



A Practical Guide

Stress & Burnout

Recognising the signs, understanding the causes, and building your way back to wellbeing

Hope Therapy & Counselling Services

This resource is for informational and self-help purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional support. If you are in crisis, please contact your GP, call 999, or reach the Samaritans on 116 123 (free, 24/7).

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1 What Is Stress?

Understanding a normal but powerful response

Stress is your body's natural response to demands, pressures, or perceived threats. It is not inherently harmful — in fact, short-term stress can sharpen focus, motivate action, and help us rise to challenges. This is sometimes called eustress: the kind of pressure that energises rather than depletes.

The problem arises when stress becomes chronic — when the pressure never really lets up, the body never fully recovers, and demands consistently outpace your resources and capacity to cope.

Chronic stress is now recognised as one of the major contributors to a wide range of health problems, including cardiovascular disease, immune dysfunction, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression. It is not something to push through indefinitely.

"Being busy is not the same as being productive. Being stressed is not the same as being dedicated. And running on empty is not the same as working hard."

Is all stress the same?

Psychologists distinguish between acute stress (short-term, linked to a specific event), episodic acute stress (frequent short-term stress for people who are constantly overloaded), and chronic stress (persistent, grinding pressure over months or years). Each has different effects on the body and requires a different response.

2 What Is Burnout?

More than just tiredness

Burnout is a state of chronic exhaustion — physical, emotional, and mental — caused by prolonged and excessive stress, particularly in contexts where you feel little control, recognition, or reward. The World Health Organisation now officially recognises burnout as an occupational phenomenon.

Burnout is not just being tired. It is a deeper depletion — a sense that your reserves are completely empty and that even rest does not restore you. It is often accompanied by growing detachment, cynicism, and a loss of any sense of meaning or effectiveness.

While burnout is most commonly associated with work, it can also develop from caring responsibilities, chronic illness, relationship pressure, or any situation in which you are giving more than you are able to sustainably sustain.

The Three Dimensions of Burnout

Research by psychologist Christina Maslach identified three core dimensions of burnout:

Exhaustion

A profound depletion of emotional, physical, and cognitive resources. Feeling drained at a level that sleep and weekends no longer fix. This is the central feature of burnout.

Depersonalisation / Cynicism

Emotional detachment from work, responsibilities, or the people involved. A growing sense of indifference, cynicism, or even resentment toward things that once felt meaningful.

Reduced Efficacy

A collapsing sense of competence and achievement. Feeling that nothing you do makes a difference, that you are failing, or that you are no longer capable of what you once were.

Burnout develops gradually. Most people do not notice it building until they are already significantly depleted. Recovery takes time — often months rather than days.

3 Stress vs Burnout

Understanding where you are

Stress and burnout are related but distinct. Understanding the difference matters because they call for different responses.

Stress	Burnout
Too much — overloaded	Too little left — completely depleted
Urgent, anxious, reactive	Numb, flat, detached
Motivation still present	Significantly reduced or absent
Rest helps — feel better after a break	Rest insufficient — doesn't restore
Primarily physical — body bears the cost	Primarily emotional — loss of meaning, hope
Can resolve relatively quickly with relief	Requires sustained recovery over time

Many people experience both simultaneously — or find that unaddressed stress has quietly become burnout over time. Wherever you are on this spectrum, this guide has something for you.

4 What Does Stress & Burnout Feel Like?

Recognising the signs

Stress and burnout can show up across every area of life. You may recognise some signs more than others.

Exhaustion	Mental fog
Profound tiredness that doesn't lift with rest. Dreading the start of each day.	Difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or making even simple decisions.
Irritability	Detachment
Short fuse. Snapping at people. Feeling easily overwhelmed by small things.	Feeling emotionally numb or disconnected from work, relationships, or life.
Sleep problems	Physical symptoms
Difficulty switching off at night, or sleeping excessively but waking unrefreshed.	Headaches, muscle tension, stomach problems, frequent illness, or chest tightness.
Loss of motivation	Withdrawal
Things that once felt meaningful now feel pointless or joyless.	Pulling away from friends, family, hobbies, and social connection.
Anxiety & dread	Cynicism
A low-level hum of worry, or intense anxiety about facing the day.	Growing negativity, resentment, or indifference — especially toward work.

