

THE BURNOUT CURRICULUM

Understanding Burnout

What it is, how it works, and how to recognize it

Module One of Three · Education for Healthcare Professionals

WHY THIS MATTERS

Burnout is common, costly, and widely misunderstood

A recognized condition

In 2019 the World Health Organization classified burnout in the ICD-11 as an occupational phenomenon — a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

Widespread in caregiving fields

Healthcare professionals report among the highest rates of burnout of any field — a consistent finding across decades of occupational research.

It is not a character flaw

The research is unanimous: burnout is a measurable response to prolonged stress, not a sign of weakness or insufficient dedication.

What we'll cover

1

What burnout actually is

The standard definition and its three dimensions

2

How it shows up

Signs and symptoms in the body, the mind, and the emotions

3

What drives it

The general conditions that produce burnout over time

4

Burnout vs. depression

Knowing the difference — and where to find help

1

PART ONE

What Burnout Actually Is

The word gets used loosely. The science is precise — and the precision is what makes recognition possible.

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It describes what happens when you used to have passion, used to be on fire, and then it's gone. The stress of the work eats you alive, burns you up.

Christina Maslach, PhD · Pioneer of burnout research, UC Berkeley

Burnout has three dimensions

EXHAUSTION

Emotional and physical depletion. Not ordinary tiredness — the defining feature is that rest no longer restores you.

CYNICISM

Also called depersonalization: growing distance, detachment, and negativity toward the work and the people in it.

INEFFICACY

A shrinking sense of accomplishment — the feeling that nothing you do makes a difference anymore.

Maslach & Leiter identified these three dimensions; the World Health Organization adopted them in its 2019 ICD-11 definition.

A KEY DISTINCTION

Stress and burnout are not the same

STRESS

Too much: over-engaged, over-reactive, urgent. The system is on overdrive — but still running hot and still caring.

BURNOUT

Not enough: disengaged, blunted, empty. The system has run down. Where stress is too much, burnout is depletion.

Plumbly frames it plainly: prolonged, inescapable stress is what eventually tips the nervous system into burnout.

Dr. Claire Plumbly, Clinical Psychologist • The Trauma of Burnout (2024)

“

Burnout isn't a medical condition. It's a response to chronic job stressors that have not been successfully managed.

Christina Maslach, PhD · American Psychological Association, 2025

2

PART TWO

How Burnout Shows Up

It rarely announces itself. It presents — in the body, the mind, and the emotions.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

In the body

- Persistent fatigue that sleep doesn't resolve
- Disrupted sleep — trouble falling asleep, or waking unrefreshed
- Headaches, muscle tension, gut and stomach complaints
- Getting sick more often as the immune system runs down
- A constant keyed-up feeling, or being unable to wind down

These are the body running too long in a stress state — the physiology we unpack in Part Three.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

In the mind

- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or finishing tasks
- Decisions feel harder than they should — even small ones
- Increasing forgetfulness and mental fog
- Cynical or negative thoughts that weren't there before
- A creeping sense that your work no longer matters

Plumbly: burnout “stifles your ability to think clearly” — you cannot simply think your way out of it.

In the emotions

- Irritability and a shorter fuse than usual
- Emotional numbness, flatness, or detachment
- Loss of motivation and of enjoyment in things once enjoyed
- Feeling helpless, trapped, or defeated
- Withdrawing from people, at work and at home

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It feels like I'm not processing things like a human.

A patient describing depersonalization · *Dr. Jessi Gold, How Do You Feel? (2024), p. 56*

IT'S GRADUAL, NOT SUDDEN

Burnout develops on a slope

ENGAGED

Energy, involvement, a sense of effectiveness. The work is demanding but rewarding.

STRAINED

Running on reserves. Recovery still works — but barely. Early signs appear and are easy to dismiss.

BURNED OUT

All three dimensions, sustained: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy together.

The most useful place to catch burnout is the middle — where the signs are quiet and the response is simplest.

3

PART THREE

What Drives Burnout

Burnout builds when demands outweigh resources for too long — and the nervous system pays the bill.

WHAT TENDS TO PRODUCE BURNOUT

The general drivers

Sustained overload

Demands that consistently exceed time, energy, or resources, with too little recovery between.

Low control

Little say over how the work gets done, or over one's own schedule and pace.

Insufficient reward

Effort that goes unrecognized — financially, socially, or in simple acknowledgment.

Eroded community

Isolation, conflict, or loss of supportive connection with others.

