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## COLUMNIST

### 5 Signs of Burnout, and Tricks to Break Free

Knowing the signs of burnout can help you get your groove back. With just a little proactive self-assessment, you can turn things around and get back to your happy place, where you're more motivated and enthusiastic about your work.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

Feeling burned out? Think you may have hit a low point? You're in good company. The pace of change these days is exhausting, and it's not uncommon to hit a lull when the stress finally takes its toll.

Knowing the signs of burnout can help you get your groove back. With just a little proactive self-assessment, you can turn things around and get back to your happy place, where you're more motivated and enthusiastic about your work.

Recently I spent several months coaching a leader at a highly ambitious company--one where expectations are high, and failure is not an option. The intensity, long hours, pressure, and accountability all make this hard-charging, highly visible company a challenging place to work. They're doing exciting work and people want to be a part of it, but it's hard to sustain the energy that such a culture demands.

This particular leader, whom we'll call Evan Stevens, was a director in IT. Within 10 minutes of our very first coaching session, tears were springing to his eyes. Finally given the opportunity to speak about his working life, he opened up about his discouragement and fatigue. Evan was working 13-14 hours a day, as well as receiving phone calls from work at night. He was starting to worry about his family life. Evan was completely burned out. He was seen as a high performer, a high producer, well respected leader, well regarded contributor, and he got lots of positive feedback for his work. Yet he felt discouraged, defeated, unappreciated and undervalued from the company around him.

You may or may not be in a situation as extreme as Evan's, but many people I have met over the years are very close.

How do you recognize the signs of burnout? How do you know if you're just going through a phase, or if it's time for a more serious change?

For many people, the best case scenario is to find a way to stay at your current company, while finding a way back to meaning and fulfillment. It is possible--I've seen it many times. Even if you're burned out now, you may find it possible to work happily at your company, giving your best, enjoying yourself, putting in extra hours if you need to, while also finding a way to be fulfilled, appreciated, valued and enjoying your work. Now that's a good life.

So what are the signs of burnout? The following signs came out of my work with Evan:

**You give up easily.** Evan said, "I feel like I am giving up." He noticed in himself a sense of defeat. That sense of defeat can show up even *before* tackling a project. You feel like giving up, because you don't have the motivation to follow through with initiatives. They suddenly seem daunting.

**You blame others.** The blame could be in regards to the atmosphere of the work place, or the quality of work being done. If you catch yourself blaming others, ask yourself where the basis for the blame is really coming from. If it's from a place of exhaustion or doubt, you might be facing burnout.

**Time passes slowly, even when you have a lot to do.** "I can tell that I am burning out when the day seems long and dragging and I can't wait to get home," Evan told me. Burnout feels slow and slogging.

**Your confidence is down.** You'll know you may be burning out if you used to tackle projects with excitement and focus, but now you question your abilities to finish the task at hand and finish it well. You notice may hesitate to get involved even in projects or discussions where you have something to add.

**It's hard to define success.** Burnout can make it hard to see hope. Evan told me: "I've stopped seeing my own successes. Other people are not seeing my successes, and I am not seeing my successes either."

Compared to those signs of burnout, after Evan was able to break free from this phase, he told me: "I accomplish more, I see my successes, I am contributing, I know I am a valuable part of the organization. Even if I am not getting the recognition that I want from my managers or my senior management, I look other places for my own value. I look to my team and how am I responding for them. I care more about what my manager says, but it's also true that her approval is not where I get my self-worth from. I find ways to cheer myself up."

How do you get from the signs and symptoms of burnout to a better place as Evan did?

First, take a step back and refocus. Get away. That means getting away from work without the phone, without the email, without feeling guilty, and just having to trust that you won't be letting coworkers down if you take a few hours (or days) to collect your thoughts. Then reflect on the situation with a fresh perspective. Ask yourself: What can I do to turn this around? What can I control, and what can I not control, and how do I move forward?

It may seem impossible to get away and clear your thoughts, especially if it's overwork or overwhelm that's causing the burnout. Do it anyway. A clear mind is essential to finding solutions. After you've had some think time, treat yourself to a little extra time to rest, recover, catch up with the home stuff, clear the space and come back to work refreshed.

Second, think about how to redesign your work life so you can sustain that sense of stability longer term. For example, Evan did take a two week rest-recover-and-reflect vacation, but he also made a commitment when he came back to reducing his schedule to reliable 10-hour days. He made plans to get away with his family at least one evening or weekend day a week and left the phone behind.

Third, reinforce your commitments by booking activities that refresh you and you know you won't skip. Evan made a promise to his daughters that he would read them a story every single night--a promise that meant he couldn't hole up in his office late at night.

Life in business today can be extremely intense and busy, and burnout is an issue (if not an epidemic). You are far too valuable to be swept away by stress and overwhelm. Become aware of the signs and symptoms, and acknowledge when you're starting to feel burnt out, so you can take control and make a positive change.

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