Burnout often creeps up gradually. Many people only recognise it looking back — noticing that they have been running on empty for far longer than they realised. If several of these feel familiar, take that seriously.

What happens inside your body

The HPA Axis and Cortisol

When your brain perceives a threat or demand, it activates the HPA axis (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal), triggering the release of cortisol — your primary stress hormone. Cortisol raises blood sugar for energy, suppresses non-essential functions, and sharpens alertness. In short bursts, this is life-saving.

Under chronic stress, cortisol levels remain persistently elevated. Over time this causes significant damage: impaired immune function, disrupted sleep, weight gain, memory and concentration problems, elevated blood pressure, and increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

What Chronic Stress Does to the Body & Brain

Brain structure

Chronic stress shrinks the prefrontal cortex (rational thinking, decision-making) and enlarges the amygdala (fear and reactivity), making it harder to think clearly and easier to feel overwhelmed.

Immune system

Sustained cortisol suppresses immune function, leaving you more susceptible to illness, slower to heal, and more prone to inflammatory conditions.

Cardiovascular system

Chronically elevated blood pressure and heart rate increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and other cardiovascular problems over time.

Sleep

Cortisol is naturally lowest at night to allow sleep. Under chronic stress, this rhythm is disrupted, leading to difficulty sleeping despite exhaustion.

Digestion

The gut-brain connection means stress directly affects digestion, often leading to IBS symptoms, nausea, appetite changes, and inflammation.

Energy & motivation

The dopamine system — responsible for motivation and reward — is depleted by chronic stress, contributing to the flat, joyless exhaustion characteristic of burnout.

"Your body keeps the score. Stress that isn't processed doesn't disappear — it gets stored."

6 What Causes Burnout?

It's rarely just about working too hard

Burnout is not simply the result of working too many hours. Research identifies six key mismatches that drive it. Understanding which apply to you is an important part of recovery.

Unsustainable workload

Consistently being asked to do more than is humanly possible. Deadlines that overlap, insufficient recovery time, and the constant sense of being behind no matter how hard you work.

Lack of control

Little or no autonomy over how, when, or where you work. Feeling micromanaged, unable to influence decisions, or having no agency over factors that directly affect you.

Insufficient recognition

Effort going unacknowledged. Feeling invisible, undervalued, or that what you contribute makes no difference. Often more damaging than low pay alone.

Poor community

Toxic relationships at work, lack of support from colleagues or managers, conflict, isolation, or a culture where asking for help is seen as weakness.

Unfairness

Experiencing or witnessing favouritism, inconsistency, discrimination, or decisions that feel unjust. A persistent sense that the rules do not apply equally to everyone.

Values mismatch

Being asked to do things that conflict with your personal values, or working in an organisation whose culture or ethics feel at odds with who you are. One of the most corrosive contributors to burnout.

Caring & personal responsibilities

Burnout is not exclusive to paid work. Caring for children, elderly parents, or a partner with health needs — particularly without adequate support — can be just as depleting.

Personal factors

Perfectionism, difficulty delegating, people-pleasing, poor boundaries, and high self-criticism all increase vulnerability to burnout. These patterns are often what therapy can most usefully address.

7 Self-Assessment Checklist

Tick what applies to you

This checklist is not a diagnostic tool. However, it can help you identify how stress or burnout may be showing up for you right now.

