

Burned Out & Burned Up

We use the term “burnout” to talk about many aspects of our lives, but it’s really an occupational phenomenon. When we’re thinking about how burnout might be impacting us, we can learn a lot by looking at how we feel about our jobs.

When we’re [burned out](#):

- **We feel exhausted.** There’s too much to do, too little time to do it, and this kind of time crunch happens too often.
- **We feel cynical.** We’re removed from, or indifferent to, the work we do. We slide by with the minimum effort required, no longer trying to give our best.
- **We feel inefficient.** We experience little satisfaction with what we’ve accomplished in the past or with what we’re doing now. The things we do don’t really feel like they’re making any difference, and we don’t have any way to change that.

Burnout doesn’t suddenly flare up after a rough week. It’s what happens in response to prolonged, chronic work stressors. It’s less of a problem that any one individual has, and more of a sign that there is something broken with the system in which they work.

There are at least 6 sources of burnout:

- **An unsustainable workload.** This is what we most often think of as the primary cause of burnout. There is simply not enough time, energy, or other resources available to get the job done right. It can be worsened when someone has different skills from the ones they need to do their job. Unfortunately, this mismatch is happening more frequently during the pandemic. People are leaving jobs, then others must shift into those positions, oftentimes without the skills or experience they need to perform well.



Photo by [Nataliya Vaitkevich](#) from [Pexels](#)

While an unsustainable workload is a significant driver of burnout, it’s certainly not the only one. We also need to consider:

- **A perceived lack of control.** When a person has very little autonomy with few opportunities to make improvements, or when they lack clarity as to what their role is, what tasks they should be doing, or how to do them, this feeds the fires of burnout.
- **Rewards and recognition that feel like a mismatch.** This is when the “pay-off” for effort is ill-suited to either the individual, the particular situation, or the organization. It can be insufficient pay, but it can also happen when supervisors or coworkers don’t acknowledge someone’s efforts.
- **A lack of supportive community in the workplace.** Do interactions with co-workers, supervisors, employees, and customers feel toxic or uplifting? [Work loneliness](#) is also linked to work exhaustion, and can eventually lead to burnout.
- **A lack of fairness.** This is a work environment that feels full of disrespect, is emotionally treacherous, or when different people get to “play” by a different set of rules.
- **Divergent values.** This would be when someone’s values run counter to what the organization holds as important. It can also be when the work they do has little real meaning for them, or they feel like they’re not contributing to the world in a way that matters to them personally.

Once the drivers of burnout have been identified, they can be transformed. With intention, effort, and resources, it’s possible to create [workplaces that fire people up](#), instead of jobs that burn people out.

Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We’re here to help!
Ask a nurse or provider if you’d like to talk. 218-387-2330

Exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficiency are the smoke of burnout, so here are some questions to help you pinpoint exactly what's fueling that fire. (For questions on a 1-10 scale, 1 is very little/ almost never and 10 is a great deal/ often.)

Workload

- How many hours a day would you say you spend working?
- On a scale of 1—10, with 1 being “I can't continue this way” and 10 being “I can easily keep going,” how sustainable do you find your current workload to be?
- Do you get enough rest, meaning both sleep and relaxation?
- Are there parts of your job that you could delegate to someone else? What support would you need to do that?
- Do you have the skills you need to do your job well?
- What resources do you need to do your job better or lighten your workload?
- For remote workers: How clear is the boundary between your work and your personal life?

Control

- On a scale of 1—10, how much choice do you have in the way that you get your job done?
- On a scale of 1—10, how free are you to experiment with improvements in the way that you do things?
- Are there areas where your manager could give you more freedom or control? If so, what are they?

Reward

- On a scale of 1—10, how valued do you feel at work?
- Do you feel that you're fairly paid for your efforts?
- When was the last time a co-worker recognized you for doing your job well?
- When was the last time you acknowledged a co-worker for something they did well?
- Is there a specific task or project where you felt your work was undervalued?
- On a scale of 1—10, how appreciated do you feel by those in leadership positions? What could be done to improve that?

Community

- On a scale of 1—10, how well would you say you get along with your co-workers? (1—not well, 10—We get along great!)
- Do you like and enjoy being around members of your team?
- Is there any personal conflict at work that makes being there unpleasant?
- What could be done to improve how your team gets along?
- Do you have a “best friend” at work?
- For remote workers: Do you feel connected to your colleagues from a distance? What could be done to improve that?

Fairness

- Do your performance evaluations reflect the reality of how you have to do your job?
- Is there a recent occasion where you think your work, or someone else's work, wasn't fairly valued or evaluated? If so, what made that unfair?
- On a scale of 1—10, how respected do you feel by your: Coworkers? Your supervisor? The people you supervise? Customers/Clients?
- Do you feel like you're given enough opportunities to offer feedback about your working conditions?
- Do you feel that feedback will be acted on?

Values

- Do you ever feel like you have to make ethical compromises in order to do your job?
- What do you find most rewarding at work?
- When was the last time you enjoyed/ felt excited by the work you were doing? What would need to change so that you could do more of that?
- What could your employer do to help you feel more motivated?

The Canary In The Coalmine

Dr. Christina Maslach, renowned burnout researcher, has described burnout as “the canary in the coalmine.” If a canary is struggling to breathe in the mine, it doesn't make sense to tell it to toughen up and be more resilient, or to relax and find work/life balance. It makes sense to pay attention to what the canary is signaling. Only when the toxicity of the mine is fixed will people be able to safely and effectively work.

Coping vs. Prevention

Too often workplaces respond to burnout by offering individuals [strategies for coping](#) with stress: exercise, time off, etc. These mechanisms are helpful when stress crops up in an otherwise healthy workplace. However, if a work environment has reached a point that people are burned out, no amount of individual stress management can repair the system. In fact, expecting already burned-out people to “fix themselves” only creates more stress.

By [widening the focus](#) to include not only personal stress management, but also the correction of systemic causes, existing burnout can be healed and further damage can be prevented.

If you're feeling burned out and burned up, the Behavioral Health Team at Sawtooth Mountain Clinic is here to help. Just call 218-387-2330 to set up an appointment.

