
burnout.io Documentation

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burnout.io

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“Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.” It manifests itself in ways including anxiety, loss of motivation and confidence, and even degradation of physical health. Burnout can be prevalent in organizations that promote [hero culture](#) and where employees maintain a strong [sense of duty](#) or feel they have no alternatives in the employment market.

CHAPTER 1

Summary

The following seems to be a reasonable approach to figuring out work-related burnout:

Determine if the causes are localized (self-inflicted). Determine if the causes are external (management, work environment, etc.) and if it can be changed. Find someplace new if the issues can't be fixed.

CHAPTER 2

Why?

At the 2014 DevOpsDays Pittsburgh conference, Jennifer Davis gave a talk titled, “From Hero to Zero” ([updated at DevOpsDays Boston 2014](#)) which sparked additional exploration of burnout during an Open Space discussion.

The site was originally built with IT professionals in mind, but the concepts here can apply to many other fields as well.

3.1 Actionables

3.1.1 Steps to Fighting Burnout

The general consensus seems to be that there are three steps in fighting against burnout:

1. Determine if it's self-inflicted.

If you can take some time off, be removed from on-call for a bit, or allow that next task to wait until you become yourself again, *do it*. Get some sleep and figure out what it will take to remove the strain.

The objective is to maintain a healthy work-life balance. **Stop being a hero.** There is no benefit if the toll is so great that your personal life and relationships suffer.

Make sure when you aren't in the office you spend some time doing something completely unrelated to your profession. We are all passionate about what we do, but if your hobby happens to be the same as your job, you may experience burnout much faster.

2. Determine if it's an external pressure.

- Management says they need that new feature *now*.
- You're not allowed to fix the technical debt and apply band-aids instead.
- You're constantly fighting fires.
- The only reason everything is working is because you put in too many hours a week.

If these sorts of situations sound familiar and you're burning out, it's time for the external factors to change.

Find out what is causing the problem.

Burnout can be caused by mindless repetition and interruptions. Or it can be middle-management setting unrealistic deadlines. Document the causes, then find ways to alleviate them.

Communicate the burnout to people who can help.

Sometimes all it takes is explaining the problem and talking it out with management and coworkers. Middle-management should exist to help specifically with these kinds of problems.

Say “no” to unreasonable requests.

Say “no” if a request is unreasonable, but try to provide feedback in order to prevent the pattern from continuing.

Don’t allow yourself to be talked down when it comes to time estimates. Instead, learn [Defense Against the Dark Art of Estimation Bargaining](#)

“Yes, and…”

If “no” doesn’t work, try using the [Yes, and… technique](#) in order to emphasize your willingness to work with the requester but also take the opportunity to establish some boundaries and tradeoffs.

For example:

- “Yes, we’ll make sure Feature X is our top priority, and to accommodate the new timeline we can put Features Y and Z on hold until the next release.”
- “Yes, we can plan on adding Project X to our responsibilities, and we can take some time to plan the hiring we’ll have to do in order to meet that goal.”

An alternative way of phrasing “Yes, and…” is to say, “You can have everything you want, just not all at once.”

Let it fail.

If your cries for change aren’t working, allow the consequences (downtime, no new features, missed deadlines, etc.) to speak for themselves. If the choice is between your mental health and your work, one of those is going to win (and it needs to be your mental health)! Of course, this point should be considered with caution (don’t be malicious or reckless just to prove a point).

3. Move on (or take a break).

If your organization can’t change enough to help you prevent burnout, it may be time to leave. A recurring point with people who have escaped burnout seems to be “I’m so much happier now that I work for a company that allows me to maintain a good work-life balance.” There’s no guarantee, but at least you can take the opportunity to fairly evaluate a potential job during the interview process.

It may also be better to take a long vacation, far away from emails and business-speak.

A note on preparation.

It's a really good idea to set aside emergency funds to use in case you have to exercise option 3. Open up a savings account and allocate a percentage of your income towards your potential burnout escape.

3.2 More Ideas

3.2.1 More ideas to help recover from burnout

Acknowledge your feelings.

