

Documentary Investigates the Causes and Ramifications of Stress-Related Burnout

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Around the world, burnout due to excessive work stress is becoming an increasingly pervasive problem, affecting people from all walks of life, thanks to changes taking place in the modern workplace
- › Employees are expected to work at a much faster pace than previously, while having to put in longer hours and/or being closely monitored and evaluated based on performance metrics, any or all of which can make work stress unbearable
- › Preventing burnout is a lot easier than recovering from it. Strategies to reduce work stress and recover from burnout are discussed

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Unless kept in check, stress can wreak absolute havoc on your life, undercutting your health and depressing your very will to live. Around the world, "burnout" is becoming an increasingly pervasive problem, affecting people from all walks of life. Being successful per se will not insulate you from burnout. On the contrary, it may actually raise your risk.

"The Day I Snapped" is a mental health documentary featuring five professionals who walked into the proverbial wall one day, "suddenly" unable to cope any longer. However, as noted in the film, while the crisis may appear sudden, that moment when a person "snaps" is really the culmination of an untenable situation that has been going on for a long time.

Why the Modern Workplace Promotes Burnout

The five individuals in the film suffered burnout due to work-related stress, which is the most typical scenario. But what is it about the modern workplace that pressures people beyond their limits? Key factors highlighted in the film include:

1. People are expected to work at a much faster pace than previously, while frequently having to put in longer hours and/or being closely monitored and evaluated based on a variety of performance metrics. In some workplaces, the pace is so high, they cannot even take a proper lunch break. As noted by one of the individuals in the film, it is the "having no choice in what you do" on any given day that "makes the stress unbearable"
2. Job duties are changing (and expanding) more frequently than before, and when combined with poor direction or guidance from management, it can cause a great deal of uncertainty and performance anxiety
3. Many jobs for which people are trained are being eliminated, thereby preventing many from fulfilling their skill-potential. This, in turn, can breed unhappiness and feelings of worthlessness
4. Deteriorating social support at home and at work

Are You Headed Toward Burnout?

In the U.K., work is the third leading cause of stress, trailing right behind bereavement and financial woes. In the U.S., work ranks second on the list of sources of significant stress.¹

According to the film, nearly 7 million working days are lost each year in the U.K. to stress-related illnesses² such as skin conditions, insomnia, heart disease, memory impairment, digestive problems, autoimmune disorders and depression, just to name a few. In reality, just about any ailment or disease can be triggered or worsened by stress. Symptoms of burnout include but are not limited to:³

- Physical exhaustion, signaled by chronic fatigue, insomnia, forgetfulness, impaired concentration, inattentiveness, physical illness and loss of appetite
- Emotional exhaustion, a "feeling of internal collapse," loss of perspective, detachment, irritability, frequent anger, loss of enjoyment, pessimism, increasing isolation, apathy and hopelessness
- Reduced performance and productivity despite best efforts, loss of self-esteem, feeling like a failure
- Depression

Frequently, people on the road toward burnout will turn to alcohol or other addictive substances in an effort to prop themselves up to avoid the inevitable. Sadly, one of the most serious side effects of burnout is suicide. **If you are feeling desperate or have any thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a toll-free number: (800) 273-TALK (8255). Alternatively, call 911 or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.**

Preventing Burnout Is Easier Than Recovering From It

If you recognize the warning signs of burnout in yourself or someone you care about, remember this: Preventing burnout is a lot easier than recovering from it. Recovery usually takes time – six months or more is not uncommon. The five professionals in the film all eventually recovered, through a variety of different means, which highlights the need to be flexible enough to identify your unique needs.

Just as the circumstances that brought you to a crisis point will be unique, so will your recovery. That said, some basic guidelines can be given (see below). A key point that may initially be difficult to accept is that you need to change how you live. The way you've been living so far does not work, and merely taking a few weeks off, only to return right back to it, is rarely going to suffice.

For the featured professionals in the film, all of whom suffered "executive burnout" or burnout brought on by chronic work stress, part of the answer was a change in

profession. For three of them, this involved going into business for themselves and doing more physically demanding work, as opposed to working in an office.

How to Reduce Work Stress and Prevent Burnout

If you feel you might be headed toward the proverbial wall, please consider addressing the situation before you break down completely. Psychologist Sherrie Bourg Carter, Psy.D., offers the following advice for those struggling with work stress.⁴ I've also added some of my own suggestions.

- **Take inventory** – Write down all of the situations that trigger stress in your life: situations that make you feel worried, anxious, frustrated or helpless. Keep adding to this list as you go along. Next to each item on the list, write down what you can do to reduce the stress it's generating, and implement those solutions whenever possible
- **Just say no** – Saying no is one of the best ways to protect your energy reserves. Avoid taking on new responsibilities or commitments while you're in recovery. If something must be done, see if you can delegate the task to someone else. Avoid the trap of thinking no one else will be able to do it as well as you. Sometimes "good enough" really is enough
- **Schedule breaks and take time to socialize** – Make sure you take breaks between projects, to give your mind and body time to recover. Also, be sure to schedule breaks on a daily basis, and do not take work home with you. Cultivating a social life is an important aspect of a well-balanced life, so avoid the temptation to make work your sole focus
- **Manage your electronic devices wisely** – Smartphones, iPads and computers can be an enormous time drain if you don't manage their use well. The constant barrage of message notifications can be a major source of stress in and of itself.

