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Burnout

A Two-Minute Burnout Checkup

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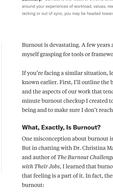

Summary. Burnout is the result of chronic stress and, at work, that stress tends accumulate around your experiences of workload, values, reward, control, fairness, and community. If any are lacking or out of sync, you may be headed toward exhaustion, cynicism, and the feeling... more

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Burnout is devastating. A few years ago, deep in the throes of it, I found myself grasping for tools or frameworks to help me get to the other side.

If you're facing a similar situation, let me share a few things I wish I had known earlier. First, I'll outline the basics about the signs of burnout and the aspects of our work that tend to cause it. Second, I'll share a two-minute burnout checkup I created to monitor my own mental well-being and to make sure I don't reach the point of burning out again.

What, Exactly, Is Burnout?

One misconception about burnout is that it's the same as exhaustion. But in charting with Dr. Christina Maslach, a leading burnout researcher and author of *The Burnout Challenge: Managing People's Relationships with Their Jobs*, I learned that burnout goes beyond exhaustion, though that is a painful part. In fact, there are three core attributes of burnout:

- First, we feel exhausted and as though we have no energy to do good work.
- Second, we feel cynical and have negative attitudes toward our projects. We also experience a sense of disassociation from those projects and from the people around us, whether coworkers, friends, or family.
- Third, burnout makes us feel ineffective, by no means accomplishing significantly less than usual and can't muster the fortitude to be productive.

Experiencing any one of these dimensions serves as a precursor to being fully burned out. But there's more to it. To really understand what's causing burnout, you have to dissect and pinpoint its sources.

Ultimately, there is really only one thing in our work (and life) that causes burnout: an overwhelming amount of chronic stress.

Unlike acute stress, which is temporary and akin to a tunnel we must navigate through to reach the light on the other side, chronic stress never lets up. At work, it may come from falling behind on an endless stream of emails, ongoing conflicts with coworkers, or being buried beneath a never-ending pile of tasks.

Maslach's research has found that chronic stress at work usually comes from six primary sources:

Workload. How sustainable the amount of work on our plate is. The more our workload eclipses our capacity, the more likely we are to reach the point of burnout.

Values. What lets us connect with our work on a deeper level. This may sound wishy-washy, but the more our work aligns with what we value, the more meaningful it feels and engaged we become. Both help us avoid burnout.

Reward. The level of reward we get from our job — including financial rewards (salary, bonuses, stock options, etc.) and social rewards (whether we're recognized for the contributions we make). Insufficient reward can make us feel ineffective, one of the core attributes of burnout.

Control. The autonomy we have over when, where, and how we do our work. The less control we have, the more likely we are to burn out.

Fairness. The feeling that we're treated equitably at work relative to our colleagues. Fairness is an important ingredient that promotes engagement and keeps cynicism at bay.

Community. Maintaining productive contribute enormously to minimizing burnout and boosting engagement. The weaker our relationships and the more conflict we experience, the more likely we are to burn out.

While burnout is traditionally defined as an occupational phenomenon, the ongoing stressors we face at home can also count toward our total level of chronic stress. The bottom line is this: The more chronic stress we face, no matter where it's coming from, the more likely we are to burn out.

The Two-Minute Burnout Checkup

So how to know if you're heading toward burnout? It's possible to track your burnout status through one easy, quick activity.

The two-minute burnout checkup is a simple assessment I created to gauge how close I might be to burning out. If you're looking for a more reliable measurement to determine your burnout status — or if you find that you're close to burnout through this activity — it's important to consult a mental health professional or a test like the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which can be taken online for around $15 at the time of writing.

My two-minute activity is simply meant to give you a rough and subjective lay of the land — and when you do it on a regular basis, a trend line — for how you're feeling at a point in time and whether you're heading in the right direction.

With these disclaimers out of the way, here's the practical, tactical bit.

