

The Hidden Effects of Stress – How to Recognize & Prevent Burnout

Introduction

Stress is a universal experience that can be difficult to track when it crosses over into dangerous territory. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines stress as “the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors” (APA, 2018). The effects of those internal and external stressors can have an unexpected impact over a long period, called burnout. Those effects may remain hidden from those individuals if they are unaware of what burnout looks like. This article advises on how to recognize the overlooked symptoms of stress and burnout and how to prevent them in practical ways.

The Hidden Effects of Stress

How Chronic Stress Sneaks Up on You

There are many demands that people have to deal with every day, whether that is their career, relationships, or parenting. There are also internal stressors such as expectations, emotions, or medical concerns. “Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave” (APA, 2018). The effects of daily stress cannot be understated, and it has the potential to have long-term consequences if not detected early and mitigated.

The APA advises that “chronic stress, experiencing stressors over a prolonged period of time, can result in a long-term drain on the body” (APA, 2018). Chronic stress can have unintended effects including negative physical experiences, especially if symptoms are ignored. It is common in Western society, for there to be an expectation to overwork oneself. There are deadlines, goals, and agendas that need to be completed and those can cause symptoms of chronic stress to go unnoticed.

Many people ignore the symptoms they may be experiencing due to high levels of stress in order to satisfy work, relationship, or family requirements. But while hard work is admirable, the lack of ability to properly care for oneself may still have unintended consequences.

The Physical Toll of Unmanaged Stress

Stress can cause major changes to the body physically and alter a person's experience in every other area of their life. “By causing these mind-body changes, stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorder and disease and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life” (APA, 2018). A reduction in the quality of life may look like sleep disturbances, an inability to “wind down”, or chronic health issues as mild as repeated colds or something more severe. One may also experience digestive issues, an inability to regulate

one's emotions, muscle tension, or even chronic pain. The effects of stress and burnout may show up differently depending on the individual and there is no one-size-fits-all description of how chronic stress and burnout may affect someone. Not only do stress and burnout have a physical impact, but a cognitive and emotional one as well.

Cognitive & Emotional Signs You Might Miss

The APA states that “psychological symptoms of stress include: experiencing irritability or anger (50 percent); feeling nervous (45 percent); lack of energy (45 percent); and feeling as though you could cry (35 percent). In addition, almost half (48 percent) of Americans report lying awake at night due to stress” (APA, 2007). Many people may recognize that they have experienced symptoms such as these but may misunderstand at what point these symptoms are reflective of burnout and when they can become dangerous to one's cognitive and emotional health.

Recognizing Burnout Before It's Too Late

Early Warning Signs of Burnout

“Exhaustion is the central symptom of burnout. It comprises profound physical, cognitive, and emotional fatigue that undermines people's ability to work effectively and feel positive about what they're doing” (Valcour, 2016). Determining whether or not you are experiencing exhaustion from burnout may need to be determined on an individual level. Different people have varying degrees of tolerance for certain kinds of stress. While one person may be able to tolerate longer bouts of physical stress, their exhaustion may show up more readily in their cognitive ability or emotional control.

It is important to recognize for oneself when you are at the point of exhaustion. Without awareness of the exhaustion, the ability to link the symptoms to burnout may be all but impossible. Awareness of changes in one's physical state, emotional health, and behavior can allow one to take proactive measures to prevent the continuing downward trend toward deepening burnout.

Who's Most at Risk for Burnout?

There are various professions that are exposed to high levels of stress for different reasons. “Teachers and health care workers are uniquely prone to high rates of burnout” (Abramson, 2022). When working in an environment that is not only comprised of a high degree of responsibility for the lives of others it is common to see higher levels of burnout. People who are high achievers and those in other high-stress professions put themselves in a precarious

position regarding burnout just by their very nature. That of course is not to negate professions with a lower level of stress whose participants may experience burnout because of the length of time they are exposed to the consistent stress. In either case, there needs to be an active approach taken to prevent burnout.

Practical Ways to Prevent Burnout

Reset Your Nervous System

There are many ways for individuals to attempt to reset their nervous system. As stated before, awareness is a key component to adhere to. This continues in one's attempts to reset their nervous system and regulate themselves physically and emotionally. Some techniques include deep breathing, mindfulness, and forms of movement that enhance one's connectedness to themselves. "Diaphragmatic breathing can help you deal with pain flares, manage discomfort at school or in public, or reduce stress that may come from schoolwork or other situations. As diaphragmatic breathing calms and relaxes the body, many people are able to think more clearly about how to manage their situation." (Johns Hopkins Medicine). Anything overdone may cause the opposite intended effect and lead to even more stress.

Reframe Your Mindset & Set Boundaries

Part of making these long-lasting changes is not just changing the behaviors that led to burnout but adjusting the mindset that was present to begin with. "The most damaging stress is the hidden kind — hidden because we no longer pay attention to our bodies, to how we feel, and to our own needs. Recognition requires taking some time regularly to check in with ourselves" (Hollington-Sawyer, S. (n.d.). To prevent burnout one must be committed to listening to one's body, checking in with your own emotions, and setting boundaries or schedules that allow one to maintain their own health. Without those efforts stress, exhaustion, and burnout are bound to be repeated or simply not resolved at all.

Build a Stress-Resilient Lifestyle

Creating a lifestyle that protects one from stress also takes proactive measures that because of stress can be easy to avoid. "Sharing our emotions is an essential way for human beings to alleviate the physiological consequences of stress" (2025). It is a common experience that when emotions are kept inside they can have detrimental physical, emotional, and cognitive consequences. Finding a way to express those emotions is a proactive way to protect oneself against the future potential damage of stress. Creating daily habits to promote healthy expression can reduce stress and set oneself up for a life with little to no burnout.

Conclusion

It is nearly impossible to live a life without stress. If it is not experienced at work then it may be experienced at home. In either case, taking a proactive approach to not only recognizing the signs of exhaustion and burnout but also taking steps to reduce the likelihood of experiencing those negative consequences is paramount. Everyone can take an active role in the management of their stress levels, either by changing the external environment or adjusting internally how one processes their individual experience. Recognizing and preventing burnout is a commitment to one's health on a daily basis and can be accomplished when one is committed to doing the work.

Citations

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