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We often hear the word burnout and lump it in the same category as stress. Burnout and stress are two very different things. Let us explore the difference between the two, whether you are at risk and then what you can do about it.

Firstly, let's look at stress. We are all familiar with this emotion. Most of us use this word everyday to describe some element of our working day or home environment. We are used to that subtle as well as overwhelming feeling of having too much to do and so little time.

The biggest difference between stress and burnout is that, with stress we can take ourselves out of a stressful situation after some time and come back renewed and rested. With stress, we can usually see the end of a stressful situation in sight and we work under stress knowing we will be fine at the completion of this period. Stress can feel more physical than emotional.

Burnout, on the other hand, is when a person or situation can no longer be tolerated. It is a state of complete emotional and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged, unrelenting and intense stress. There is no give or ease up of stress.

If you are constantly trying to meet demands and feeling overwhelmed for a long period of time, your body will start responding by shutting down. You start losing interest or motivation in everyday activities; you also have a drop in energy and start experiencing physical symptoms, such as sleeplessness, irritability and unhappiness. Often, having a short break or rest period is not enough to bounce back after an extreme level of stress. You will feel quite flat and disengaged from life in general. Burnout is strongly associated with psychological symptoms.

So how do you know if you are a candidate for burnout? As burnout does not happen overnight you may

not be aware that your lifestyle or state of mind could be leading to burnout. It is important to be aware of changes in your body and mind.

Some burnout characteristics

- Exhaustion, tiredness and sense of being run down.
- Sleeplessness and/or depression.
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- Weight-loss or weight-gain.
- Frustration and powerlessness.
- Loss of motivation and excitement.
- Feelings of being trapped. Mood swings, irritability and anger.
- Cynicism, negativity and sadness.
- Feeling of detachment and isolation.
- Increased degree of risk taking to help escape negative feelings.
- Shortness of breath and possible anxiety.

An interesting difference between burnout and stress is that you are usually aware when you are under a lot of stress. Burnout, on the other hand, creeps up slowly over months and you are usually unaware that you are starting to have the symptoms. It may even take another person to point out changes in your personality and general demeanour.

Prevent or treat burnout

Do what works for you

If you are in a job that leaves you flat, seek more projects or a job that excites and challenges you, rather than works against your personal strengths. Stress from doing a job that is not compatible with your skill set can leave you feeling helpless and prone to burnout. It is important to have realistic goals to work towards and have some degree of freedom to feel less stressed. If you

need to change jobs to acquire this, then do what it takes to lead a healthier and happier life.

Identify any major causes of stress and start tackling them.

Identify those aspects you can change and try to accept those you can't. Stress can be better managed if you prioritise tasks and focus on time management.

Take care of your body and mind

Regular exercise, a healthy diet, plenty of quality sleep and time management are necessary to stave off burnout and stress. Yes, we have all heard this advice before, but are you following it?


Slow down

Try to be more in the moment rather than living in the future. Many things are beyond our control, so know when to ease back and let things slide.

Watch for signals

Watch out for signs from your body that it is time to ease back.

Know that stress and burnout are signals from your body to slow down. Listen to them as soon as feelings and symptoms start to arise and you should bounce back a lot faster from any stress.

Above all else, know that you can get help for stress and burnout and that your feelings do not have to be a way of life. Prevention is better than cure, so ease back, practice self-management and you will help prevent excessive stress or burnout. 

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