

PATIENT INFORMATION · MENTAL HEALTH

Stress and burnout

why a fortnight off does not fix it

Burnout is what happens when demands exceed capacity for long enough that the system stops compensating. It is a work-related syndrome rather than a medical diagnosis, it is not the same as depression, and it does not resolve simply by resting — because the conditions that produced it are usually still there when you return.

Please get help promptly if

- you are having **thoughts of harming yourself or ending your life**
- you are **drinking or using drugs** to get through the day or to sleep
- you have **chest pain, palpitations or breathlessness** that has not been assessed
- you feel **unable to function** at work or at home
- you have become **hopeless**, or feel there is no way out of your situation

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or ending your life, help is available now and these feelings can be treated. Call **999** or go to an emergency department if you have already harmed yourself or feel unable to stay safe. Otherwise call **Samaritans free on 116 123**, any time of day or night, text **SHOUT to 85258**, or call **NHS 111 and select the mental health option**. Please also tell someone you trust, and tell us — we would far rather you did.

The three dimensions

Exhaustion

depleted, and sleep does not restore it

Detachment

cynicism, distance, going through motions

Ineffectiveness

a sense that nothing you do matters

All three together distinguish burnout from ordinary tiredness. The detachment is often the most telling, and the most distressing for people who used to care a great deal about their work.

How it shows up

- waking exhausted regardless of how long you slept; dreading the day before it starts
- irritability, short fuse, tearfulness, or feeling flat and numb
- difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering things

- headaches, gut symptoms, muscle tension, frequent minor infections
- withdrawing from colleagues, friends and activities you used to enjoy
- increased alcohol, caffeine, nicotine or comfort eating
- working longer and achieving less — the defining paradox

Burnout or depression?

They overlap and often coexist. Burnout is tied to a context: you feel different on holiday, and the symptoms lift when you are genuinely away from the source. Depression travels with you — the flatness and loss of pleasure are there on holiday too, and self-worth is affected across your whole life rather than at work. The distinction matters because the treatment differs, and getting it wrong wastes months.

Why rest alone is not enough

Two weeks off restores energy temporarily. If the workload, the lack of control, the unclear expectations or the absent recognition are unchanged, burnout returns within weeks — often faster the second time. Recovery needs something in the situation to change, not only something in you.

- **Identify which dimension is driving it** — workload, autonomy, fairness, values, community or reward. The remedy differs for each.
- **Have the conversation at work.** Occupational health, an honest discussion with your manager, adjusted hours, redistributed responsibilities, or a phased return.
- **Re-establish boundaries deliberately** — a defined finish time, notifications off, no email in bed. These sound trivial and are not.
- **Protect sleep first.** Nothing else works while sleep is broken.
- **Reintroduce activities that have nothing to do with achievement.**
- **Therapy helps**, particularly where perfectionism, difficulty saying no or a strong identification with work are part of the picture.

Time off and returning

- A period off work is sometimes necessary, and we can provide a fit note. Aim for it to be **purposeful** rather than open-ended.
- A fit note can recommend **adjustments rather than absence** — reduced hours, altered duties, phased return. This is often more useful than being signed off entirely.
- Plan the return before it arrives. Going back to exactly the same conditions produces exactly the same result.
- Recovery from established burnout typically takes **months, not weeks**. Expecting to bounce back in a fortnight sets up a second failure.

Book an appointment if you recognise yourself here. We can assess whether depression, anxiety, thyroid disease, anaemia or sleep apnoea are contributing, provide a fit note with workplace recommendations, and refer for therapy without a long wait.

Assessment, fit notes and therapy referral

Seven days a week, 9am–7pm, on Whitechapel Road.

Book an appointment

or call 020 7916 0029

Where to get help

Tower Bridge Hospital London

97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT

020 7916 0029

WhatsApp **07903 284 189**

info@mhwclinic.co.uk

Open 7 days, 9am–7pm

In an emergency

Call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

When we are closed and it is not an emergency

Call NHS 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk.

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This leaflet is based on current NHS guidance on stress, the WHO ICD-11 definition of burnout, and NICE guidance on mental wellbeing at work. It is general information and does not replace advice from a clinician who has assessed you. If your symptoms change or you are worried, contact us on 020 7916 0029, call NHS 111, or call 999 in an emergency.

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