Physical Signs

- ☐ I feel tired most of the time, even when I've had enough sleep
- ☐ I wake up already dreading the day ahead
- ☐ I have frequent headaches, muscle tension, or physical aches without a clear cause
- ☐ I have been getting ill more often than usual
- ☐ My sleep has been disrupted — difficulty falling asleep, waking in the night, or oversleeping
- ☐ I have noticed changes in my appetite — eating more or less than usual
- ☐ I feel a persistent physical heaviness or sluggishness

Emotional & Mental Signs

- ☐ I feel emotionally flat, numb, or disconnected from things that used to matter
- ☐ I feel increasingly cynical, negative, or resentful — particularly about work
- ☐ I feel anxious, on edge, or like I'm constantly waiting for something to go wrong
- ☐ I feel irritable and find myself snapping at people I care about
- ☐ I feel a loss of purpose or meaning in what I'm doing
- ☐ I struggle to concentrate, focus, or think clearly
- ☐ I feel like I'm going through the motions rather than genuinely living my life
- ☐ I feel trapped — like there is no way out of the situation I'm in

Behavioural Signs

- ☐ I have been withdrawing from friends, family, or social activities
- ☐ I have stopped doing things I used to enjoy — hobbies, exercise, creative activities
- ☐ I am working longer hours but getting less done
- ☐ I am making more mistakes or finding it harder to meet my own standards
- ☐ I am relying on caffeine, alcohol, or other substances to get through the day
- ☐ I am neglecting my own needs — meals, breaks, rest, medical appointments
- ☐ I find it hard to switch off — work or worries follow me into evenings and weekends
- ☐ I have been putting off dealing with problems because I have nothing left

Ready to talk to someone?

If anything in this section resonates, our free 15-minute consultation is a no-pressure way to explore whether therapy might help.

Book at: calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation

Practical tools to reduce stress and begin recovery

These techniques are drawn from evidence-based approaches including CBT, mindfulness, nervous system regulation, and ACT. For burnout, the most important thing is to begin gradually — small, consistent steps matter far more than dramatic changes.

Immediate Stress Relief

1. Physiological Sigh

Take a full breath in through your nose. At the top, take one more short sniff to fully inflate the lungs. Then breathe out slowly and completely through your mouth. Repeat 1–2 times. The fastest known way to reduce physiological stress arousal — works in under 30 seconds.

2. Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

Breathe in for 4 counts. Hold for 4 counts. Breathe out for 4 counts. Hold for 4 counts. Repeat 4–6 cycles. Activates the parasympathetic nervous system directly. Used by military, emergency services, and athletes to manage high-pressure situations.

3. 5-Minute Body Scan

Sit or lie comfortably. Starting at the top of your head, slowly bring attention down through your body. Notice where you are holding tension without trying to fix it. On each exhale, consciously soften each area. Stress lives in the body — regular body scans build awareness before tension accumulates.

Managing Cognitive Overload

4. Brain Dump

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Write down everything occupying your mind — worries, tasks, things you're holding, things you're avoiding. Don't organise it — just empty your head. Then review: what needs action? What can you let go? Working memory has a limited capacity — externalising thoughts reduces mental load.

5. The Two-Minute Rule

If a task will take less than two minutes — do it now. If it takes longer — schedule it, delegate it, or decide not to do it. Small incomplete tasks create disproportionate mental drag. Clearing them quickly removes a surprising amount of background stress.

6. Worry Postponement

Choose a daily 'worry time' — 15–20 minutes at the same time each day. When a worry arises outside this window, write it down briefly and remind yourself: 'I'll address this at my worry time.' Contains worry to a defined period rather than letting it run all day.

Boundaries & Energy Management

7. The Energy Audit

Draw two columns: 'Energising' and 'Depleting'. List every significant activity, relationship, and commitment in your life. Honestly assign each to one of the two columns. Most people in burnout have dramatically underestimated how depleted their energy column is.

8. Learning to Say No

Recognise that 'no' is a complete sentence. Practise a simple, kind, firm response: 'I'm not able to take that on right now.' Remember: every yes to something that depletes you is a no to your own recovery. Building the capacity to say no is not selfish — it is essential.

9. Micro-Recoveries

Build genuine recovery into your day — every 60–90 minutes, take a 5-minute break: stand, move, breathe, look away from screens. Eat lunch away from your desk. Working in long unbroken blocks without rest accelerates burnout.

