: How managers and leaders in veterinary and healthcare can alleviate some of the stress and pain impacting our frontline workers.

References

Christina Guthier, Christian Dormann, Manuel C. Voelkle. (2020). Reciprocal effects between job stressors and burnout: A continuous time meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, DOI: 10.1037/bul0000304

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* Article Excerpted from Psychology Today: The Surprising Difference Between Stress and Burnout. A new study shows how to avoid getting caught in the chicken-and-egg cycle. [Bryan E. Robinson Ph.D. The Right Mindset](#)