



TEN QUICK TIPS

- 1 Notice early warning signs.** Watch for the first signs of burnout including fatigue, lack of enthusiasm, and feelings of cynicism at work.
- 2 Get advice.** Seek the advice of co-workers not bothered by the same conditions as you.
- 3 Is the job a good fit?** Ask yourself if your job is too challenging, or not challenging enough?
- 4 Get a life away from work.** If your self-esteem is too dependent on your success at work, when business cycles take a fall, you will too.
- 5 Your input matters.** Ask your boss to be included in discussions that concern how your work gets done.
- 6 Get some control.** Seek out a level of control commensurate with the amount of responsibility you have.
- 7 Get a hobby.** Do something in your spare time that is completely different from what you do at work.
- 8 Consider a change.** If your job is jeopardizing your health, threatening your safety, or compromising your values you may need to change jobs.
- 9 Increase your outlets for reducing stress.** Exercise, meditate, practice yoga, and try deep breathing.
- 10 Develop a social support network.** Foster lasting personal and professional friendships.



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Burnout & Job-stress

*Learning how
to avoid
burnout and
eliminate
job-stress*



What you need to know...

Burnout is an occupational hazard that affects all industries at every level from the mail room to the board room. Some people burn out because *they* are not adept at handling stress, some people burn out because their *occupation* is stressful, and others burn out because their *working environment* is stressful.

Dr. Christina Maslach, the researcher who helped coin the term, calls burnout “the erosion of the soul.” Workers suffering from burnout tend to withdraw from their jobs and become cynical about what they do. They feel ineffective, powerless, and chronically exhausted.

In her book *The Truth About Burnout*, Dr. Maslach contends that organizations unknowingly foster burnout. She believes that when one or more of the following conditions exists in an organization workers wind up suffering from burnout. These six conditions are: **work overload, lack of control, inadequate compensation, breakdown in community, unfair treatment, and conflicting values.**

Work overload. Companies often try to cut back their workforce and increase the workload on those remaining. Sometimes this results in an increase in productivity. But other times this strategy backfires, especially when the workload is too great or when productivity is emphasized at the expense of quality. When these conditions exist workers tend to burn out.

Lack of control. You need to have a certain amount of control over how you perform your job. For example, when a customer complains to you about something your company did poorly, you should be given the authority to correct the problem. This empowerment strategy is good for business and it's good for you. It makes the customer happy to avoid a lot of red tape, and it makes you feel more in control of the situation. But when your hands are always tied by company

policy, you feel powerless, and eventually you simply stop caring.

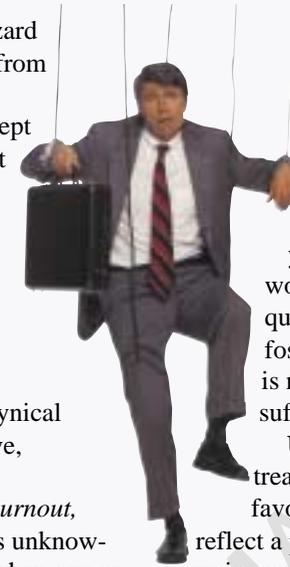
Inadequate compensation. If you don't feel adequately compensated for your services your productivity and interest in your job are going to diminish.

Breakdown in community. When you don't feel a part of a community at work your enthusiasm for what you do quickly wanes. Sometimes team-building is fostered in an organization, and sometimes it is not. When it isn't worker morale generally suffers.

Unfair treatment. Everyone wants to be treated fairly. But in some organizations favoritism runs rampant, and salaries don't reflect a person's years of service. This can be a major source of burnout.

Conflicting values. In certain cases, burnout is the result of doing things at work that conflict with your own sense of values. For example, a vegetarian probably shouldn't work in a meat-packing plant. Usually though the source of conflict is much more subtle than that. When a demanding boss expects you to reach certain sales quotas “no matter how you do it,” or when company policy forces you to restock items that have been returned slightly damaged, you may feel like you're being dishonest. If these value conflicts occur often enough, burnout is going to be the result.

These are some of the many ways your working environment can cause burnout. But sometimes burnout is the result of your own inability to cope with stress. This explains why two people, working under the same conditions, will disagree about how stressful their jobs are. But if *you* are the one having trouble coping with stress, (the good news is) there may be someone sitting right next to you who can teach you how to handle it better. On the other hand, if enough of the factors we listed above are present - your job may be impossible for *anyone* to cope with.



What you might ask...

What are the symptoms of burnout that I should watch out for?

During burnout your energy turns into exhaustion, your involvement turns into cynicism, and your efficacy turns into ineffectiveness. You begin to care less and less about your job. As your burnout worsens you notice stress-related symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, and chronic fatigue. These symptoms can lead to stress-related disorders such as high blood pressure, migraine headaches, and gastrointestinal problems. You may also feel anxious, depressed, and have trouble sleeping.

