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COVID-19: how to avoid burnout during the coronavirus pandemic

At this stressful, uncertain time, many of us may be coming close to burnout. During the coronavirus lockdown it's becoming harder and harder to maintain a work-life balance, or find time for relaxation whilst staying informed about what's going on around us.

Use Patient's **coronavirus checker tool** if you have any symptoms of fever or a new cough. Until you have used the tool and been advised what action to take, please stay at home and avoid contact with other people.

We are all responding to the coronavirus pandemic in different ways. From speaking to friends and family, I've heard the full spectrum of attitudes, ranging from despair to a very British stoicism, to a wholehearted embrace of the joys of baking bread.

However, perhaps the most prevalent feeling is one of weariness. "How much longer is it going to last?" we ask, fatigued by the ongoing social distancing measures and the constant cycle of [bad news](#). And despite all the jokes about alternating 'day pyjamas' with 'night pyjamas', few of us are really finding this relaxing. For some, the sense of burnout is very real.

"Because the pandemic has brought an enforced change in lifestyle for most people, we are all a lot more susceptible to burnout," says [Dr Rekha Taylor](#), a former GP. "Most of us are currently trying to cope in situations beyond our usual situation and control - whether that be key workers who are working longer hours, parents who are juggling home-schooling and work, or vulnerable people who are forced to self-isolate and are missing out on their usual routines. This puts a strain on everyone in different ways."

Why you might be experiencing burnout

While burnout is normally associated with long days at the office, it isn't confined to that scenario. For certain, many people will be working harder than normal – not least frontline carers and other key workers, along with those who have responsibilities for colleagues who are on furlough. However, even if your workload hasn't changed, the added pressures posed by the pandemic are very real.

"Some people may not even realise they are experiencing burnout, because it's not the type that they're used to," says Ann Heathcote, a psychotherapist and counsellor at [The Worsley Centre](#). "However, many of us just aren't used to this amount of psychological stress. There is so much for us to think about within our new lifestyles. There is a lot of pressure at the moment to use this time effectively, to do everything you've been meaning to do."

She adds that we may be experiencing 'decision fatigue' – a lack of energy and focus, brought about by having to make too many small decisions. Should you go shopping in the morning, when it's busier, or in the afternoon, when the shelves are bare? Should you help your kid with times tables, or answer that email from your boss?

Factor in other psychological stressors, such as a loss of control, and a pressure to fulfil multiple roles, and you may reach a point of wanting to snap.

"Burnout is when you lose all motivation and enthusiasm for your work and you feel high levels of stress, [anxiety](#), [depression](#), overwhelm or even hopelessness or dread," says [Jivan Dempsey](#), a psychologist and life coach. "We are all of us susceptible to burnout and there are a number of contributing factors, some of which are quite relevant at this time of social isolation and lockdown."

Maintaining a work-life balance

Addressing this situation isn't easy. However, there are certain practical strategies you can put in place to help you stay on top of things.

Top of the list is maintaining a work-life balance: setting realistic targets, switching off at a designated time, and doing all you can to ensure your workload doesn't seep into the rest of your life.

"We all know that it can be difficult to switch off from work at the best of times, but when your home and the office become the same place it can be even harder," says Dr Arun Thiyagarajan, medical director at [Bupa Health Clinics](#).

"A good place to start is creating a routine. If you are used to getting up at a certain time, continue getting up at this time, whether you are working or not. Make sure you take some time to set yourself up for your day. And don't stay stuck to your desk all day but take time to get up, move around and stretch."

It's also a good idea to separate your work area from the rest of the house if possible, and to shut the door at the end of the day. This means you won't be tempted to go back in to send that final email.

"Finding purpose and value in what you do is a key step in preventing burnout," says [Dr Alka Patel](#), a health coach. "Ask yourself, what matters to me? What have been my most fulfilling career accomplishments? What am I doing when I feel most effective and productive? And blend a healthy lifestyle into your day - try standing up while working, get a daily dose of outdoor sunlight, slip in stretches and squats while the kettle is boiling, etc."

Self-care during lockdown

Another aspect of the equation is managing your consumption of social media and news. This might come down to setting rules for yourself (eg, only checking the news twice a day). Or it might simply mean being mindful about which news sources you're following.

It's a good idea, too, to maintain social contact as much as possible (eg, video calling your friends and family), to make time to exercise and practise daily meditation or mindfulness. We all know the benefits of going for walks, taking warm baths, [healthy eating](#), minimising our [alcohol](#) consumption, [volunteering](#), journalling and gardening.

However, if you find yourself bypassing that online HIIT session in favour of a Netflix marathon, now isn't the time to feel guilty.

"Ultimately, burnout points to a lack of self-care – an imbalance in what we are giving out to the world and taking back for ourselves," says Dr Elena Touroni, consultant psychologist and co-founder of [My Online Therapy](#). "Balance activities that are necessary with ones that you do simply for pleasure – make time in the day to do things that nourish you and fill you with a sense of well-being."

Checking in with yourself

She adds that, if you're feeling overwhelmed, it's important to check in with yourself and see what's really going on. Are you taking too much on? Are there ways of delegating some of your responsibilities? Whatever the case, it's important to acknowledge your feelings and express them.

"Be mindful of how you feel and don't criticise yourself for feeling overwhelmed, but try to work out – perhaps together with those around you – what makes you feel like that," says [Jan P de Jonge](#), a business psychologist. "You need to look after yourself. Think of the aeroplane passenger taking off who is reminded to 'put on your own oxygen mask first'."

David Birtwistle, a movement and nutrition coach and founder of [Endeavour](#), suggests focusing on the now, clearing your mind of speculation about what's going to happen in the future.

"What is the one, most important thing that you have to do?" he says. "Put your mind into that and you will achieve. This will give you a sense of control. And take some time for you – this could be the opportunity for you to think about your life in a slightly deeper way and ask questions about what you could be doing more of to move your life forward."

If there are bigger issues lurking beneath the surface, a therapist will be able to help you address the underlying causes. Organisations such as [Mind](#) and [Bupa](#) all have free mental health advice online, while charities such as the [Samaritans](#) and [CALM](#) have helplines for people needing urgent support.

"If it all gets too much don't be afraid to seek professional help. Although we are in lockdown, GP surgeries are [still open](#) and it's vital not to suffer in silence," says Dr Rekha Tailor.

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023	Next review date: 18/05/2020	Document ID: doc_31331

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