Mindset & Perspective

10. Values Clarification

Ask yourself: what matters most to me in my life? Write your top 5–8 core values. Now look honestly at how you are spending your time and energy. Burnout often develops when we are living far from our values. Reconnecting provides both direction and motivation for change.

11. Cognitive Defusion

Notice a stressful thought (e.g. 'I can't cope'). Prefix it with: 'I'm having the thought that I can't cope.' Or imagine the thought as words on a screen slowly fading. Creates psychological distance from thoughts, reducing their grip and allowing you to respond rather than react.

12. Self-Compassion in the Hard Moments

When you notice the inner critic, pause. Ask: what would I say to a close friend in this situation? Place a hand on your heart and take three slow breaths. Say to yourself: 'This is genuinely hard. I am doing my best. I deserve care too.' Self-compassion is the foundation of sustainable recovery.

Exploring your own stress and burnout

These exercises invite you to look more closely at your own experience. Take your time — you may find it helpful to return to these more than once.

Exercise 1: Mapping Your Stress

What are the main sources of stress in your life right now?

Which of these feels most within your control? Which feels least?

How long have you been carrying this level of stress?

What has kept you going? What resources or strengths have you drawn on?

Exercise 2: Understanding Your Burnout

Which of the three burnout dimensions (exhaustion, detachment, reduced efficacy) feels most present for you?

What were the conditions or pressures that led to this point?

What would need to change — in your situation or in yourself — for recovery to begin?

Exercise 3: Reimagining Your Life

What did you used to enjoy that stress or burnout has taken away from you?

What would a sustainable, fulfilling version of your life look like?

What is one small thing you could do this week to move toward that?

10 Recovery: Building Back Gradually

What burnout recovery actually looks like

Burnout recovery is not linear, and it is not fast. Understanding what it actually involves helps set realistic expectations and avoid the common mistake of returning to full capacity too quickly.

The Four Phases of Burnout Recovery

Phase 1	Rest & Stabilisation
	The first priority is to reduce the load and allow the nervous system to begin recovering. This means genuinely resting — not catching up, not staying productive. Sleep, reduced stimulation, and removing yourself temporarily from the primary stressor wherever possible.
Phase 2	Gentle Reengagement
	Slowly and deliberately reintroduce activity — starting with things that are restorative and enjoyable rather than obligatory. Light movement, time in nature, brief social contact, creative activities. No rushing.
Phase 3	Addressing Root Causes
	This is where the real work happens. Understanding what drove the burnout: the external conditions, the personal patterns, the boundaries that were absent. This phase often benefits significantly from therapeutic support.
Phase 4	Sustainable Rebuilding
	Returning to full engagement, but with new structures, boundaries, and self-awareness that make a repeat less likely. Recovery is an opportunity to rebuild differently, not just to get back to where you were.

"Recovery from burnout is not about getting back to who you were before. It is about building a version of your life that doesn't burn you out in the first place."

The foundations that support recovery

Recovery from stress and burnout requires more than reducing workload. It involves actively rebuilding the physical and emotional reserves that have been depleted.

Sleep — the non-negotiable

Sleep is when the brain clears stress hormones, consolidates memory, and restores emotional regulation. Burnout almost always involves disrupted sleep. Prioritise a consistent sleep schedule, a wind-down routine, and a cool, dark room. Reduce alcohol (which fragments sleep) and screens before bed.

Movement

Exercise metabolises cortisol and adrenaline, boosts mood-regulating neurotransmitters, and significantly improves sleep quality. During burnout, gentler forms of movement — walking, yoga, swimming — are often more appropriate than high-intensity exercise, which can further stress an already depleted system.

Nature & Sunlight

Time outdoors in natural light regulates circadian rhythms, reduces cortisol, and has a direct calming effect on the nervous system. Even 20 minutes outside daily — particularly in the morning — can make a meaningful difference.

