

## *Career & Employment Center*

### **“Job Burnout”**

#### *How to Identify the Symptoms and What You Can Do About It*

At some point in your career, you may experience burnout. Regardless of how much you like your job there may come a time when you just don't feel like doing it anymore. Job burnout is defined in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.” Symptoms of burnout may include irritability, depression, anxiety attacks, and the employment of self-destructive addictions (sleep aids, food, alcohol, shopping, etc.) to numb your discomfort. Job burnout is a major cause of absenteeism in the United States, and disrupts your work at the office and your peace of mind at home.

Sometimes burnout is self-imposed; you can't say no and take on more work than you can handle. Sometimes it is unavoidable; your workload is too much. It is important to recognize the difference. Internal stress is created by your own mind, by fear-based beliefs about what will happen if you fail to meet your own or others' expectations. If your habit is to set unrealistic goals for yourself, and collapse into despair and frustration when you can't meet those goals, it is a good indication that you are creating your own burnout. Outside stress comes from a boss who mistreats you or sets unrealistic goals for you. If you think your supervisor is mistreating you, find out how to seek assistance from someone who can help. How can you protect yourself? Contact the Human Resources department of your company/organization and ask to speak with someone about your situation.

Sometimes burnout is the result of poor time management. It can be difficult to know how to use your time most efficiently if you are juggling numerous projects. It might be worthwhile for you to attend a seminar, read a book or watch a video on time management to help you cope with the magnitude of your different responsibilities. There are many good books and videos on time management. See the list of resources at the end of this article.

Another contributing factor leading to job burnout is the added pressure of technology, which has created more work for the individual when it comes to reading email and being expected to respond right away. This task alone can take hours. The emergence of certain kinds of technology came with the promise of simplifying our lives, but ended up complicating them too!

Burnout may be the result of job selection error. If we feel pressured to take the first job that is offered or if we are struggling financially and have been out of work for awhile we may take a job out of desperation, rather than finding a job that is a good fit. If you know for a fact that the job you have is not compatible with your interests, then it is worth it to look for something else that you can tolerate - even enjoy! Assess why you are staying in a job that is

causing you stress. Often people stay in a job because of the money. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, and Copyright 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Co., the term “golden handcuffs” is slang for a benefit, payment or incentive linked to the recipient’s longevity in a company. The idea was for companies to slap “golden handcuffs” on key employees. Although definitions vary career professionals commonly use the term to describe any situation whereby you dislike your job but earn a very high salary and are afraid to leave it behind. Often the familiar is much more comfortable than the unknown, even if you hate your current job. In “The Career Chase,” by Helen Harness, she writes, “Fear of change, especially a career change, blocks us from taking creative control of our lives. We must understand our resistance to change, and how it negatively affects our career decisions.”

The response to job burnout is usually one of three: work harder, escape, or look for a solution. Working harder is not a good solution on a long-term basis and it may result in more stress without relief that can cause physical distress and illness. Merely escaping for a two-week vacation is not enough and often results in more stress upon returning to work.

Fortunately, you can do something about it. The solution to job burnout is one all experts agree upon: YOU.

Looking for a solution is the best approach! “Everyone has to assess one’s strengths and weaknesses by varying one’s speed of living,” says Dr. Hans Selye, the author credited with introducing the modern concept of stress and whose book, *The Stress of Life*, has been translated into nine languages. “Only through such self-assessment can a person decide what paths of life are worth pursuing, how fast one can run to achieve goals and how to minimize the negative effects of stress on his or her life.”

You can’t avoid stress altogether and you wouldn’t want to. “Life wouldn’t be very exciting without any stress at all,” asserts Nancy Loving Tubesing, a doctor of education and consultant at Whole Person Associates in Duluth, Minn. Her extensive clinical work with Chicago suburbanites showed that “stress is what keeps us tuned and ready to respond to life’s options.” Stress is only destructive if you allow it to become too great and it interferes with your intellectual, emotional or physical well-being.

One solution to burnout often discussed but seldom exercised is to quit. If you know it’s the job that’s causing you to suffer, then leaving would be a good solution. This could add more stress to your life until you settle into a new position, but maybe that jolt will get the old you back to work.

Before you make that drastic move, however, take a serious look inside. Ask yourself, “Have I felt this way before at other jobs?” If so, going elsewhere will only start the process all over again. Instead of running away, change your perspective and you can change your attitude from “Why me?” to “Great. This is what I’ve been trained to do.”

Dr. Barthol thinks that by “reinterpreting the job you can handle things better.” He uses the example of two people with the same job. “One person may get psychological burnout while

the other person sails along and finds a motivator: It's exciting and the job remains a challenge."

**Prepare yourself for stress,** AND concentrate on minimizing the pressure you put on yourself. Allow extra time in the morning so you don't have to rush to work, building tension with each stop-and-go traffic move.

**Don't place a heavy burden on yourself** by trying to get everything done by 5 p.m. Stay 15 minutes later if you need to occasionally, but don't extend your day on a permanent basis as that may add more stress. Practice good time management and be realistic about what you can get done in a day.

**If you have a sizable project, tackle it in pieces** instead of focusing on the big picture, so the immensity doesn't overwhelm you. Don't be defeated before you begin.

**You are not alone. "Don't ever believe you're the only person who's confronted this problem,"** warns Dr. Dennis Turk, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Yale University in New Haven, CT. "We become so thoroughly enmeshed in our jobs, we forget about other people who have experienced the same situation. Talking about it with other people to see what they're doing can be of tremendous help."

**Build your strength** through exercise, relaxation and diet. Eat three meals a day and avoid caffeine, sugar and salt.

**Find or explore relaxation techniques** that will work for you, such as meditation. Take breaks during the workday.

**If you feel as if you're in a dead-end job, go exploring.** Visit the career center at \*Santa Rosa Jr. College to find out what resources are available to you. Visit your "one stop" \*Sonoma County Job Link and learn what is available there. If necessary, seek additional training.

**Separate your work from the rest of your life.** Find outside interests and make it a point not to discuss the job while you're off the clock.

**If you think you are unappreciated, reach for those rewards.** Ask for more money, more autonomy, more responsibility, and more recognition from co-workers and supervisors.

**You are in control of your situation.** The question of where, with whom, and how you work, can only be answered by you. You make the decision about whether you suffer from job burnout or set the world on fire.

## **Resources:**

**Books:** Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity, by David Allen  
How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life, by Alan Lakein  
Time Management from the Inside Out, by Julie Morgenstern

**Videos:** Master Student Series: Time Management  
Transitions: Choices for Mid-Career Changers  
Stress Management

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April 2006