How are you feeling? It is valid. Share your feelings with your support network. This helps build *resilience*. Recognize your state in the *exhaustion funnel* and how that will impact your decisions.

Build your identity.

You are more than your job. You are more than the contributions that you make to open source projects. Who are you?

Understanding who you are and what you value can help keep you afloat when traumatic events like a company layoff occur. If your identity is derived from your job, losing your job can leave you feeling like you have no meaning or value. Companies fail all the time. More startups close than make it to a finish line. Avoid tying your mental health to the success of something outside of your control.

Fuel up

Know yourself. Know what energizes or calms you. Whether it's reading, non-technical activity time, being off in a forest with the greenery, or something else. Monitor your "fuel" levels and recognize when you need to take a break. Talk to your Support network and ask them to give you external signals.

A few ways to fuel up at home & work

Take micro-breaks and play

It can help to take some time for micro-breaks and play. It sounds a bit unconventional to say "play," but it can be a helpful step in breaking the burnout cycle. Micro-breaks can be helpful by taking the step back from the work and getting your mind off of whatever is causing the burnout. Micro-breaks come in a variety of forms:

- Getting up from the desk/cube and taking 15 minutes to walk around the office, get outside, and get some air/sunshine
- Grab a colleague and talk about anything other than the task(s) at hand. This will take practice, but can be beneficial in ways other than taking a break—it may open doors to move to a position that can be less stressful
- Get a pair of baseball gloves, or a frisbee, go out into the parking lot (if available, if not, a green space), and toss the ball/frisbee around for a few minutes.

A note on micro-breaks:

If it's not possible to take these sorts of breaks, do your best to not take work home, if at all possible. The expectation that you have to work all the time, even at home, isn't realistic and can create feelings of guilt when not engaged in work. If this is the case for you, enlist the help of someone in your support community—a significant other, family member, peer or friend to help keep you accountable to not spend all of your time working and send you signals (or blatantly tell you) when work has become an unhealthy priority. When possible, take the time at home to enjoy your home, and play or engage in a hobby.

Take up a hobby

Work can often take so much precedence that it can become your identity. Remember, you are ***more*** than the work that you do, the problems you solve, and the customers you serve. Taking up a hobby can be a helpful step in reconnecting with who you are outside of your occupation. This may look like:

- Taking up homebrewing
- Learning to fish
- Making personal fitness a priority

Above all else, remember:

Be kind to yourself first.

Build a Support Network

Identify people that you can talk to safely. Meet with your support group regularly whether it's on the phone, web, or in person. Your Support Network should be more than just your significant other. Even if they are in the industry, the cost to your personal relationships in times when you need it most can be devastating.

Connect with Community

Whether you are a developer, operations, qa, product management, or in the CXO level you need to have peers to be able to recognize the common problems. We are humans and identify patterns. These patterns can help you discern between “you” issues and “everyone” issues. Talking about burnout as a community for example has helped many recognize that they are not alone! Community time can also help with feelings of loneliness. It is critical that you recognize the cost in interactions as well that may feel like internal stressors.

3.3 Resources

3.3.1 List of Resources

We've all struggled with being burnt out and it's not easy. That's why we've compiled a list of resources here that have helped us, as well as other in the community, in the fight against burnout.

Talking to a Real Person

There's always someone available in our gitter channel. If you'd like to talk with someone who's been through the cycle of burnout, reach out! We'd love to help in any way we can:

Online Resources

- [Critical Mental Health Resources For College Students](#)
- [If Me](#)
- [Mental Health First Aid](#)
- [HelpGuide.org](#)
- [DevPressed](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
- [NAMI Local Chapters](#)
- [Mental Health America](#)
- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
- [BlueHackers](#)
- [Geek Mental Help Week](#)
- [Mental Illness Happy Hour](#)
- [Mind Mental Health Charity](#)
- [LIS Mental Health Doc](#)

Further Reading

There are a number of courageous people in the community talking about burnout, their experiences with it and how they've made progress. Read more about what they have to say at the [Further reading](#) page.

3.4 Further Reading

We've all faced burnout—here are some quotes from around the community.

