We experience a burnout when demands are such that they exceed our capacity to meet them. We are often the authors of those excessive demands. Is this good news? Yes, because it means we hold the cure.

**The nature of professional burnout**
Burnout is defined as an intense syndrome of psychological work-related distress. It manifests itself in three clear ways: deep-rooted emotional fatigue, a detached and cynical attitude towards work, and a major drop in any sense of accomplishment at work. However, any specific diagnosis of professional burnout is also the subject of much discussion.

**Accumulation of prolonged stress**
Burnout is triggered by an accumulation of prolonged stress stemming from unrealistic ideals related to one's performance and the quest for professional success at any cost. The good news is there are ways of preventing or at least slowing down the onset of burnout by learning to recognize its signs.

**Depression or burnout?**
Depression and burnout are completely different conditions with equally different treatments, which is why it's so important to know what the differences are. To do so, remember that the symptoms of burnout are strictly related to work, while depression involves all facets of a person's life: family, friends, work, etc. Someone who's experiencing depression loses interest in life as a whole and feels no desire to have any fun at all, whereas burnout is more about losing interest in one's work. Slowly but surely, emotional exhaustion leads to isolation and the other areas of a person's life begin to suffer the strain. Someone who's suffering from depression is already discouraged and is already battling mental fatigue; work may not be the root cause of the symptoms, but it can be the “last straw.”

Another way of distinguishing between these conditions is to study the causes. While burnout is usually triggered by unreasonable professional ambitions, depression is usually the result of a series of life-altering events: losing a loved one, the birth of a child, job change, sickness, etc. Depression can also be caused by a biochemical imbalance in the brain, influences in one's immediate surroundings (family, culture, society), or dominant personality traits. Antidepressants target these imbalances.
The four phases of burnout

Professional burnout is marked by a range of physical, emotional and intellectual symptoms and is known to develop in four main stages:

Idealism
You’re working at maximum energy all the time and you’re highly motivated. Ambitious, you’re shooting for nothing less than the best. You invest all of your time and energy in your work, especially when completing the most demanding tasks.

Hitting a wall
You realize that despite all of your efforts, you just aren’t achieving your goals. Moreover, you dismiss any compliments you may receive and feel that your efforts aren’t recognized by your employer and co-workers. Instead of revisiting your objectives or your definition of a job well done, you roll up your sleeves and vow to work even harder, including on evenings and weekends.

Disillusionment
This period is marked by deep frustration. You feel as though your efforts are not being adequately acknowledged and that you are always asked to do more. You are disappointed and tired and you don’t believe you will ever reach your goals. Impatient and irritable, you are starting to take medication so that you can work harder and get some sleep. Other symptoms are starting to affect your day-to-day existence.

Despondency
You are feeling discouraged and despondent. Your energy reserves are depleted and you’ve lost all interest in your work. You are experiencing professional burnout.

Any stress-related situation is most easily reversed in the Idealism phase. Before you run out of steam and get discouraged, you can take advantage of this period of high energy to step back and refocus your energies on yourself. This may keep you from falling into the advanced stages of this syndrome and may therefore help prevent any disability.

The telling signs
Since professional burnout can creep up on you slowly, the physical and psychological signs of it are less obvious in the early stages of the condition. Obvious mood swings and irritability are the first two signs of professional burnout.

The physical symptoms can include general fatigue, trouble digesting, nausea, backaches, migraines, insomnia and weight loss.

On an emotional level, the symptoms are often marked by irritability, impatience, despair, negativity, low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, an aversion to work, anxiety, being overly sensitive, feeling let down and abandoned, and rage and aggression.

Some symptoms manifest on a more cognitive or intellectual level: memory loss, easy distraction, indecisiveness, confusion and loss of focus/concentration.

High-risk individuals
While no one is shielded from the possibility of professional burnout, those who work in the caregiving field (healthcare, education, correctional facilities) have a higher risk of suffering from burnout, given the demands their professions make on their energy and personal resources.
Perfectionists, and those who demand nothing but the best from themselves, are at a higher risk of experiencing burnout.

Preventing burnout

According to health professionals, to prevent any type of work-related exhaustion, it is important to adopt a less rigid attitude toward work and to give one’s self a break every now and then. Learning to say no and taking on a workload that you know you can handle are not signs of weakness; they are signs that you know your own limits.

Outside of the workplace, experts suggest regularly taking part in activities that help manage stress. For example, yoga, meditation, sports or anything that allows for a creative outlet.

There exist many community programs designed to help us understand and overcome stress and overwork. Some companies have their own programs in place to help employees redefine happiness and professional success.

Finally, changing one’s philosophy, thinking differently and trying to adopt a new attitude toward work, is not an easy solution. It takes courage. But it’s the first step toward success.

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