Nutrition & Blood Sugar

Erratic eating, skipped meals, and high sugar intake all destabilise blood sugar, which directly worsens anxiety, irritability, and fatigue. Regular, balanced meals and reducing ultra-processed foods supports both energy and emotional regulation.

Alcohol & Stimulants

Caffeine after 2pm disrupts sleep; alcohol disrupts it further and increases anxiety the next day. During stress and burnout recovery, both are worth moderating significantly. Many people notice meaningful improvement within two weeks.

Connection

Isolation worsens burnout. Even brief, low-key contact with people who feel safe can restore a sense of being supported. Simply being with others helps regulate the nervous system.

Restorative activities

Actively rebuild time for activities that restore rather than deplete you. Not productive hobbies — genuinely restful or joyful ones. Recovery requires permission to rest.

Digital boundaries

The always-on culture of phones and work messaging is a significant driver of stress. Set clear boundaries around when you check work emails, mute notifications outside working hours, and create phone-free time in your mornings and evenings.

12 When to Seek Professional Support

You don't have to manage this alone

Self-help strategies are a valuable starting point, but there are times when professional support makes all the difference. Consider reaching out if:

- You have been significantly stressed or exhausted for several weeks or more
- You are no longer able to function effectively at work or at home
- Rest and time off are no longer providing recovery
- You feel emotionally numb, detached, or like you have lost your sense of self
- You are using alcohol, substances, or unhealthy behaviours to cope
- Your relationships are significantly suffering
- You feel hopeless about things ever improving
- Anxiety, low mood, or physical health problems have developed alongside the stress
- You have tried self-help and it has not been enough
- You sense that the patterns driving your stress go deeper than your current situation

"Recognising that you need support is not weakness. It is the clearest sign that you are taking your own wellbeing seriously."

What to expect from professional support

Therapy for stress and burnout is not about being told to slow down or work less. It is a collaborative process that helps you understand the deeper patterns driving your stress, develop practical skills to manage it, and build a more sustainable relationship with yourself and your life.

CBT — Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Helps you identify the thinking patterns (perfectionism, catastrophising, over-responsibility) and behaviours (overworking, poor boundaries, avoidance) that maintain stress. CBT provides practical tools to change these patterns and build more sustainable ways of responding to pressure.

Person-Centred Counselling

Provides a genuinely confidential, non-judgmental space to explore how you arrived here and what you truly need. Sometimes the most therapeutic thing is simply being fully heard by someone who is not managing their own agenda in relation to your recovery.

EMDR

Particularly useful where burnout or chronic stress is connected to past experiences, trauma, or deeply held beliefs about yourself and your worth. EMDR can help reprocess the root material that drives the patterns.

Hypnotherapy

Can be highly effective for stress-related conditions, helping to access and reframe deeply held patterns of overwork, perfectionism, or people-pleasing that contribute to burnout. Also effective for sleep difficulties and anxiety that accompany burnout.

Integrative Therapy

Many therapists at Hope Therapy work integratively — drawing from multiple approaches to provide support that is tailored specifically to you, your history, your personality, and your goals.

Ready to take the next step?

A free 15-minute consultation is a no-pressure way to explore whether therapy might help with your stress or burnout.

Book at: calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation



We're Here When You're Ready

At Hope Therapy & Counselling Services, we work with people every day who are exhausted, overwhelmed, or running on empty. We understand how hard it can be to reach out when you have nothing left.

calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation

Book your free 15-minute consultation — no commitment, no pressure.

- ✓ Individual counselling, CBT, EMDR, and hypnotherapy for stress and burnout
- ✓ Online sessions available nationwide across England
- ✓ Face-to-face sessions in selected locations (subject to therapist availability)
- ✓ Specialist support for LGBTQIA+ individuals and neurodiverse clients
- ✓ Qualified, registered therapists — all members of appropriate UK professional bodies
- ✓ A free 15-minute consultation to get started — no commitment required

Or visit us at: www.hopefulminds.co.uk

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