

# ARE YOU HEADING FOR BURNOUT?

**More people than ever are stressed, exhausted and unfulfilled – but carry on with their lives in the same way, regardless. Elisabeth Wilson says that we ignore these feelings at our peril...** Illustrations Jason Ford

**D**o you feel irritated a lot of the time – tired, stressed and stretched to the limit by the demands of your life? According to a recent study into quality of life by the Chartered Management Institute, more than 55 per cent of us suffer regularly from insomnia, and 43 per cent from anger and irritability. And these symptoms, says the Stress Management Society, are associated with the first stages of 'burnout'.

A recent study from the University of Helsinki also indicates that burnout is far more common than previously thought, particularly in staff who are overworked. Although we usually associate this kind of meltdown with high-flying jobs, such as those in banking or law, in fact, the highest incidences are among teachers and primary-health-care workers.

So what does burnout feel like? It often starts with tiredness, quickly followed by exhaustion. You might cry for no obvious reason and stop

caring about your job, your future – yourself. You may become cynical or feel defeated and start self-medicating (perhaps drinking more than usual). Your GP might prescribe antidepressants or sleeping tablets to deal with the symptoms. You could experience inexplicable aches and pains – frozen shoulder, gut problems,

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chronic headaches – or find yourself succumbing to one bug after another. Eventually, if it's not arrested, you could reach the point of collapse.

'I am seeing more people than ever who are seeking help with stress disorders that could, if left untreated, lead to burnout,' says Dr Patrizia Collard of the University of East

London, a psychotherapist who specialises in treating stress with cognitive behavioural therapy. 'Patients complain of sleep difficulties and anxiety. They may find themselves crying for no apparent reason.'

Burnout looks like depression, but it isn't treatable with a pill. It's a sickness of the soul. One textbook definition of burnout is 'a state of

time to your job. Research shows that marriage and children protect against burnout. A job won't love you back no matter how much you invest in it, so people who have put all their efforts into work can be more prone to burnout, while those who have spread their emotional energy over a wider field are able to avoid it.

Burnout is more likely when rewards don't live up to expectations – and it's not always about money. 'Burnout is not just about the "big job",' says Hermione Elliott, a therapist who specialises in treating the condition. 'It is about losing our idea of ourselves; about struggling on even when the circumstances of our lives no longer work for us.'

If you're not worried about yourself, perhaps you should be concerned about your children. Another myth about burnout is that it's just another name for midlife crisis. In fact, it is increasingly common in those who haven't yet hit their 30th birthday. 'I'd say 20 per cent of my

fatigue and frustration due to a devotion to a way of life that does not produce the expected reward'. 'Devotion to a way of life' doesn't necessarily refer to a job – it could be about a relationship or a lifestyle choice. But dissatisfaction with work does seem to be the premier cause. And, of course, dedicating too much





clients are seeking help at a younger age than one would have expected in the past,' says Hermione Elliott. It makes sense. Youth means more idealism, more expectations – more room for crashing disappointments. 'I'm seeing a definite trend in those in their 20s succumbing to burnout,' says Dr Collard. 'They have grown up in a highly competitive world that promises a huge amount to those people deemed "successful", without acknowledging that very few of us make the right choice of career, partner or lifestyle on our first attempt.' Young people are fed the myth of the perfect life and feel that they should be certain about what they want to do – experimentation is far more of a dirty word than it ever was for previous generations.

'I was one of Thatcher's children and had a typical middle-class education, where the emphasis was on academic achievement, whether it would make you happy or not,' says Lucy, who was 28 when she

burned out. 'You worked hard, you got a job – it was accepted that there wasn't too much room for error or starting down the wrong path.' Lucy was idealistic in her choice of profession – she wanted to help people, so she started out as a freelance community arts worker. But it was a 'precarious profession; very stressful. I had either too much work or too little,' she recalls. Also, once she had embarked on her career, she wasn't sure that it was right for her. 'There was a voice inside me saying, "This isn't me – but what is?" But I ignored it.' Lucy got a virus. Although unwell, she returned to work. 'I just kept forcing myself on. The worse I felt, the harder I worked,' she says. Eventually, miserable and exhausted, she simply couldn't work any more. 'I gave up everything and went home to my parents. I didn't have a clue what to do,' she says.

Many of us know that we're not happy, but we don't know what to do next. It is sometimes easier to ►

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

These pointers are adapted from Dina Glouberman's *The Joy of Burnout*. 'How many ticks constitute burnout?' she asks. 'There is no answer to this – but it's a good way to spot the warning signs.' You could feel many of these things and not be burning out. Your doctor may be able to help with some symptoms, but if you feel that it is more of a 'soul sickness' than a medical problem, then it may be time to think hard about what you really want from life.