“Horde statistics: 1 in 3 thought about quitting because of stress, 75% are not engaged with their work, over 1 million absent per day...” - [Avoiding Burnout: The Zombie Survival Guide](#) - David Manners

“EDD [Experience Driven Development] - some basic information around the topic mental health/illness in IT” - [EDD \(Experience Driven Development\)](#) - Michael Scholl

“Mental disorders are the largest contributor to disease burden in North America, but the developer community and those who employ us are afraid to face the problem head-on. In this talk, we'll examine the state of mental health awareness in the developer workplace, why most developers feel it isn't safe to talk about mental health, and what we can do to change the culture and save lives.” - [Stronger Than Fear: Mental Health in the Developer Community](#) - Ed Finkler

“While critically important as a tool to help, these solutions also don't directly address the path to burnout. They don't tackle the systemic problems within both startups and larger organizations that lead to burnout. They gloss over the patterned behaviors of sociopathic (or even merely incompetent) managers.” - [Dodging Burnout, 4 Hours at a Time](#) - J. Paul Reed

“You didn't mean to end up here. You didn't even see it coming... It all started with a chance to earn a living doing something you loved. Your dream job. Creating things instead of rotting in a cubicle. You weren't just going to make a living—you were going to leave your mark on the world.” - [The Cult of Work You Never Meant to Join](#) - Jason Lengstorf

“If... you work for someone for money, you’re just a factor of production... You’re trading your time, your skills, your talent for that money... Every time you stay after work late, you’re giving away that time away for free.” - [Go the F*** Home](#) - Pam Selle

“It is true that I would insist that I could handle it, and I guess I did, but don’t organizations have a responsibility to their employees to stop them from harming themselves in the name of the job?” - [A Year of Fire and Fog](#) - Alex Nobert

“Sometimes it’s the feelings of burnout... things we struggle with in our jobs, particularly with some of the ill-defined tasks that we get as software developers, and some of the high-stress workplaces that we put ourselves in that demand constant contact and constant availability.” - [Node Up: Episode #80: A developer mental health show](#). - Rod Vagg, Aria Stewart, Ed Finkler, Greg Baugues

“I am aware of how programming is often coupled with depression and how entrepreneurship is often coupled with anxiety. I am aware of articles that imply these mood disorders are necessary in order to be good at these professions.” - [Surviving Free Culture \[Article\] & \[Talk\]](#) - Benjamin Lupton

“I have bipolar and ADHD and speak a lot about mental health in the tech community. I’m writing a book called *Developers and Depression*, and in 2013 I had the honor of speaking on the topic at the Business of Software conference. That 30 minutes on stage was one of the best things I’ve done with my life.” - [Developers and Depression](#) - Greg Baugues

“This time, about 8 minutes into his presentation, Stephen admitted that his previous year had been so stressful from industry burnout, that he seriously contemplated suicide. Everyone in the room was shocked.” - [Karōjisatsu](#) - John Willis

“Health is more important than anything else. If your job is driving you crazy and giving you high BP, my prescription is, ‘Try, try, then quit’.” - [So your management fails at IT, huh?](#) - Tom Limoncelli

“Burnout, in the broadest sense of the definition, refers to the emotions a person or organization experiences that are associated with mental or psychological exhaustion and/or cynicism over an extended period of time.” - [What Is Burnout?](#) - Information Technology Burnout Project

“Burnt out staff are likely to leave... or worse stay” - [Burnout - DevOpsDays Ignite Talk](#) - Mike Preston

“Then came that fateful day where I realised that I couldn’t go back. Something broke and it wasn’t going to be fixed easily.” - [Burnout, Recovery and Honesty](#) - Matt Wallace

“Currently, as an open-source maintainer of popular projects, we are greeted with screens like this each day... Let us share the techniques, resources, and support we’ve used before and those we use today to overcome these feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame our roles as open-source maintainers are up against.” - [Help Open-Source Maintainers Stay Sane](#) - Benjamin Lupton, et al.

