

Avoid Burnout Before You're Already Burned Out

You don't have to be ready to throw in the towel to improve things at work. These small changes can go a long way.

By Elizabeth Grace Saunders

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According to the World Health Organization, [burnout is a workplace issue](#).

But just because burnout can happen at work or because of work, doesn't mean how you use your time outside of work can't help prevent it. As a time management coach, I've seen that at the core, burnout prevention is about living out what is true about your body, your personality and your reality. You don't need a dream job. But in your overall life, you do need to find time to take care of your health, do things you find refreshing and have a sense of purpose. The closer you are to living your truth, the less likely you are to burnout.

I can't guarantee that if you follow these simple strategies that you will never experience burnout. I can guarantee, however, that you'll significantly reduce the likelihood of it, and that you'll get back to work more quickly after taking a break if you reach a burnout state.

Your body

Your body is designed to repair and restore itself. So when you're feeling the

impact of burnout — ongoing exhaustion, detachment from your job and perhaps even weight gain and illness from stress — it's a sign that the demands on your body exceed its ability to keep up. Giving your body what it needs is the foundation of burnout prevention. You can help reduce the energy depletion associated with burnout and facilitate restoration by prioritizing three universal core needs: sleeping, eating and moving.

[Sleep serves many purposes](#), including regulating our mood, clearing waste from our brain and re-energizing our cells. That's why not getting enough sleep is one of the [main risk factors](#) for developing burnout, and improving sleep quality can help individuals with even a clinical burnout problem recover enough to [return to work](#).

First, you should know how much sleep you need. The National Sleep Foundation recommends between [seven to nine hours of sleep](#) for most adults, but that could mean as little as six hours to as much as 10 depending on your needs. The goal is to get to the point where you feel alert most of the day. And as a bonus, you'll likely feel happier too, which can reduce your chance of the cynicism associated with burnout.

Getting more sleep is pretty basic math: You can either go to bed earlier, get up later or do both. If you tend to lose track of time, set an alarm to remind yourself to turn off electronic devices and wind down at [least 30 minutes](#) before your bed time. In that moment, you'll likely feel tempted to stay up longer. One strategy to motivate yourself to get to bed is to remember just how bad it feels when you're exhausted and then how good it feels when you've had enough rest.

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What you put in your mouth also has an impact on your mood and energy.

Avoid foods that make you feel tired or too full. Try eating lighter, healthier foods that increase your energy level. Similarly, eating smaller, more frequent meals can help maintain your high [energy](#).

So if you find that you're more negative about your job at certain times in the day, you may want to assess whether you need to eat more frequently. Before working with me, some of my coaching clients would forget to eat, and found that their energy level was dragging by mid-afternoon. For some of them, creating a routine around packing lunch the night before or simply setting a calendar reminder to get lunch midday really helped. When you're honest about what fuel your body needs to feel happy and healthy, you help buffer against the potential for burnout.

Finally, taking time to move provides another opportunity for our bodies and minds to recalibrate. Even [five minutes of outdoor exercise](#) can have a meaningful psychological impact. And better yet, if you can do 20 to 30 minutes of exercise at a time, you can over all [improve your mental health](#). For example, when something stressful happens to me, I'll try to go on a walk or a run around the block as soon as possible to get the negative energy out of my body. This not only reduces the negative feelings but also calms my mind so I can focus for the rest of the day. Thinking through difficult situations is important but at a certain point, the only way to release the emotions is to physically let them go.

Your personality

In addition to living our truth about our health and our bodies, to prevent burnout we need to honor the truth around our personalities.

“Self-care is dependent on the individual. It is based on what helps them to feel more like they're in their natural state, which is the thing, place or feeling that would happen if there were no pressure on them — the thing they would want

to do,” said Robert L. Bogue, co-author of “[Extinguish Burnout: A Practical Guide to Prevention and Recovery.](#)”

“When you’re operating outside of your natural state, you are consuming energy,” he explained. “The more in alignment you become, the less you’re demanding of yourself and the more [personal agency](#) you build up.”

Put simply, you need to know what restores you and invest in those activities to prevent burnout. But what fulfills these needs for you may look different than what fulfills those needs for someone else. For example, someone who is highly extroverted may need to hang out with friends or family on a daily basis after work to buffer against burnout. Someone who is highly introverted, on the other hand, may require time alone to recharge. One introverted home-schooling mom I know starts and finishes each day with deep breathing and makes sure at least once a week to do something on her own, such as journaling, gardening, crafting or hiking.

Or the differences in what you need may vary based on your core motivations. For example, Dr. Steven Reiss, a research psychologist, conducted [studies involving more than 6,000 people](#) and found that [16 core desires](#) can motivate our behavior: power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical exercise and tranquillity. For instance, I really enjoy order so I might choose to take a night to tidy up and organize my home in order to recharge. If you have a very strong desire for curiosity, you might spend that same night learning a new skill or language, or going somewhere new to feel refreshed.

I’m not wrong, and you’re not wrong. We’re just different. As Mr. Bogue stated, the more you know what truly aligns with who you are and honor that need, the less drained you will feel and the less likely you will burnout.

Your reality

A third element of burnout prevention is to live the truth of your work situation reality — what you can actually change, and where you will need to find alternative sources to meet your needs. According to the [“Areas of Worklife”](#) model, workload is only *one* of the six contributors to burnout. Control, reward, fairness, community and values are the other five elements.

These other contributors revolve around feeling supported, appreciated and safe. Ideally, you can either shift your current work environment or find a new job where all of these areas meet up with your expectations. But in some cases, that’s not possible. In those circumstances, you have other options.

One alternative is to modify your expectations. For example, you may prefer going to lunch with colleagues, but maybe that’s not their preference. It may work better, instead, to cultivate community by stopping by their desk to chat for a few minutes, or organize after-work get-togethers if everyone agrees to come. Or you may prefer that your boss verbally affirms you every time you complete a large task. But maybe that’s not his style. You can learn to appreciate that he gives you good annual reviews and respects your opinion in meetings.

Another alternative is to stop expecting satisfaction in these areas within your job and, instead, seek opportunities outside of work that fulfill these core needs. For example, maybe you volunteer with an organization where you feel appreciated, find the activities intrinsically rewarding, have values alignment and a strong sense of community. Or maybe you invest time in your family or friends to cultivate a feeling of belonging, fulfillment and autonomy.

When you’re “filled up” by how you invest your time outside of work, and you feel supported by people who know and care about you, you have a buffer against the drain that may exist in the office.

You may not have the ability to change everything you don’t like about your job, but you do have the ability to improve how good you feel about yourself

and life in general. By investing your time based on the truth of your body, personality and reality, you can reduce your risk of burnout. And if you already feel burnt out, you can recover faster.

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