

A blurred, high-angle photograph of a crowd of people walking through a brightly lit hallway or airport terminal. The motion blur creates a sense of a busy, fast-paced environment. The colors are predominantly cool blues and greys, with some warmer tones from clothing and lighting. The perspective is from above, looking down at the crowd as they move away from the viewer.

Stress &
Resilience
Institute

Is It
STRESS
or Is It
BURNOUT?

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Work and life have become more complex and fast-paced such that it has become more difficult to distinguish between just having a bad day or two and something more. One of the questions I am asked most frequently is, “How do I know if it’s just stress or if I’m burned out?”

Stress exists on a continuum, and it’s important to know your place on it from week to week, month to month and beyond. Burnout is a state of chronic workplace stress represented by these three dimensions:

EXHAUSTION

You feel chronically physically and emotionally drained. Eventually, chronic exhaustion leads to emotional and cognitive detachment, likely as a way to cope with the overload.

CYNICISM

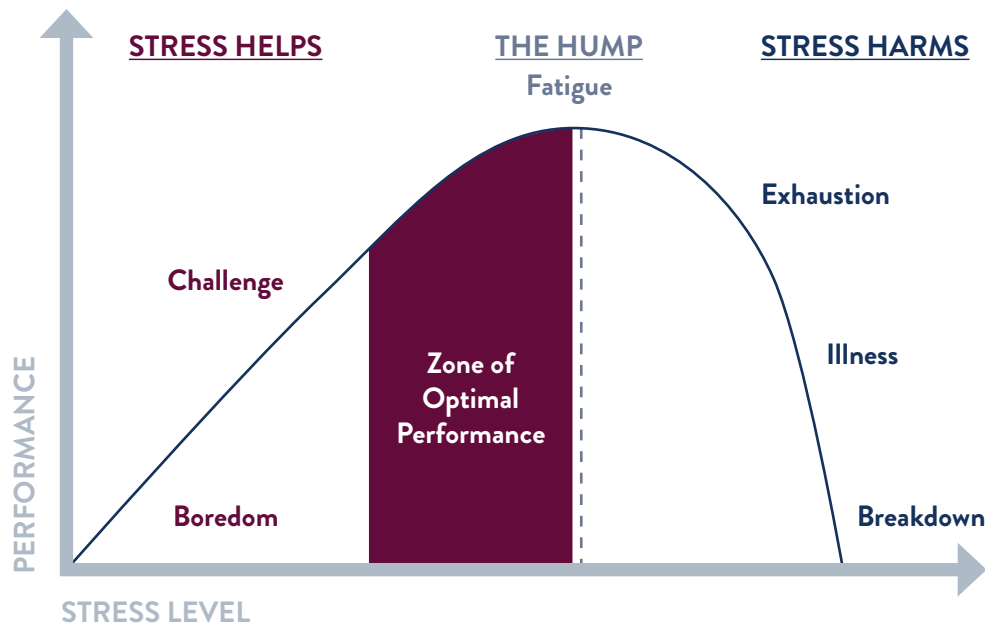
Everyone, from colleagues to clients and patients, starts to bug you and rub you the wrong way. You start to distance yourself from these people by actively ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging, and the result is less empathy and caring.

INEFFICACY

Inefficacy is a “why bother, who cares” attitude that appears as you struggle to identify important resources and as it becomes more difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment and impact in your work.

Burnout doesn’t happen overnight. When I burned out at the end of my law practice, I started going into the office a little later, stopped having as many lunches and Friday beverage meet ups with my colleagues and spent less time with my friends on the weekend in favor of bad reality TV and the couch. Only much later in the process did I experience panic attacks and trips to the emergency room because of stress-induced stomach aches. You don’t want to get to that point. Here are five additional ways to tell if it’s just stress or something more:

Stress-Performance Sweet Spot



1

EVALUATE YOUR STRESS LEVEL WITH THIS GRAPH. I want you to place a dot on this graph that represents where your stress level is today. If you placed your dot by “exhaustion,” can you explain why? If you’re in the middle of a significant project, that might explain why you feel tired, but pay attention to whether you bounce back to the “Zone of Optimal Performance” quickly once the project ends. People who are burned out either can’t recover or notice a much slower than typical recovery.