“Ultimately you should remember that downtime is precious. It’s not healthy to be in front of a computer, let alone working, all day and night. You might not be doing other people harm but you may be doing harm to yourself.” - [Working Late, Responsibly](#) - Dan Carley

“We can be more productive through sleep, meditation, and healthy habits than through editor shortcuts.” - [Fighting Burnout](#) - Nick Cox

“Suddenly, I realized that something had to give. I was forced to come to terms with how unsustainable my work-life balance had become. At one point, I had thought that my capacity for productivity was limitless. But now both science and my own body were directly contradicting the myth of the superhuman startup worker.” - [A Moment to Breathe](#) - Nick Cox

“Like everyone else, I thought that the common solution is to take a break and go on a holiday trip with loved ones or simply take a few days away from work once in a while. Holiday trips are always nice, but it didn’t exactly help me much, the effect didn’t last. Occasionally, I found myself to be extremely stressed just 2 days after I came back to work. It’s not because there were tons of work waiting, it’s not because the holidays were too short.” - [My secret to getting rid of burnout permanently](#) - Kent Nguyen

“In the long run, this is not great for companies’ overall health and more importantly for a team’s health and morale. There are already statistics about how churn in IT is the highest compared to other fields. . .”
- [On Burnout](#) - Silvia Botros

“For many of us, the world we live in requires us to be on far more than the traditional 40 hours a week. In an ongoing effort to drive continuous delivery and improvement of the products and services we build and support, it’s not uncommon to labor, plan, or stress about something related to work outside of the 9-5 business hours. As a result, we risk damaging our relationships, health, or worse.” - [Burnout In Tech](#)
- Jason Hand

“If you follow what you love, it will come back to you. . .” - [Frustration Driven Development](#) - Evan Light

“Humans have the astonishing ability to derive pleasure out of the most unlikely domains, and what could possibly be worse than a disease whose definition is ‘the inability to feel pleasure?’” - [Stanford’s Sapolsky On Depression in U.S.](#) - Professor Robert Sapolsky

“Art and love are the same thing; they’re the process of seeing yourself in things that aren’t you.” - [A Community of People, Not Projects](#) - Carter Rabasa

“How’s your heart? How do you feel? What are you not saying that needs to be said?” - [How to Avoid Burnout](#) - Allison Schultz

“Because high-achievers are often so passionate about what they do, they tend to ignore the fact that they’re working exceptionally long hours, taking on exceedingly heavy work loads, and putting enormous pressure on themselves to excel—all of which make them ripe for burnout.” - [The Tell Tale Signs of Burnout](#) - Sherrie Bourg Carter Psy.D.

3.5 Contribute

We value your ideas! If you’d like to help improve Burnout.io, do whatever works best for you:

- Open an [issue](#)
- [Fork](#) the project and submit a PR
- Send an [email](#)
- Reach out on [twitter](#)

3.5.1 Info for Contributing to Burnout.io

- This project is written in [reStructuredText](#)
- Hosted by [Read the Docs](#)
- Tested by rendering in [Sphinx](#) on [Travis CI](#)

If you are looking to add content, fix formatting, syntax, typos or other wonderful things, please follow this process:

- Install `Sphinx`: `easy_install Sphinx sphinx_rtd_theme` or `pip install -r requirements.txt`
- Fork the repository to your own account
- Check out a branch to make your changes on: `git checkout --branch <my_topic>`
- Execute `make html` to build the docs in to `_build/`
- Make your changes
- Execute `make html` again and verify your changes don’t cause any warnings/errors

- Commit with a descriptive message, and submit a pull request from your branch to `master`
- We'll review the change, and either merge it or provide some feedback. Community review is also encouraged.

A quick note if you're adding a new heading:

Sphinx will error out if your title text is longer than the title underline. For example: `/projects/burnout.io/resources.rst:12: WARNING: Title underline too short.`

And when you look at the title, you see:

```
This title is quite long...
-----
```

Which will cause the error. Corrected, the title would be more like:

```
This title is quite long...
-----
```

Which will correct the issue. For any other issues you run into, hop into the Gitter channel and one of us will help out.

3.5.2 Current Build Status