- Work is no longer a pleasure
- Activities with friends and family are no longer fun
- You are doing more but accomplishing less
- Things will fall apart if you stop
- You are not doing as much as you should
- Everyone else is talking or doing things too slowly
- You feel out of control
- What you do makes no difference anyway
- You're always worrying
- You're not as effective at doing what you've always done
- There's a growing sense of mental, emotional and/or physical exhaustion
- You feel cut off
- You feel emotionally dead, angry, and with a loss of appetite for food, sex, life
- Concentrating is difficult
- You are doing more of (or some of) the following: watching TV, drinking, eating junk food, shopping, casual sex, using internet chatrooms
- You're experiencing physical problems, especially pain in the head, gut, back or viral illness



◀ keep going than to stop and find answers. And the more effort that we have put into attaining that ultimately unsatisfying career or unfulfilling relationship, the harder it is to admit that we've made a mistake. For Lucy, giving up on her training, her business and her desire to help others was excruciating – and she was young and single. For those of us further down the road, giving up our commitment to a certain lifestyle can seem impossible, especially when it will mean changes for the whole family. But experts warn that we face serious consequences if we don't make changes. 'What I'm hoping is that those people who are heading for burnout recognise the symptoms, seek help and make changes in time, before they collapse completely – perhaps suffering from ME [myalgic encephalitis] for years,' says Hermione Elliott.

'Of course there's nothing wrong with wanting what I call the "big life" – the big job, big house, big holiday,' she says, 'as long as you're happy. But the real root of burnout is not working hard or being stressed. It's when we lose heart in our life. What usually happens is that we suppress the inner voice that's telling us something is wrong until some life change occurs which means we can't ignore that we're on the wrong course.'

'To highlight how difficult it is to get through this period, I compare it to dealing with the death of a loved one. When we realise that we've been expending all this time and energy in the wrong direction, it hits us as hard as a bereavement.'

At 45, Chris was one of those people who was brought up to 'just keep going'. She was happy with her situation until a series of life changes – and her soldiering-on attitude – led her to the point of burnout. The main event was the death of her mother, with whom she had always had a difficult relationship.

Chris cut her working hours as an occupational therapist in a bid to cope with the emotional turmoil and bureaucratic administration involved in winding up her mother's estate. But she ended up simply squeezing



## 'There's nothing wrong with wanting the "big life" – big job, big house, big holiday – as long as you're happy'

her full-time role into fewer hours, which led to more stress. Looking back, the strain was obvious, but Chris just kept going. 'It was taking me longer and longer to carry out tasks that I used to complete in no time at all. I was exhausted, I couldn't stop crying – I was in a terrible state. My doctor tested me for anaemia and thyroid disease – both negative,' says Chris. 'Then I read a magazine article which mentioned a book called *The Joy of Burnout* [Hodder Mobius]. When I bought it, I read it from cover to cover four times.' The central message of this book, by Dr Dina Glouberman, who herself burned out, is that 'burnout is the state of mind reached by those who have come to the end of a particular road but haven't acknowledged this'. The 'joy' bit comes from Dr Glouberman's conviction that 'it can be a door to a life of joy, of a sense of being able to be one's true self'.

Chris finally admitted that she was miserable at work, but still she couldn't resign. 'I'm not a quitter,' she says, 'but I discovered that I was entitled to a year's sabbatical. This was a way of leaving that was acceptable for me – not quitting, just taking a break. For the first six months, I slept. I tried counselling through my GP, but that made things worse.' Knowing instinctively that she had much to come to terms with following her mother's death and the other changes in her life, Chris continued to look for help. 'Eventually I did find a therapist

who helped me. I went back to work at the end of the year, but lasted just two weeks. Nothing had changed there, but I had. During the sabbatical, I started doing a City and Guilds course in floristry to pass the time. I loved it, so I decided to continue with that.

'Now I'm a florist. Despite being made redundant from my first position and wondering who would want a fairly inexperienced woman in her 50s, I found another job that suits me even better than the previous one. I guess I'm resilient again. Life is back on an even keel.'

There are similarities between Lucy and Chris. They have high standards and say things like, 'You've just got to get on with it' and, 'I was angry with myself for not sorting things out.'

Lucy, now 32, remembers that just before she got too ill to work, she was working harder than ever before. 'I kept pushing myself, as if it would blot out the voice telling me to stop.' She sought counselling during her time at her parents and learned that people like her, who long to help others, have to learn to look after themselves first. Now she is training to be a counsellor, but this time things are different. 'What I've learnt is that instead of pouring more and more energy into things in an effort to fix them, I've got to keep some back for myself,' she says. ■

For more info, visit Hermione Elliott's website at [burnoutsolutions.com](http://burnoutsolutions.com) and Dr Collard's at [stressminus.co.uk](http://stressminus.co.uk)

## HOW TO STAY WELL

● Research shows that people who are married with children aren't so prone to burnout because there is less chance of their lives getting out of balance and going in just one direction.

● Treasure yourself. 'After 28, we don't produce as much growth hormone,' says Dr Collard. 'Your body is now a vintage model and looking after yourself is essential.

Otherwise, life becomes like trying to drive a car up hill in fourth gear. Eating healthily and taking time to go for a walk or practise yoga, or some other gentle exercise that appeals to you, will help you to find a balance.'

● Find a way to be in the 'now'. Burnout is characterised by an inability to switch off. Establishing a comfort zone where you can relax is a simple and effective way to de-stress. 'The more resistant you are to meditation and consciously stilling your mind, the more you could benefit,' says Dr Collard. 'I find that the clients who are the least interested are often the greatest converts when they actually give it a go.'

● Be quiet long enough to listen to what your body is trying to tell you. 'Unexplained illness, irritation, exhaustion, tears – your body is sending you a message,' says Hermione Elliott. 'But you have to listen. And remember that it takes courage just to listen to your inner voice, let alone act on it, so don't be too hard on yourself. But by listening there is a chance that you can build a life you enjoy.'