Unfairness

Inconsistency, or the sense that effort and outcome aren't matched fairly.

Values conflict

Being routinely required to act against what one believes is right or important.

These six areas come from the research of Maslach & Leiter — a useful map for locating your own sources of strain.

What sustained stress does to the nervous system

Your autonomic nervous system constantly scans for safety and threat, shifting you between a calm, regulated state and a mobilized fight-or-flight state.

Short bursts of mobilization are healthy. The problem is chronic activation — staying in stress mode with no return to calm.

Held there long enough, the system can tip into shutdown: numbness, flatness, and disconnection — the depersonalization seen earlier.

Grounded in Stephen Porges' polyvagal research and Bessel van der Kolk's work on stress physiology.

“

After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system.

Bessel van der Kolk, MD · *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014)

“

Burnout stifles your ability to think clearly — you cannot ‘think’ your way out of it.

Dr. Claire Plumbly · *The Trauma of Burnout* (2024)

4

PART FOUR

Burnout, Depression, and Getting Help

Overlapping, but not the same — and the difference decides what helps.

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

Burnout vs. depression

BURNOUT

Tends to be tied to a context or role. Often eases, at least somewhat, with genuine time away. Energy and interest may return when the stressor lifts.

DEPRESSION

Pervades all areas of life. Low mood, loss of interest, and changes in sleep, appetite, and self-worth that don't lift with time off — and may need clinical treatment.

They can overlap, and prolonged burnout can develop into depression — which is exactly why recognizing it early matters.

Where to find support

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 — free, confidential, 24/7. If you ever have thoughts of not wanting to be here, reach out today, not someday.

Employee Assistance Program

Most employers offer free, confidential counseling — often within days. [Facility inserts contact details here.]

A clinician

A primary care provider or mental health professional — the right step when symptoms are pervasive or persistent.

Someone you trust

Telling one person “I’m not okay lately” is a real and meaningful first step.

Seeking help is a skill, not a weakness.

TAKEAWAYS

If you take three things from this hour

1

Burnout is real and defined

Exhaustion that rest won't fix, cynicism, and a lost sense of effectiveness — together, over time. A response to stress, not a weakness.

2

It shows up across body, mind, and emotions

And it develops on a slope. The signs are quietest — and most addressable — in the strained middle stage.

3

Know the line, and where to turn

Symptoms that pervade all of life, or any thoughts of self-harm, mean it's time for a clinician, your EAP, or 988.

**You don't burn out
without having cared first.**

Module Two: how to prevent and manage it. Module Three: the practical toolkit.

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THE BURNOUT CURRICULUM

Preventing & Managing Burnout

Working with the stress response instead of against it

Module Two of Three · Education for Healthcare Professionals

THE PREMISE

You have more influence than burnout lets you feel

Burnout convinces you that nothing will help. That feeling is itself a symptom — not an accurate report.

You cannot always change the demands placed on you. You can change how completely your body discharges stress, how you protect recovery, and how you respond to early signs.

The science is clear that these change real outcomes — which is why this module is practical, not motivational.

What we'll cover

1

Complete the stress cycle

Why ending the stressor isn't the same as ending the stress

2

Protect recovery

Rest, detachment, and sleep that actually restore

3

Real self-care vs. faux self-care

Boundaries, values, and self-compassion that change the pattern

4

Catch it early

Recognizing your own signals and responding while it's easy



1

PART ONE

Complete the Stress Cycle

Dealing with a stressor is not the same as dealing with the stress it leaves in your body.

“

Emotions are tunnels. If you go all the way through them, you get to the light at the end. Exhaustion happens when we get stuck in an emotion.

Emily & Amelia Nagoski · *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* (2019)

How to complete the cycle

Movement

The most efficient discharge — any physical activity that raises the heart rate, even briefly.

Slow breathing

Long, slow exhales signal safety to the nervous system. The one tool available almost anywhere.

Connection

Warm, genuine contact with another person — conversation, a hug, shared laughter.

Release

Crying or laughing fully are complete cycles in themselves — not signs of weakness.

Creative or physical making

Cooking, music, building — absorbing activity that moves you out of the stress loop.

The Nagoskis' point: completing the cycle is a separate act from solving the problem. Both have to happen.

“

We're not saying you should take 42 percent of your time to rest; we're saying if you don't take the 42 percent, the 42 percent will take you.

Emily & Amelia Nagoski · *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* (2019)

2

PART TWO

Protect Recovery

Recovery isn't what's left over after everything else. It's the part that makes everything else sustainable.