To do the checkup, write down how much stress, on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 being negligible stress, 10 being extreme stress), you experience from each of the six factors of burnout. For example, if you're finding it tough to connect with colleagues after a long period of working from home, you might score community an 8. Conversely, you might rank workload a 2 if you have a good amount to do but that the amount of work is manageable. You can use the table that follows to try this activity out.

Your score — the sum of all the dimensions out of 60 — will show how well you're doing in the moment. While the total number of points is important, what's more useful is your score in each of the six categories. If you're anything like me, this activity will probably show that you're healthy in some dimensions and unhealthy in others.

The Two-Minute Burnout Checkup

Rate your level of stress from 0 to 10 on all six factors of burnout, with 0 equaling negligible stress and 10 equaling extreme stress. Add the numbers to get your general burnout score out of 60, and pay attention to specific burnout factors that score particularly high.

Burnout factors	LEVEL OF STRESS (0–10)
Workload: Sustainability of the amount of work on your plate	
Values: Whether you connect with your work on a deeper level	
Reward: Both financial rewards (salary, bonuses, stock options, etc.) and social rewards (whether you're recognized for your contributions)	
Control: The autonomy you have over when, where, and how you do your work	
Fairness: The feeling that you're treated equitably at work relative to your colleagues	
Community: Professional relationships that boost engagement	
	Total: /60

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This level of awareness can help you create a more targeted plan going forward. Let's say your workload is hovering at a 9. Try making a list of all the activities your job entails. Pick three that let you contribute most to your team. This is your core work. From here, consider meeting with your boss or team to clarify what's truly important and see if there's a way to delegate or eliminate some of the tasks, and as a result, reduce your overall stress.

Some of these stress factors are more systemic than others and more difficult to tackle over a short period of time or through one-off conversations. Depending on your workplace, fairness can be a particularly tough one to crack. The effort that it takes to create a more fair and equitable environment may even generate more stress than making the decision to leave a workplace all together. Ultimately, there is no universal answer for how to reduce these sources of chronic stress, but identifying them is an important first step.

This activity also works in reverse, to track how well you're doing across the six areas. Given that the opposite of burnout is engagement, this activity may prove equally valuable to assess the more positive gains coming from your work.

For example, maybe you notice a low stress score in the reward category of the checkup. Thinking back, you realize it's because you received your consulting rates and are finally feeling as though your level of compensation is on par with your experience. Or maybe your values stress score is low because you recently advocated to lead a project that lets you connect with a subject area you love. Reflecting on why you scored low for stress in these categories can help reveal the practices you made to get there so you can potentially apply those same steps again in the future.

Use your best judgement when doing the activity. Having a few factors out of whack is often enough to come face-to-face with burnout, particularly when you're also experiencing the three characteristics of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.

I do this two-minute burnout checkup every few months — when the projects that make up my work change enough to warrant a recalculation. Or, if I'm feeling some combination of cynical, exhausted, and ineffective, I'll tally up my score even sooner.

After experiencing burnout once, I've come to love this simple technique for calculating how close I am to reaching that point again. It gives you a bigger picture look at your sources of stress so you can come up with ways to better handle them or change the situation all together. Bringing this level of mindfulness to your work can help you stay engaged rather than counting on autopilot. It can also help your levels of chronic stress in check so you can move through tasks with greater intention — a huge benefit for productivity.

Burnout is not pleasant. But because our work stress tends to originate from six sources, it's possible to approximate how close we are to reaching our personal limits. In such a stressful time, I hope this two-minute burnout checkup is a helpful addition to your toolbox of mental resilience strategies.

Chris Bailey is an author who explores the science behind living a deeper, more productive life. His latest book, *[How to Calm Your Mind](#)* (Viking), is about the productivity benefits of a calm state of mind. Also the author of *Hyperfocus* (Viking) and *The Productivity Project* (Currency), Bailey's books have been published in 16 languages. He writes a regular column at ChrisBailey.com and speaks to audiences around the world about becoming more productive without losing the process.

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