



Rejuvenate
Yourself

BURNT OUT

Has stress pushed you into
the danger zone?

Here's help

BY DIANNE HALES

FOR OVER 15 years, Tracy Everson, 46, balanced life as a full-time veterinary nurse, wife and mother of three, largely on her own. "It was hectic," says Everson, who was based in Adelaide while her husband travelled for his job. "I was doing shift work, running three kids to sporting events and trying to keep the house in order," she says. "Work at the surgery was consuming me emotionally. I'd

see a lot of animal cruelty, then have to go home and cook dinner."

Then one day, after a distressing incident at work, Everson had finally had enough. "I just thought, *That's it - I can't do this anymore.*" She had burnt out.

Millions of Australians are at risk of burning out. One in three adults suffers moderate to extreme stress in the workplace; in the past ten years, stress-related workers' compensation

claims have increased by 400% and are expected to continue to rise. The World Health Organisation lists stress as one of the top ten key determinants of poor health. No-one is immune to burnout. Mothers, managers, ambulance officers and call centre operators all can feel the flames of too much stress and not enough satisfaction.

“Burnout is caused by prolonged, high levels of stress,” explains Dr Louise Adams, a clinical psychologist who works in Sydney’s inner west. “It

starting a course in massage therapy. “Going back to study was my choice and was something I really wanted to do. I haven’t looked back.”

What’s the problem?

Too much work? Too little control? No recognition or rewards? Difficult colleagues? Unfair treatment? A clash of values? After decades of research, Christina Maslach, a psychologist and co-author of *Banishing Burnout*, found that any of these factors can sabotage

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tends to creep up on people. They gradually change from feeling stressed but able to cope with their job to feeling emotionally spent, exhausted, disillusioned with their work and unmotivated to perform.”

And it can take a toll on their health. “Sleep problems, low energy, headaches, digestive disturbance and breathlessness are all signs of prolonged stress, which can lead to a potential burnout,” Adams says.

After her burnout, Everson had to re-evaluate her life. “I had to stop and think about what would fulfil me,” she says. “It had been a long time since I had stopped to think about myself.”

She decided to make drastic changes. She quit her job, let her now adult children fend for themselves and followed her husband to Sydney, where he had been posted by the army.

The biggest change in her life was

your job satisfaction. “Maybe you can handle the workload but are constantly battling with your colleagues. Or your boss may be micro-managing you to death. Or perhaps you feel you’re not being treated fairly or not getting appropriate compensation.” A bad fit between the person and any key aspect of a job increases the risk of burnout.

For Michael Stone, 37, of Castlecrag in Sydney, the desire for a better work-life balance stoked his dissatisfaction. After working for a top accounting firm, Stone found himself employed as a trader on New York’s Wall Street. “I was living the dream,” he says. “I was trading hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time, but I wasn’t happy. Staff were seen as resources to be taken advantage of.” Every thought Stone had about work was negative. “I’d look at my so-called mentors and

feel little respect. They worked ridiculous hours, had dysfunctional family lives and major health problems. I didn’t want to work hard all my life only to drop dead of a heart attack in my 50s. What’s the point?”

“I realised I was craving a real connection with people,” he says. A few months after this realisation struck him, terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre, only a block from his office. That was the catalyst for change, and soon after he left his job and returned to Australia in search of greater fulfilment.

Stone now runs a consultancy that helps companies manage workplace stress and employee satisfaction. “The money is nowhere near what I was earning before but there is no comparison in the amount of fulfilment I’ve gained.”

“You have to feel that a job, like a relationship, is worth doing,” observes Kenneth Christian, a psychologist and the author of *Your Own Worst Enemy*. “If there’s no recognition that you’re working hard, if nobody’s watching your back, if only the bottom line matters, you feel expendable. It’s like a marriage that’s gone bad.”

Smouldering stress

Even with work you love and care passionately about, stress can take a serious toll. Take for example Leslie Godwin, 46, a marriage and family counsellor, who couldn’t set boundaries or stop worrying about the drug addicts she was treating. After years of witnessing nonstop stress, her

husband casually commented that he thought she hated her job. Godwin tried to protest, but she burst into tears. “My body betrayed me. I just couldn’t stop crying. I was completely burnt out, and I was the last one to know,” she says.

As Godwin learnt, burnout can smoulder for years before erupting into a blaze. Often the first sign is exhaustion: physical, mental and emotional. “It’s draining to deal with people and problems under incredible time pressures,” says Maslach, who explains that as fatigue builds, passion and commitment dwindle.

“The hallmark of burnout is a shift to the negative. You begin to detach and to dislike your job. You become cynical, critical, hostile. You blame other people. Rather than do your very best, you try to get by with the bare minimum,” Maslach notes.