Conversely, boredom can be a signal that you aren’t being challenged by your work and it’s important to know that stress can be beneficial. How you think about stress matters enormously in terms of how it [impacts](#) your well-being. Some people view stress as a threat (wholly negative), while others are able to view it as a challenge (there might be positive aspects). People who can [reframe stress](#) to feel more like a challenge and less like a threat report less depression and anxiety, higher levels of energy, work performance and life satisfaction.

THESE QUESTIONS CAN HELP YOU DEVELOP A CHALLENGE RESPONSE TO STRESS:

- *Where do I have control/influence/leverage in the situation?*

- *What is a specific action step I can take?*

- *What are my strengths?*

- *What resources do I have?*

- *What allows me to know that I can handle this?*

2

MEASURE HOW YOU FEEL WITH THIS QUESTION. Researchers have been able to validate a non-proprietary, [single question item](#), which may serve as a reliable substitute for the emotional exhaustion dimension of the gold standard burnout measurement tool. The question they validated is subjective, and this should be used only as a first point of entry toward understanding burnout and not as a replacement for the full measurement tool.

Overall, based on your definition of burnout, how would you rate your level of burnout?

CHECK THE BOX THAT MOST CLOSELY MATCHES HOW YOU'RE FEELING TODAY:

I enjoy my work. I have no symptoms of burnout.

Occasionally I am under stress, and I don't always have as much energy as I once did, but I don't feel burned out.

I am definitely burning out and have one or more symptoms of burnout, such as physical and emotional exhaustion.

The symptoms of burnout that I'm experiencing won't go away. I think about frustration at work a lot.

I feel completely burned out and often wonder if I can go on. I am at the point where I may need some changes or may need to seek some sort of help.

3

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS OF BURNOUT

Physical:

- Frequent headaches
- Getting sick more often than usual
- Stomach and digestive issues
- Exhaustion
- Restless
- Can't sleep
- Heart palpitations
- Chest pain

Psychological:

- Panic attacks
- Increasing feelings of anger, frustration, and irritability
- Feeling hopeless, helpless, and pessimistic
- Loss of enjoyment for activities you once loved

Behavioral:

- Drop in productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Becoming a poor team player
- Increased alcohol/drug use
- Isolation – wanting to eat lunch alone or just be alone

Again, these warning signs and symptoms exist on a continuum, and the difference between stress and burnout may be a matter of degree. **How many (if any) symptoms do you have?**

4

CHECK FOR AN IMBALANCE IN ONE OF THESE WORK AREAS. Research describes job stressors in terms of person-job imbalances, or mismatches, and identifies [six key areas](#) in which these imbalances take place. The greater the mismatch between you and each of these specific areas, the greater the likelihood of burnout.

CHECK THE BOX(ES) BY THE AREA(S) OF PERCEIVED MISMATCH:

Workload (You have enough time to do what's important in your job)

Control/Autonomy (You have influence in the decisions affecting your work)

Reward (Your work is appreciated)

Community (You are a member of a supportive work group)

Fairness (Opportunities are decided solely on merit)

Values (Your values and the organization's values are alike)

5

GET AN OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE. What would a close friend, family member or colleague say about your stress level? The closer you are to burnout, the harder it is to hide the manifestation of stress, and those who know you best will likely pick up on even subtle changes.

So, is it STRESS or is it BURNOUT?

If it's stress, it's important for you to keep track of any changes to your well-being so it doesn't turn into burnout. You can access additional tools in our e-book, [STRONG™ \(STress Resilience ON the Go\)](#).



If you determine that you're burned out, now might be a good time to take a step back and assess causes and any changes you might need to make. You can learn more about burnout and get more strategies to help by downloading our e-book, [Addicted to Busy](#).

You can also schedule a coaching session with Paula at paula@stressandresilience.com. For organizations, please visit the "What We Do" tab at www.stressandresilience.com to review programs we lead across industries.

Please contact paula@stressandresilience.com with questions.

Paula is writing a book about burnout tentatively titled *Teaming Up Against Burnout* to be published by the Wharton School Press in 2021.

