Recognising and Preventing Burnout

Many of us know the feeling of a hard week at work. But when the pressure never stops, it can slowly turn into burnout. The World Health Organization describes burnout, in the eleventh revision of its International Classification of Diseases, as an occupational phenomenon: the result of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is not classified as a medical condition, and it refers only to experiences at work. The psychologist Christina Maslach, who has studied burnout for decades, helps us understand its three signs and how to prevent it. This summary gives general information, not medical advice.

1. Exhaustion

The first sign is exhaustion: a deep feeling of being drained of energy. It is more than normal tiredness, because rest no longer seems to help. People wake up tired, struggle to concentrate, and find every task hard. It signals that job demands have been higher than our resources for too long.

Example: A friend who works as a nurse sleeps all weekend and still feels tired on Monday. We recognise the first sign, exhaustion, and she decides to discuss her many night shifts with her manager.

At work: Lamia, a customer service team leader, has covered two empty positions for six months. She notices exhaustion: even short emails now feel heavy, and she is tired before the day begins. She writes down her working hours and sees that she has had no real break for months.

2. Mental Distance

The second sign is mental distance from the job, sometimes felt as negativity or cynicism. People care less about their work, customers or colleagues. They may feel irritated, make bitter jokes, or simply do the minimum. But over time, it takes away the meaning and the enjoyment of work.

Example: A teacher who once loved planning lessons now says that nothing he does makes a difference. A colleague notices this mental distance and asks what has changed, and he admits feeling alone since his classes grew.

At work: Lamia catches herself calling customers annoying before she even hears their problems. She recognises the second sign, mental distance, in her own words. She realises that she has stopped seeing customers as people, and she starts to look for the cause.

3. Reduced Efficacy

The third sign is reduced professional efficacy: the feeling that we are no longer good at our job. People doubt their skills, achieve less, and stop noticing their successes. Often the skills are still there, but energy and confidence have faded. This sign can feed the other two, creating a downward circle. Seeing it clearly is the first step to breaking that circle.

Example: An experienced accountant starts checking every number three times because she no longer trusts herself. A friend points out this reduced efficacy, and the accountant remembers that her work has always been accurate.

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At work: Lamia feels that her team's results are her personal failure, although customer ratings are still good. She sees reduced efficacy in this feeling, not a lack of skill. Now that she has named all three signs, she decides to ask for help.

4. Six Areas Behind Burnout

Maslach and her colleague Michael Leiter found that burnout grows from a mismatch between people and their job in six areas. These areas are workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Too much work with too few resources is the most obvious mismatch. A lack of control, recognition, support, fairness or shared values can make things worse. So burnout is not a personal weakness, but a sign of a poor fit between the person and the job.

Example: A young engineer finds that his workload is fine, but his ideas are never recognised. Looking at the six areas, he sees that reward is his mismatch, and he asks his manager for regular feedback.

At work: Lamia uses the six areas to look at her own situation. Workload is the clear mismatch, because two positions have been empty for six months. She also notices a lack of control, because she cannot change the team's schedule herself.

5. Practical Prevention

Preventing burnout works best when both the person and the organisation act. Organisations can set realistic workloads, give people a say in their work, recognise effort and treat everyone fairly. Individuals can protect their sleep, take real breaks, limit their working hours and stay close to supportive people. If the signs are strong or long-lasting, it is important to see a doctor or another qualified professional.

Example: A shop owner who works seven days a week decides to prevent burnout by closing the shop one day each week. After a month, she sleeps better and enjoys her shop again.

At work: Lamia meets her manager and explains the workload mismatch with clear facts. They agree on prevention steps: a temporary hire, a fair shift plan and a firm end to her working day. Within weeks, Lamia has more energy and enjoys helping customers again.

Conclusion

In summary, the World Health Organization sees burnout as an occupational phenomenon with three signs: exhaustion, mental distance and reduced efficacy. Christina Maslach's work shows that it grows from mismatches in six areas of work. Recognising the signs early allows us to act before burnout becomes serious. Rest, fair workloads and good support keep both people and teams healthy.

Sources

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- General information only, not medical advice.

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