Understanding burnout

The signs of burnout, what leads to it and how to recover.

Burnout builds slowly, from long-term stress that has not been managed, usually at work or in a caring role. It is not a weakness. It tends to happen to conscientious people who keep going long after they should have stopped.

The three signs

Exhaustion
Drained, physically and emotionally. Rest does not seem to refill the tank.

Distance
Feeling detached, cynical or numb about work or the people you look after. Going through the motions.

Feeling ineffective
Tasks take longer. Mistakes creep in. A sense that nothing you do makes a difference.

What leads to it

- [ ] Too much to do, for too long
- [ ] Little control over how I work
- [ ] Effort that goes unnoticed
- [ ] Conflict or lack of support
- [ ] Unfairness
- [ ] Work that clashes with my values
- [ ] No real time off
- [ ] Caring for others with little care for me

Is it burnout or depression?

They overlap, and one can lead to the other. Burnout is usually tied to one area of life and eases with distance from it. Depression affects all of it. If low mood, hopelessness or loss of interest have spread across your whole life, talk to your GP.

Recovering

1. **Take it seriously.** Burnout does not fix itself by pushing through.
2. **Rest properly.** Time off that is really off. Sleep, daylight, movement, food.
3. **Reduce the load.** What can be dropped, delayed, delegated or renegotiated?
4. **Put boundaries around work:** hours, email, breaks.
5. **Reconnect** with people and with things that have nothing to do with being useful.
6. **Look at the causes.** Without some change in the conditions, burnout comes back.

Recovery takes time
Usually months. Trying to rush it tends to set you back.

What needs to change for me, and who do I need to talk to about it?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.