Rest that actually restores

Not all rest restores. The strongest predictor of recovery is psychological detachment — genuinely disengaging from work mentally, not just physically.

Scrolling while replaying the day, or being off but mentally still working, doesn't count — the mind never left.

Restorative rest tends to be absorbing, active, or connecting: something that fully occupies your attention elsewhere.

Occupational health research consistently finds detachment — not just time off — is what predicts recovery.

WHAT PROTECTS IT

Sleep is the foundation of recovery

Consistency

A regular sleep window matters more than perfection. The body clock rewards routine.

Wind-down

A buffer between stimulation and sleep — dim light, no screens, slow breathing — helps the system downshift.

Light management

Bright light when you need to be alert; darkness when you need to sleep. Light is the master signal.

Caffeine timing

Caffeine lingers for hours — keep it well clear of your sleep window.

Sleep is when the stress chemistry of the day is cleared. Protecting it is not optional maintenance.

“

The body keeps the score.

Bessel van der Kolk, MD · *The Body Keeps the Score (2014)*

3

PART THREE

Real Self-Care vs. Faux Self-Care

Some 'self-care' changes how you feel for an hour. Real self-care changes the pattern.

“

Faux self-care... in the moment might improve your mood, but it does nothing to change the circumstances in your life that led you to feel drained.

Dr. Pooja Lakshmin · *Real Self-Care (2023)*

What real self-care actually is

1. Set boundaries

Decide what you will and won't take on — and tolerate the discomfort that protecting your limits can bring.

2. Practice self-compassion

Change how you talk to yourself. Speak to yourself as you would to someone you respect.

3. Align with your values

Make choices that reflect what genuinely matters to you, not only what's expected.

4. Use your power

Recognize the choices that are yours to make — and make them deliberately.

Change how you talk to yourself

People in burnout are often harshest with themselves — “Why can’t I just push through?” Even Dr. Jessi Gold, who treats burnout, caught herself thinking exactly that.

Self-criticism keeps the nervous system in threat. Self-compassion is not indulgence — it is what allows the system to settle enough to recover.

A simple test: would you say this to someone you respect who was struggling? If not, it isn’t accurate — it’s just the burnout talking.

Gold writes of her own burnout: “Why can’t I just suck it up and work through my fatigue?” — How Do You Feel? (2024)



4

PART FOUR

Catch It Early

The signs are quietest — and easiest to act on — long before burnout is full-blown.

A regular self-check

- Is my sleep still restoring me, or am I waking tired?
- Am I more cynical or detached than I was a month ago?
- Do I still feel my work matters — at least sometimes?
- Am I dreading things I used to be neutral about?
- Has my patience at home grown shorter?

Checking in monthly turns vague unease into information you can act on — a trend matters more than any single day.

“

Our nervous system is stuck in survival mode, making it hard to make decisions, rest, solve problems, be mindful, and set boundaries.

Dr. Claire Plumbly · *The Trauma of Burnout (2024)*

TAKEAWAYS

If you take three things from this hour

1

Complete the stress cycle

Ending the stressor isn't enough — discharge the stress through movement, breath, connection, or release.

2

Protect recovery deliberately

Detachment and sleep are the engine of resilience, not the leftovers. Guard them on purpose.

3

Real self-care, caught early

Boundaries, self-compassion, and values change the pattern — and a monthly self-check lets you act while it's easy.

**Rest is not the reward
for finishing the work.**

It's part of the work.

Module Three: the practical toolkit — practiced together.

REFERENCES

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- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. — foundational burnout research.

THE BURNOUT CURRICULUM

The Toolkit

Practical tools to calm the nervous system — in the moment and over time

Module Three of Three · A practice session

THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE PRACTICE

Why these tools work

WHAT THEY DO

Give you direct, physical control over your stress response. Breath and attention are levers you can pull deliberately — in minutes, anywhere, at no cost.

WHY IT MATTERS

Burnout impairs clear thinking, so tools that work through the body — not willpower — are the ones that hold up when you most need them.

As Plumbly notes, you can't think your way out of burnout — but you can breathe your way toward a calmer state.

Today's practice session

1

The breath

Three breathing tools, practiced live — from 30 seconds to a few minutes

2

The body

Grounding and a guided body scan for flooded moments

3

Daily practices

Small habits that lower your baseline stress over time

4

When it's bigger than tools

Recognizing the limit, and where real support lives



1

PART ONE

The Breath

The one part of the stress response you can steer directly — starting now.

