

Breaking Point: Recognizing the Signs of Burnout

Summary

Stress is inevitable; burnout is not. While stress feels like "too much" (too much pressure, too much work), burnout feels like "not enough" (not enough energy, motivation, or care). It is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Recognizing the difference is the first step to recovery, which often requires disconnecting rather than just "resting."

We often wear our exhaustion like a badge of honor. "I'm so stressed," we say, reaching for another coffee. But there is a line where normal stress crosses into something more dangerous: **Burnout**.

Burnout isn't just a bad week at work. In 2019, the World Health Organization officially recognized it as an "occupational phenomenon." It changes how your brain functions and how you view the world.

Stress vs. Burnout: The Difference

- **Stress** is characterized by *over-engagement*. You feel frantic, anxious, and hyperactive. You care *too much*.
- **Burnout** is characterized by *disengagement*. You feel numb, cynical, and empty. You stop caring at all.

The Three Red Flags

1. **Exhaustion:** Not just sleepy, but drained to the core. A weekend of sleep doesn't fix it.
2. **Cynicism:** You feel detached from your job or people. You might start feeling negative, irritable, or feeling that nothing you do matters.
3. **Inefficacy:** You feel like you can't accomplish anything. Simple tasks take hours. You doubt your own skills.

The Path Back

You can't "lifehack" your way out of burnout. You have to subtract, not add.

- **Disconnect:** True recovery requires psychological detachment from work. That means no checking emails after hours.
- **Rediscover Non-Work You:** Re-engage with hobbies that have no "goal." Paint poorly. Walk slowly. Remind yourself you are more than your productivity.

Sources Cited:

- World Health Organization (WHO). (2019). *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon"*.
- Mayo Clinic. (2023). *Job burnout: How to spot it and take action*.
- Cleveland Clinic. (n.d.). *Burnout: Symptoms and Signs*.