Turn down the stress by turning off all notifications on your devices; batch process your emails, at most four times a day, and restrict social media to a specific time or

place rather than trying to "keep up" on an hour-by-hour basis

- **Stop multitasking** – Paradoxically, giving up multitasking is one of the key strategies of highly productive people. Focusing on one thing at a time will also make you calmer and less stressed out

The Importance of Maintaining Balance in Your Life

In 2017, I interviewed Dr. Joseph Maroon on the topic of burnout. He is a professor of neurosurgery at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and author of "Square One: A Simple Guide to a Balanced Life," a book that grew out of his own struggles with burnout.

I've included a condensed version here for your convenience. To listen to the full interview, please see "[How to Recover From Burnout by Rebalancing Your Life](#)." The recovery plan detailed in "Square One" is based on William H. Danforth's work, which emphasizes that you have not one but four lives to live, and these four entities make up the sides of a square:

- Physical life
- Spiritual life
- Work life
- Relationship life

Maintaining balance between each of these four life segments is key. Each of these needs to be actively pursued and nourished on a daily basis.

"We all know that you can't avoid stress in this world – divorce, our jobs; 40 percent of people have difficulty with job relationships," Maroon said. "What happens [is], you get an elevated cortisol level in your blood. What does [excess] cortisol do to the brain? It kills brain cells. What does it do to your memory? It reduces memory, our tissues and everything else."

That's what excess chronic unremitting stress [causes], which is what I personally went through. It's incredible depression. Most doctors think depression is [treatable] with antidepressants. I have no doubt that physical activity is the most effective antidepressant we can use ...

[It] gets all the neurotransmitters back into order – your dopamine, your serotonin and your acetylcholine. The point is we can't escape adversity. We can't escape stress. But what happened to me is I didn't recognize how bad off I was in a unidimensional life."

How to Regain Balance and Heal Burnout

Based on these four life segments, you can see that to prevent or recover from burnout, you need:

- Exercise and a healthy diet that optimizes mitochondrial function and limits inflammation (physical nourishment)
- Mindfulness or some form of spiritual practice (spiritual nourishment)
- Ideally, work that suits your personality and gives you meaning and purpose; at bare minimum, strategies to control your day-to-day work stress (work-related pursuits)
- Family time and social contacts, and/or a hobby or volunteer work (relationship-related pursuits)

In a nutshell, recovering from burnout (or avoiding it in the first place) boils down to finding and maintaining a balance between your work life, physical activities, relationships and spirituality or mindfulness. As noted by Maroon:

"You need exercise. You need a degree of meditation and spirituality ... If you look at people who live to be centenarians ... They all have in common a healthy diet and work. They work hard, which is their physical activity ... They control stress with, usually, a very strong family unit, spirituality, religion or church. All

those things are mindfulness. All reduce stress, the excess cortisol, and try to keep our bodies in balance."

To this, I would add a fifth life category that needs balance, and that is sleep. Sleep deprivation dramatically impairs your body's ability to handle stress, and has absolutely no redeeming consequences. Working rather than sleeping will not allow you to get ahead or accomplish more. It's only going to make matters worse. Treating your sleep as "sacred time" that cannot be infringed upon can go a long way toward managing your overall stress and maintaining balance in your life.

Finding Work-Life Balance Is Worth Every Effort

On the whole, leading a balanced life is not rocket science, but it can still be difficult to do. It's much easier, actually, to focus on work to the exclusion of everything else. Finding balance takes a bit of work. It may require finding and setting new boundaries, which may feel unfamiliar and maybe even a bit frightening at first. The alternative, however, is far worse than any discomfort you might experience as you strive for balance.

Arianna Huffington is perhaps one of the most well-known public personas who suffered burnout — and wrote a book about it. In "Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom and Wonder," Huffington, who was the chairman, president and editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group (now known as HuffPost), details her downward spiral, and her journey back to health.

Her self-reflection resulted in a new definition of success, which includes a "third metric" besides the two conventional ones: money and power. This third metric consists of four pillars:

- **Health and well-being** — If you sacrifice your health and well-being in the pursuit of success, you're really paying an insanely high price. The result of this sacrifice includes everything from diabetes to heart disease, and other stress-related afflictions like depression, alcoholism or drug addiction

- **Wisdom** – As Huffington said: "We have a lot of very smart leaders around making terrible decisions. The problem is not that they don't have a high IQ; the problem is that they are not connected with their inner wisdom. Taking time to connect with the source of our inner wisdom and strength is essential"
- **Joy and childlike wonder** – It's also important to bring joy into your everyday life and to connect with the sense that you are part of "something larger." This includes appreciating ordinary beauty and small everyday miracles
- **Giving** – No complete life is ever lived just for oneself

When you integrate giving, wonder, wisdom and well-being together with the first two metrics of money and power, you can really have a complete life, filled with meaning and purpose.

Sources and References

- ¹ [CBS News February 5, 2015](#)
- ² [Health Line, What Is Stress Related Illness?](#)
- ³ [Psychology Today, Symptoms of Burnout](#)
- ⁴ [Psychology Today April 17, 2011](#)