Ultimately, the one-two punch of exhaustion and cynicism culminates in what Maslach calls inefficacy, a sense of inadequacy that saps your strength and spirit.

Research in the relatively new field of social neuroscience is providing fresh insight into this process. “Our brains are designed to reflect and catch the state of the person we’re with, which works to our advantage in most situations by helping us understand each other better,” says Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and author of *Social Intelligence*. However, constant interaction with people who are anxious, angry, stressed or traumatised floods the brain with

negative emotions and activates your stress centres.

“If you add a toxic boss on top of job stress, you’re creating a perfect storm for burnout because there’s no-one to go to for emotional support,” he notes. “You’re like an empty

well. You don’t have anything left to give. As a protective mechanism, you shut down and end up pushing away the very person you’re trying to help.”

However, simply acknowledging burnout can itself mark a turning point. “Insight changes everything,” Godwin affirms. “Once you see what’s happening, you can’t continue to approach your work in the same way.”

Within a few months of her epiphany, she switched to a part-time

position doing psychotherapy with teenagers. In time, she created a business dedicated to counselling parents. “If you realise you need to make a change, you find a way to do it. The realisation is much harder than the concrete steps you have to take afterwards,” she adds.

Beat burnout

So how do you begin to move away from burnout and towards a renewed feeling of enthusiasm? Here are some recommendations:

Make time for yourself. “When you put helping others above everything else, you don’t meet your own needs,” says 29-year-old pastor Aaron Varner. “You’re just giving, giving, giving, and you feel guilty if you stop.”

It took a week at a retreat for him to remember that even God rested on the seventh day. Now he reserves Mondays for himself and his family.

Develop a method to help calm yourself.

Some people, like Varner, choose prayer. Others meditate or breathe deeply. “Do whatever works for you,” suggests Goleman. “Do it every day outside the work situation, ideally in the morning, and then draw on it during pauses throughout your workday.”

Simply taking regular short breaks to close your eyes and clear your mind can help re-energise your brain during the course of a frenetic day.

Analyse what you love and hate about work. What has changed? Is it the amount of work, the deadlines, the boss, the low salary, the company’s “mission”? Once you’ve identified problem areas, think of specific strategies to resolve them. For instance, you might build an alliance with colleagues and work together to address shared concerns.

WHO'S MOST AT RISK?

While burnout can occur in almost any job, researchers have consistently found high rates of burnout in the following fields:

- Teaching
- Social services
- Medicine and nursing
- Mental health
- Law enforcement
- Telecommunications

Settle for less than perfect. “Work at 90% rather than 110% of maximum,” advises Larina Kase, the author of *Anxious 9 to 5*. “Accept that the dishes may pile up in the sink. Delegate what you can.” And don’t be available 24/7. Rather than check e-mails and voice messages round the clock, respond at preset times, and know when to turn off the devices and focus on the rest of your life.

Take good care of yourself. Eat healthy foods. Get enough sleep. Exercise every day. “If you think you’re too busy, start with two five-minute walks a day,” Kase suggests. “Once you see the benefits, you’ll want to do more of the things that are really key to keeping you from getting burnt out or more burnt out.”

Cultivate a support network. “Find a friend at work you can talk freely with, someone to turn to when things get hard,” says Goleman. If you’re a carer at home, tap relatives and friends. “Human nature isn’t designed for

isolation,” he notes. “We all need to re-create the support of the extended family through friendships.”

Set limits. Take 24 hours before agreeing to any new demand on your time. Talk to your spouse or a friend about whether it’s something you really want to do. If it isn’t, don’t do it.

Plan for the future. If you need to leave a toxic workplace but can’t quit yet, spend 15 minutes a day exploring other options. Go online. Network. Get additional training. Review your résumé. “Most people are within 18 months of being in a better, healthier work situation,” says Godwin. The key is to start now. Taking small steps will help you feel more in control and set the stage for a fresh start.

LOCAL ADDITIONS BY SARAH ETCHELLS

Are you in a stressful job, or have you suffered from career burnout and changed fields because of it? Write to the address on page 5 or online at www.readersdigest.com.au/yousaidit.

CAR TROUBLE

An elderly woman came into the garage where I work. After she told me what seemed to be the story of her life, all I had learnt about her car was that it was a black 1995 Ford that made a noise, drove oddly and was somewhere in the car park.

A mechanic went out to get it but had to make three trips back in to speak to the customer before he finally found her vehicle: a white panel van parked at the service station that made a noise and drove oddly – because it had a flat tyre.

PATRICK O'REILLY

The following small ad appeared on our company intranet: “Lotus Excel, 1984, red leather interior. Has compartment in the glovebox for panties and bras and a spike on the dashboard for speeding tickets. Wife forces sale.”

PHIL TURLAND