



Burnout

People are **three times more likely to drink alcohol to try to cope with stress than they are to go and talk to their GP.**

Stress is an inescapable part of 21st-century life. But what do you do when life has thrown so much at you that you feel at real risk of not being able to carry on under such pressure?

What is burnout?

Burnout is a physical and emotional syndrome that occurs when your body and brain simply cannot continue under the level of stress you have been under. It is important to remember that stress is much more than something 'all in your head'. In fact, stress is a complex combination of physiological, neurological and hormonal responses that help you adjust and react to the challenges and demands you face in your day-to-day life.

Burnout is characterised by symptoms of exhaustion, as your energy reserves begin to run out. Physically, you may feel symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems or muscle weakness. Emotionally, burnout is often experienced as emotions feeling closer to the surface than normal: little things feel overwhelming and you may find yourself over-reacting to things that usually wouldn't have bothered you. You may also struggle to react and respond, either finding it hard to empathise or care about the struggles of others you are supporting, or not finding enjoyment and pleasure in things you usually love. For some people, it comes to a crisis point where they are just not able to continue (sometimes referred to as a breakdown).

Another important characteristic of burnout is that it triggers very negative feelings about yourself, your impact and the work you do. Sufferers may feel useless, ineffective and frustrated – it's important to recognise that these feelings are part of the condition and are unlikely to reflect reality.

What causes burnout?

Burnout is generally caused by simple maths: more to do than any human can manage long term. However it's important to note that although difficult or traumatic times are more obviously stressful, neutral – or even positive – times can trigger a lot of stress too. Significant changes in your personal, family or work life can require big adjustments, and we must not underestimate the impact such events can have in terms of stress.

One factor strongly associated with burnout is that of empathy. Empathy involves understanding and sympathising with the emotions and experiences of others, and some people are more naturally or instinctively



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empathetic than others. Research suggests that neurological circuits involving 'mirror neurons' may be involved in empathy, suggesting that we do not just witness the emotional pain of others but actually experience something of it ourselves. This may explain why some people, particularly those in caring professions who experience very powerful empathy, may be particularly at risk of burnout.

Can it be treated?

The treatment for burnout is as simple as it can be frustrating: rest. Alongside this, talking therapies and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in particular can be useful, helping those who are more prone to problems with stress identify patterns of thinking which may fuel troublesome emotions, such as anxiety and worry. They can play a significant role in moderating stress.

What about faith?

Faith is an interesting issue where stress and burnout are concerned, as some may think that faith should protect people from such things. However, churches are busy places and Christians can be particularly at risk of stress and burnout, as many juggle lots of additional responsibilities on top of their work and family life. God-given passion can be a powerful drive and we may run the risk of pushing ourselves too hard and failing to schedule adequate rest.

It's important to note how central rest is to the way we were designed 'in God's image' (Genesis 1:26). Genesis 2:1 tells us what God did after creating the world: 'By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested.' This same pattern became one of the Ten Commandments handed out to Moses (Exodus 20:8-10). The commandment to rest isn't an afterthought: in fact it comes fourth, before such things as 'you shall not murder' and 'you shall not commit adultery' (Exodus 20:13-14). God also reminds his people of this important commandment regularly, for example Exodus 31:13 and also Exodus 34:21, with a particular note that this is important 'even during the ploughing season and harvest'.

It seems God was right to remind us: particularly in the often frenetic 21st century we seem to forget our need to rest. And yet even Jesus, God in a human body, was not above this very human need. He regularly – in fact 'as often as possible' (Luke 5:14) – took time out to rest and connect with God. He also reminded the disciples of their need to attend to their basic needs, such as to eat (Mark 6:31).



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⇒ Helpful links:

Check out Refuel by Kate Middleton, one of the team at Mind and Soul. This helpful, accessible book looks at the particular challenges for Christians of managing stress - balancing the pull of our passion with our need to rest:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/balance-work-life-faith-church>

There's also a website and blog to accompany the book:

⇒ <https://refuel1211.blogspot.co.uk>

Mindfulness is often mentioned as a great skill to learn in managing stress. A Book of Sparks is a fantastic book about Christian Mindfulness. Here's an article written by the author, Shaun Lambert, about stress:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/stress-lets-make-some-noise>

Compassion fatigue can be a big part of burnout - but do we understand what it is? This article looks at the difference between compassion and empathy, exploring why empathy can be linked with stress:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/can-you-care-too-much>