Tool 1: The physiological sigh

- 1** Inhale through the nose — then, at the top, take one more short sip of air
- 2** Long, slow exhale through the mouth — let it empty completely
- 3** Repeat 1–3 times. That’s the whole tool.

When: any moment your stress spikes. The body’s built-in reset, done on purpose.

Tool 2: Long-exhale breathing

The pattern: inhale gently for about 4 — exhale slowly for about 6. No strain, no holding.

Why it works: a longer exhale than inhale is the clearest 'safe' signal you can send your nervous system.

The aim: slow and steady matters more than exact counts. If counting distracts you, just make every exhale longer than its inhale.

When: winding down, before sleep, or any time you have two minutes. If you keep only one tool — keep this one.

1-2 MINUTES • FOR FOCUS UNDER PRESSURE

Tool 3: Box breathing

Inhale — 4

Hold — 4

Exhale — 4

Hold — 4

Equal counts around a square. The brief holds give a racing mind something to focus on — which is why it steadies rather than just relaxes.

When: before something demanding. Skip the holds (just 4 in, 4 out) if holding feels uncomfortable.



2

PART TWO

The Body

When breath alone isn't enough, attention to the body brings you back.

60-90 SECONDS • FOR FLOODED MOMENTS

Grounding: 5-4-3-2-1

- Name 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste — or one slow breath to finish

Moving attention to the senses walks the mind out of the spiral and back into the present moment.

2-6 MINUTES • RELEASE HELD TENSION

A guided body scan

Bring gentle attention to one point in the body at a time — and let it soften before moving on.

A simple path: crown of the head → jaw → shoulders → arms and hands → chest → belly → legs → feet.

Spend about one breath at each point. You're not forcing relaxation — only noticing, and allowing.

Van der Kolk's work shows that reconnecting with bodily sensation is central to settling a stressed nervous system.



3

PART THREE

Daily Practices

In-the-moment tools settle a spike. Daily practice lowers the baseline.

WHAT LOWERS THE BASELINE

Small habits, repeated

A daily breathing practice

Even 5–10 minutes of slow breathing a day builds a calmer resting state over weeks.

Complete the stress cycle

Attach one discharge — a walk, movement, real connection — to the end of demanding days.

Protect sleep and wind-down

A consistent sleep window and a screen-free buffer before bed.

One genuine connection

Regular contact with someone you don't have to perform for.

Brief daily stillness

A few minutes of simply noticing — no task, no input — retrains a system braced for threat.

Anchor a new habit to one that already exists, and give it a few weeks. These are reps, not quick fixes.

CHOOSE THREE • A FEW MINUTES NOW

Build your own short practice

ONE IN-THE-MOMENT TOOL

The sigh, long-exhale breathing, box breathing, or grounding — your go-to when stress spikes.

ONE DAILY PRACTICE

A few minutes of breathing, a stress-cycle discharge, or daily stillness — your baseline-lowerer.

ONE SUPPORT CONTACT

A person or resource to reach for if things go beyond what a tool can hold.

Choosing now — while you're calm — means the plan is ready before you need it.



4

PART FOUR

When It's Bigger Than Tools

Tools help — and knowing their limit is part of using them well.

RECOGNITION

Signs it's time for support, not another tool

- Rest and time off no longer help at all
- The low or numb feeling is present everywhere — not just around work
- Sleep, appetite, or physical health are clearly affected
- You've been practicing the tools honestly and still feel worse over time
- Any thoughts of self-harm, or that life isn't worth it

This isn't a tool failure — it's the signal to reach for support. The last point means reaching out today.

Where real support lives

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988 — free, confidential, 24/7. If you ever have thoughts of not wanting to be here: today, not someday.

Employee Assistance Program

Free, confidential counseling through most employers — often within days. [Facility inserts details.]

A clinician

Primary care or a mental health professional — the right step when symptoms are pervasive or persistent.

Someone you trust

Saying “I’m not okay lately” to one person is a real first step.

Seeking help is a skill, not a weakness.

TAKEAWAYS

If you take three things from this hour

1

The breath is your fastest tool

A long exhale is a real intervention — available in thirty seconds, anywhere, free.

2

Daily reps lower the baseline

Small practices, repeated over weeks, change your resting stress level — not just the moment.

3

Know the limit

When tools aren't enough, support is the right next step — and seeking it is a skill.

The tools are small.

Done daily, they are not.

Thank you for the work you do — and for taking time for the person who does it.

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