

# When Stress Flirts With Burnout

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. You are a professional who is accustomed to stress, but all the uncertainty and anxiety in the workplace these days is putting you under more pressure than usual. You feel burned out — are you?

A. Determine whether you're suffering from burnout by assessing how you feel both mentally and physically, said Debbie Mandel, a stress management expert in Lawrence, N.Y., and author of "Addicted to Stress."

Ms. Mandel suggested asking yourself these questions about the signs of burnout: Do you have various aches and pains that come and go? Do you have trouble focusing? Are you very irritable with others and, if so, why? Are you having more conflicts than usual with people at work? Are you fatigued all the time?

"Awareness is key," Ms. Mandel said. "Just knowing this is happening is a start, because then you can work to counteract it."

Look for physical symptoms, too, because stress can cause problems like insomnia, backaches, headaches and chest pain, said Dr. Lorrie Elliott, associate medical director of the Center for Partnership Medicine, an executive health program at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Although these symptoms are often stress-related, if they are severe or persistent, you should seek help from a physician to see if there are underlying health problems, Dr. Elliott said.

Rebecca Weingarten, an executive coach and co-founder of DLC Executive Coaching and Consulting in New York, said her clients were reporting burnout even though they regularly operated under high levels of stress.

"These are new stressors, like fear of the unknown, having to manage and motivate employees during very difficult times or keeping productivity up with a reduced work force," she said.

Q. What steps can you take to prevent burnout?

A. Start by recognizing that this is a difficult time for American business and that anxiety and uncertainty are now facts of life, said Robert Rosen, a

psychologist and chief executive of Healthy Companies International, a management consulting firm in Arlington, Va.

Change your expectations from idealistic to realistic, he said: “Expect life to be tough sometimes but also expect that you are resilient and will bounce back. Focus on the positives in your life — like family or hobbies — because it’s rare that everything falls apart at once,” said Dr. Rosen, who is also the author of “Just Enough Anxiety.”

Make time for exercise and be conscious of your diet. Good nutrition and exercise help fight depression and lethargy. Block out time for things you enjoy outside of work, like painting, music or time with family, Dr. Elliott said. “Set aside some time each day — at least an hour — where you focus on something relaxing and meaningful to you other than work.” she said.

Q. If it’s too late to prevent burnout, can you reverse it?

A. Yes. Regaining some balance between work and the rest of your life will relieve the stress and accompanying symptoms, said Gayle Lantz, president of the leadership consulting firm WorkMatters in Birmingham, Ala.

Try dividing your day into 60- to 90-minute chunks where you are highly focused on a task or project, then leave your desk and take a complete break from work, she said: “Go for a walk, have a cup of coffee, but leave the space where you are working and totally disengage for 15 minutes.”

It’s crucial to lower the level of stress hormones in your body — the ones engaged in the “fight or flight” response. You can do that by meditating, even for a few minutes.

Judith Orloff, a psychiatrist, assistant clinical professor at [UCLA](#) and author of “Emotional Freedom,” suggested that professionals experiencing stress meditate for several minutes at least twice a day, but especially when feeling overwhelmed. “Close your eyes, focus on an image you find replenishing, such as a waterfall or a sunset, and breathe deeply,” she said. “Focus only on your breathing, nothing else. This calms both your body and mind.”

Connect with peers who have also experienced high levels of stress, Ms. Lantz said. “Many times what contributes to burnout is what is going on in someone’s mind, not in reality,” she said.

Q. It will probably take a while for the economy to turn around and for workplace anxiety to subside. If you're a manager, how can you lead others during this period so they feel less stressed?

A. Try to have people concentrate on their work, rather than worrying about things like the financial health of the company or who was recently laid off. "Get people to focus on execution, on getting their job done," Dr. Rosen said. You will also need your team's help to reduce your own stress, as you rely more heavily on its work.

Make sure to let each person who works for you know that he or she is very valuable and why, Ms. Weingarten said. "Acknowledge there are negative things happening," she said, "but that you all need to move forward in spite of them, and that when hiring starts again they are the ones you will be thinking about for promotions."

*E-mail: [ccouch@nytimes.com](mailto:ccouch@nytimes.com).*