

RECOGNIZING BURNOUT

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When the engine of your car is not looked after it starts to give trouble. We are like that. We need a certain degree of maintenance in order to function optimally. Ongoing lack of self care and self awareness can lead to a breakdown of physical, emotional and cognitive (thinking) functioning.

We often hear the phrase “I am feeling really burned out” used to mean that the person is tired. Burnout is more than tiredness. It is about being all used up in a way that you do not easily recover from. Burnout refers to a state of exhaustion that accumulates over time and reaches a critical point.

ICD10 is a system set down by the World Health Organization to classify symptoms and conditions. It is used by all healthcare professional for diagnosis. ICD10 describes burnout as a “**state of vital exhaustion**”

The people who are most vulnerable to burnout are those who are competent, successful and driven as well as people who do not know their boundaries or limitations. It is not about whether you are capable, but about not recognizing when you are taking on too much or when your approach to life and work stresses you out. It can be a buzz to have many things on at the same time. But eventually your resources may become depleted if you do not monitor yourself and find a balance.

Just because you are energetic, capable and enthusiastic does not mean that you are indestructible.

We are not machines and even machines let us know when they need maintenance. My car has various lights on the dashboard that indicate what has to be attended to e.g. the petrol light goes on when fuel is low. If ignored, a written warning comes on saying FUEL LOW when it is nearly empty.

Your car will have these too. They do not go away if you ignore them, they become more insistent and eventually you run out of fuel and are stranded at the side of the road. Getting the fuel you need to get your car going again involves far more effort and risk than just attending to the warning signs in the first place.

We all have deadlines, we all have responsibilities. However within those one needs to work within a realistic balance. It can feel good to believe that you are indispensable, that things will fall apart if you are not there at the forefront of things at work or at home, or that others won't be able to do it as well as you. You may also be pushed to perform by outside pressures.

Well the reality is that if you become incapacitated due to your efforts to be like a machine then someone will have to pick up where you left off, and probably have to pick you up too.

Maybe a simple rule to start out with is “listen to your body”. If you are tired go to bed early, if you are hungry eat; if you can't cope with something attend to that etc.

If burnout is very advanced it will need more than just lifestyle changes but these are a good start.

Signs to watch out for:-

- increasing physical and emotional tiredness
- lack of interest in others
- detachment from things that you used to enjoy
- dreading getting up and going to work
- lack of concern for important deadlines e.g. month end payments
- loss of feelings of accomplishment
- being too tired to think of solutions for existing problems
- an impersonal approach to others
- not being bothered to try and explain this to anyone

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- Irritability and impatience
- trying to push on regardless but being unable to
- eventually letting yourself slide down as you watch because you don't have the energy to care
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While these can be symptoms of other conditions, the most obvious thing is that something is not right. This is not about having a bad day but having a bad life. If you ignore it, you will get worse. So slow down and take stock of what is not okay and attend to it.