
Thrive

“I can’t keep doing this!”: Five ways to reduce personal burnout risk

by AMANDA WALLIS

If stress from work is leading to recurring thoughts in your mind like, “I can’t keep doing this” or “Stuff this, I’m quitting”, it’s possible that you’re experiencing the WHO-defined “[organisational phenomenon](#)” called burnout.

And, unfortunately, a lot of New Zealanders share the same experience – with up to three-quarters of us experiencing burnout annually according to recent [estimates of prevalence in 2020](#). While burnout looks different for everyone, it usually includes symptoms of ongoing exhaustion, negative feelings and cynicism towards work, and reduced productivity and effectiveness. It’s also likely to spill into other domains of life, including impacting on your family life and your ongoing physical and mental health.

So, what can we do about it? A lot of the contributing factors to burnout are [organisational in nature](#), meaning that we can often feel hopeless in the face of our burnout. But it’s important to note that burnout only arises when chronic stress is not well-managed and mitigated. It’s true that much of the onus to manage and mitigate stress lies with organisational cultures that promote over-work and do little to minimise employee stress. But, while waiting for organisational change, there are also [steps that we can each take to protect ourselves](#).

CARVE OUT CLEAR WORK-HOME BOUNDARIES

The more intentionally you separate out your work and your home life, the better you are able to enjoy the [psychological downtime](#) you get away from work. It’s hard to “come down” from the stress we experience at work if we are constantly reminded of it when we are at home.

If you can, we recommend having a separate work phone/laptop that you can physically switch off at the end of the day

(and not have any work-related notifications come through to your personal devices!). If you work from home, try to clean up your work space or close the office door so that there are fewer visual cues of work when you are in “home” mode.

It’s also important to be very intentional with your [transition between “work” and “home”](#). For some, this will mean keeping your commute sacred as a special time to reflect on the work day, resolve any stuck points, and mentally re-set before getting home. For others, it might mean a walk around the block, or a few rounds of deep breathing before leaving the work desk.

BOOST PERSONAL RESILIENCE

[Resilient habits](#) can help us manage (and even thrive) in the face of stress at home and at work. Some may feel more obvious – such as investing in meaningful relationships, exercising, and sleeping well. But others – such as boosting our emotional agility and mental fitness – may be slightly more unfamiliar.

While we can’t always control the source of stress (e.g. workload), we can control how we respond to it. One way of managing difficult emotions is through [shifting our thinking](#) (cognitive reappraisal). For example, depersonalising a situation can reduce our sense of overload, so instead of, “This person is angry with me”, try “This person is upset, that’s why they are shouting”. We can also check which of our thinking patterns we are most prone to resorting to, when work pressure is high. Do you often imagine the worst (“I’ll lose my job if I don’t meet this deadline”), over-generalise (“Nothing is going right in my life”) or engage in should-talk (“I should be quicker at getting this done”)? Identifying these patterns and challenging them is an important step in building our resilience.



CRAFT YOUR JOB

[Meaning and purpose](#) is another key dimension of resilience and we can get a lot of it from our jobs. Given that a symptom of burnout can be negativism and cynicism towards work, it might be difficult for you to immediately connect with the meaning you get out of your work. Sometimes it's necessary to craft your job to fit your needs and your strengths.

According to [research](#), job crafting can involve asking for resources (i.e. seeking help from colleagues or managers) and seeking demands/challenges (i.e. asking to do work that is more meaningful to you). It might also mean that you take a strengths-based approach to work, where you identify your signature strengths and actively seek out work that engages them. Working with your [signature strengths](#) does not always mean changing your job drastically – it can mean reframing your work (e.g. packing grocery bags) in a way that gives greater meaning and purpose (e.g. a chance to engage with people from all walks of life).

PRIORITISE RECOVERY, REST AND CONNECTION

[Rest and recovery](#) are absolutely crucial to reducing burnout risk, and the mental and physical consequences of chronic stress. Here at Umbrella, we often talk about prioritising the three Rs of relaxation: rest, recreation and relationships. We need enough of each of these, and we need them on a regular basis – not just during holiday periods. Rest involves time just being – sitting and listening to music, taking a bath, or listening to the birdsong outside – whereas recreation time could be gardening, exercising, or reading. These are activities that lift us up and enrich our lives as opposed to media of which we are passive recipients (e.g. watching trash television on Netflix).

When it comes to [relationship/connection](#) time, be sure to regularly engage with others in meaningful ways. When it comes to reducing burnout risk, this can mean utilising our mentors, our managers, and our colleagues to seek advice on how to cope with stress. In our personal lives, it means carving out quality time with our partners, children, friends, and other family – and recognising that this time is a key component of recovery that cannot be skimmed on.

CHECK THE SOCIAL NORMS IN YOUR TEAM

This conversation can be manager-led or started from the bottom-up. Start with asking yourself a few questions, and then consider starting conversations with your colleagues.

What are the unwritten rules and expectations that operate in your team around working hours, email availability, and taking breaks? Do you find yourself, or other colleagues, judging or making comments when team members deviate from these norms?

It's important to watch your language around others, including outwardly celebrating colleagues for working late and on weekends, disparaging those who leave work on time every day, or feeling resentful towards those who use up their annual leave (causing the rest of you to work extra hard to cover them because the organisation does not provide adequate staffing levels). Through commenting on these actions, you might be contributing to a culture where unsustainable work habits are applauded rather than categorically discouraged. If you're a leader, see [Leading Loudly](#) for more points on leading an anti-burnout culture.

For more on what we can each do to prevent burnout, you can check out tips in the [Harvard Business Review](#) or read more from our team on [incorporating rest and recovery into your everyday rhythms](#), practising [self-compassion](#), and using [psychological detachment](#) to make the most from your downtime.

Umbrella's Strengthening Resilience workshops are designed to strengthen people's ability to adapt and recover well following stress through equipping participants with practical tools to build resilience in their professional and personal lives. We also offer training in Building Sustainable Habits, and Shifting the Frantic – [get in touch](#).