What are the most common sources of job-stress?

Having *too much to do and not enough time to do it* is the number one cause of job-stress. Other frequently mentioned causes of stress at work are: conflicting demands for your time (having two bosses), feeling like you're always putting out fires and not working to a plan, decisions made by upper-level management without any input from below, and having too many meetings.

I've heard that burnout occurs in stages.

What are they?

In the book, *The Work Stress Connection*, authors Robert Veninga and James Spradley describe the five stages of burnout. The first stage is called The Honeymoon Stage when you don't mind putting in the long hours. The stimulation and newness of your job blind you to any discomfort. In *stage two* you begin to notice that your body just isn't performing like it used to. The long hours start to wear thin and you're not sure why. In *stage three* you start to experience stress symptoms such as exhaustion, increased hostility, depression, or anxiety. You may resort to over-the-counter medications for headache, upset stomach, or diarrhea. In *stage four* your stress-symptoms reach a point where you can no longer ignore them. Chances are you see a doctor. You may find you have some stress-related disorder such as migraine headaches, high blood pressure, or chronic colitis. Your situation at work dominates your

consciousness. In *stage five* your problems overwhelm you to the point where you are virtually non-functioning. You are a walking time-bomb. You may have severe problems with alcohol, or drug addiction, gambling, extramarital affairs, and other forms of escapism. Your very survival is in jeopardy.

My co-worker is dealing with all the same problems at work (and at home) that I am and seems to have no problem coping. How does she do it?

Everybody has a different stress profile. Some of us just seem to be more hardy when it comes to handling stress. Sometimes it's best to acknowledge your stress profile and seek a profession that is more appropriate for your personality. A highly stress-sensitive person who loves publishing might be better off working in a library, for example, than working for a printer. Other times, we need to improve our coping skills so we're more adept at handling stress. You may have a co-worker who isn't bothered by certain things that bother you because he or she sees them differently. Get that person's point of view the next time you have a problem. See how he or she would have handled it. Social support such as this is one of the most underrated ways of handling stress.

Are some jobs considered more stressful than others?

Yes. Here are the top ten. 1. Police, 2. Inner-city school teachers, 3. Air traffic controllers, 4. Firefighters, 5. Medical interns, 6. Assembly line workers, 7. Waiters and waitresses, 8. Customer service reps, 9. Security traders, 10. Newspaper editors. Generally, the amount of control vs. the amount of responsibility you have is a major factor in how stressful your job may be. For example, an ER nurse is probably going to experience more stress than an ER doctor because she is likely to have less *control* over patient outcomes.



What you can do...

Here are six ways to avoid job-stress and burnout.

1. Cut back excessive hours. There is a proven correlation between excessive overtime and burnout. Working too many hours causes inefficiency and fatigue. A person caught in this situation now has to work *even more hours* to catch up. This vicious cycle can quickly lead to burnout. If you think this is happening to you, force yourself to cut back.

2. Get a personal life. When work is fulfilling and challenging we sometimes put our personal life on hold. But when conditions at work change (let's say you get transferred to a new department, or a recession hits) your lack of personal life may leave you particularly vulnerable to burnout. For that reason, and many others, you must have a life away from work. Find things to do (and people to do it with) that contrast what you do at work. Foster intimate relationships that prop you up when the chips are down.

3. Seek more control over your job. If you're the one who is in charge of keeping the supply cabinet stocked it should be your decision when to reorder - not your boss's. So consider telling your supervisor: I'll take on more *responsibility* if you give me more *control*. The more control you have over the things you do - the less likely you are to burn out.

4. Get organized. Lack of organization is a major source of underlying stress. Since no business makes money based on how organized its employees are, these skills are seldom emphasized. But when you work from a clean desk, keep your files well organized, and your car tidy, you'll be amazed at how this positively affects everything that you do.

5. Develop a comfortable morning routine. Part of being organized is having a comfortable morning routine. When you jump out of bed after realizing you've overslept, gulp down a cup of coffee, and consume a doughnut while speeding to work you've pretty much set the tone for the whole day. On the other hand, if you get up just a half-hour earlier, enjoy a good breakfast, and arrive at work at least a few minutes early you'll be amazed how different your day can be.

6. Ask yourself: Am I being appropriately challenged by my job?

Too little challenge leads to boredom and disinterest. Too much challenge leads to anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. Look to maintain a healthy balance between these two extremes. When the problem is too little challenge - take on some added responsibility, or tackle a new project that stretches your own limitations. If the problem is too much challenge - ask for additional training, or see if you can get some help.

Remember job-stress and burnout are serious problems. Job-stress can make you hate your work and burnout can make you sick. Sometimes you can solve these problems by doing some of the things we have outlined above. But other times the only solution is to find a better supervisor, better working conditions, higher salary, nicer coworkers, and/or a company that reflects your individual values. Consider these options carefully and do what's best for your long-term health.

