

## BURNOUT

As we approach the end of the first, and hopefully final, phase of the Covid-19 pandemic we are hearing a great deal about 'burnout' amongst NHS and specifically ambulance staff.

Recent reports suggest many NHS staff are quitting because they are stressed and burned out from heavy workloads, having too little time and suffering bullying and harassment at work. The pressures of working in the NHS mean sickness absence is 2.3% higher than in the rest of the economy and contributes to one in 11 staff quitting every year. Add the demands of the recent Covid-19 pandemic to this and none of us will be surprised by where we are.

There are plans in place to help the overall situation. The NHS People Plan aims to make working lives easier with more flexible hours, the ability to work from home and better mental health support. This will help people feel they have greater choice over working patterns, help them achieve a better work-life balance, and help the NHS remain an attractive career choice.

But for now, maybe you have found yourself feeling **physically and emotionally drained** with no reserves of energy? Maybe you are **acting negatively**, responding with **cynicism/pessimism** and **resenting** anyone and anything around you? **Feeling useless, unproductive, constantly overwhelmed, helpless, disillusioned?** The list goes on, but you dread each day, getting out of bed in the morning, and feel like you have **nothing left to give**? Basically you feel you are of no use - either at home, to yourself or at work?

Sound familiar? Then take note and seek help. These are all signs that recent life has taken its toll: **you may be approaching burnout.**

### So what is burnout?

Burnout is basically caused by being totally and continually overloaded. It occurs when you have been bombarded by extreme stress for far too long. First labelled by Herbert Freudenberger, a psychologist, in the 70's it is defined as severe physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.

Burnout isn't the same as too much stress though; it is the result of **unrelenting stress**. Highly stressed people know they are stressed and can see a way out, but burnout is being devoid of feeling, detached and beyond caring.

Work-related causes of burnout include feeling that you have little control over your work or what is happening, that you are not recognised for what you do, you are lacking in challenge, or working in chaos or uncertainty.

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Lifestyle causes include working too much and not relaxing or socialising, not having trusted, supportive relationships, not sleeping well, and having too many responsibilities.

Personality traits include being a perfectionist, needing to be in control, and having a negative view of the world around you.

And it doesn't happen overnight; signs and symptoms can be subtle at first, creep up on you and gradually get worse. **Pay attention to any early red flags** so you can actively work to reduce your stress and prevent major issues. If you **ignore** them, you will eventually burn out.

It's really common to hide this subtle build up from ourselves! 'I'm fine', 'I'll be fine when I've finished this task', 'I'm just a bit tired', 'I'm happy to do that too' are all signs that we are potentially denying what is happening to us. Be aware.

It is also worth saying that burnout is not a mental health illness, but it is a mental health issue.

## What can it lead to?

Burnout can have a negative effect on every area of your life. It can cause long-term changes to your body leaving you open to everyday illnesses like colds and flu. Some people self-medicate, become sarcastic, full of self-doubt. Left unaddressed it may result in serious physical and psychological issues like depression, heart disease, and diabetes.

## How do I know I have it? What are the signs and symptoms?

| Physical signs and symptoms of burnout   | Emotional signs and symptoms of burnout  | Behavioral signs and symptoms of burnout   |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeling tired and drained most of the time; low energy</li><li>• Lowered immunity, frequent illnesses</li><li>• Frequent headaches or muscle pain</li><li>• Change in appetite or sleep habits</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sense of failure and self-doubt</li><li>• Feeling helpless, trapped, and defeated</li><li>• Detachment, feeling alone in the world</li><li>• Loss of motivation</li><li>• Increasingly cynical and negative outlook</li><li>• Decreased satisfaction and sense of accomplishment</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Withdrawing from responsibilities</li><li>• Isolating yourself from others</li><li>• Procrastinating, taking longer to get things done</li><li>• Making errors</li><li>• Using food, drugs, or alcohol to cope</li><li>• Taking out your frustrations on others; being irritable or suspicious</li><li>• Skipping work or coming in late and leaving early</li></ul> |

Many of us will continue to work thinking we are 'just' stressed, but while stress is usually experienced as feeling anxious and having a sense of urgency burnout is described as helplessness, hopelessness, or total apathy.

## What can I do?

Learn the signs of burnout; make sure you can **recognise** what is happening before you reach breaking point. Then you can stop, take stock and work to reverse the damage. Although life might look bleak, you **can** gain back control and take the positive steps we outline here.

**Reach out** to others to support you. Find the person who is able to listen attentively and non-judgmentally; **a good listener** is known to help calm your nervous system and relieve stress. Talk to **family, friends and colleagues**; they will be pleased you trust them and want to help.

Avoid people who are negative or dismissive and if necessary find new friends, or groups, who 'get' you, and see life the way you see it. Think about 'giving': doing something to help others is always a leveller but be careful you only do what you can!

Try to **find balance** at work and home. Find the good in your work; what attracted you in the first place. Find people you can chat and joke with during the day. Focus more on what you love at home and spend time on that.

Set aside time to relax, and work to develop positive sleep habits. Exercise regularly, even if you 'just don't have the time' (a 10 minute walk can improve your mood for up to 2 hours!).

Recovery can take anything from 6 weeks to 2 years, with an average of 6 to 9 months, depending on the severity of the burnout. Many people describe it as a life-long journey because recovery includes changing habits, perspectives and beliefs; major life-changes around how you take care of and think about yourselves, your work, and your relationships with others.

Clearly, prevention strategies are the most effective tools for addressing burnout. Here are some ideas:

#### **Personality traits – get to know yourself:**

- Watch how much you expect of yourself. High achievers are at the highest risk of burnout - they always want to do more, and more
- Know that you can only do your best: you cannot achieve perfection so work towards 'good enough': know that you are enough, just as you are
- Be comfortable with saying "I don't know" if you don't; ask for help
- Avoid criticising yourself; focus on your achievements instead

#### **Improve lifestyle strategies:**

- Avoid toxic people and situations
- Have social media free times, shut out negative media
- Minimize alcohol and caffeine; follow a healthy eating plan
- Keep physically (and mentally) well: take exercise, walk in green spaces,
- Keep mentally (and physically) well: garden, paint, meditate, write poetry
- Treat yourself: you are worth it! Be your own best friend
- Keep your home – and your workspace - tidy and calm
- Start a gratitude diary; think of the positives you have in your life
- Became more involved and connected with friends, family or the community

#### **Adopt new work patterns:**

- Avoid doing too many things at once: focus on one job or one manageable 'chunk' at a time
- Reward yourself for completing tasks as you go
- Learn when to say 'no'; set yourself some boundaries as to what you are willing to say yes to, and what you will say no to
- Know when to stop – and do! Talk to your line managers and ensure they know that this is crucial to your ability to repair and remain at work in the longer term
- Take breaks, avoid overtime, take leave, leave work behind when you do
- Ask your manager for realistic goals, so that your expectations are not ridiculously high

## Develop a self-care plan to help yourself:

Working on building a plan that works for you. Here are some ideas: customise suit you and your lifestyle. As soon as you recognise the potential for burnout turn to your plan, make time for yourself and find someone to support you if you can.

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| <b>Self-care strategies</b>  | Write here the relaxation, focussed strategies that best suit you  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• writing, meditation, massage, dancing, reading, exercise</li> </ul>   |
|                              | Scope out an achievable weekly timetable for each to suit you and your lifestyle<br>Revisit each week to suit 'external' demands                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mon, Wed, Fri = 20 mins exercise</li> <li>• Sat 10 am = horseriding</li> </ul>  |
|                              | Work out your priorities: what can you change/live without if necessary? what will you not miss?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can change exercise sessions (willing to miss one, move another if necessary)</li> <li>• Horse-riding untouchable!</li> </ul>           |
|                              | Take time each week to check in with your body and mind: use a body scan technique, or meditation/ mindfulness to see where tension lies             |  |
| <b>Check Out Early Signs</b> | List what burnout looks like for you (anger, frustration, exhaustion, etc.) so you can identify it early and take steps to prevent a downward spiral | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body feels on edge</li> <li>• Have to keep going whatever</li> <li>• Irritated with everyone around me for trying to stop me</li> </ul> |
| <b>Take action</b>           | Identify the people who care about you who you can connect with  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner, Suzy, my dog</li> </ul>  |
|                              | List the people you can trust, and ask if they will help   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner, Suzy, HR</li> </ul>  |
|                              | Remind yourself to find a way to verbalize your feelings to prevent future episodes of burnout   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep notebook near bed, write when need to</li> </ul>   |
|                              | Identify negative and toxic people (and experiences) in your life so you can avoid them – at least for a period of time                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>  |
|                              | Identify relevant seminars, self-help groups and talks on mental health you can call on or learn from  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headspace app. Amaravati retreats.</li> </ul>   |
|                              | Identify how you will recognise overwhelm, who you will ask for help, delegate tasks to, or reset priorities with                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know the signs. Speak to line mgr. Work out priorities and discuss with team</li> </ul>   |
|                              | Identify people who can help or support you professionally and clinically if necessary   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sources of Support card: OH, EAP and GP no's</li> </ul>   |

## And finally:

Burnout is a sign that something in your life is not working.

If you find yourself in this situation give yourself time to take note of the 'small' solutions and preventative tools we have suggested here. Take steps to look after yourself as soon as possible; even taking a few days leave if necessary. Know that there is help and support available for you if you reach a level of burnout that it is difficult to reverse: talk to your line manager, the EAP, or wellbeing@EEAST.

But also take time to think about the bigger picture; your personal hopes, goals, and dreams. What are you neglecting or missing? Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to give yourself time to slow down, rest, reflect, and heal and rediscover what really makes you happy.

Take care of yourself and others.