

Therapist Burnout: How to Spot, Prevent, and Cure

If you're a practicing psychotherapist, you already know that it's not all sunshine and roses.

Treating our clients can be deeply rewarding - but our efforts to heal the psychological welfare of others can also take a significant toll on our own.

Burnout is extremely prevalent among mental healthcare providers. It impacts our own wellbeing, as well as the quality of care we provide our clients. Some of the factors contributing to burnout include high workload, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma.

Fortunately, there are some things you can do to prevent and treat harmful levels of burnout, thereby maintaining success and growth within your career. This article will delve more deeply into both symptoms and causes of therapist burnout, as well as strategies and tips for prevention and treatment.

Symptoms of Burnout

Burnout goes beyond a full, taxing day that leaves you mentally and physically spent. True burnout might be best described as an accumulation of that level of exhaustion. It's an affliction that will occur after weeks, months, or potentially years of overwork and self-neglect.

Here are a few ways you might be able to spot burnout as a therapist:

Extreme fatigue

Being tired is pretty normal, but it is cause for concern once you reach a level of exhaustion that impairs your functioning and is not easily remedied by a good night's sleep. If you find that you never seem to feel rested and are struggling to complete simple daily tasks, it is possible that you're experiencing burnout - especially if coupled with any of the other common symptoms below.

Emotionally exhausted and disengaged from patients

It's a major red flag when you are no longer able to emotionally show up for your clients. We all have our rough days, but if you are consistently finding that you are zoning out and cannot be present during your sessions, you are clearly struggling to function on a deeper level. We're trained to manage our reactions and emotions within the scope of therapy work, but it's also a really bad sign when you stop feeling anything in relation to your clients. If you're struggling to find compassion or to feel invested in your therapeutic relationships, burnout is likely at play.

Unusual negative feelings

Are you dreading the start of every work week? Feeling frustrated with your workload and resentful of your colleagues or patients? How about feeling unappreciated, or just downright bored with your day-to-day life? If any combination of these very strong emotions have started to creep into your work identity, it is possible that burnout is the primary culprit.

Feeling overwhelmed

Whether you're at an under-resourced agency or just trying to stay afloat in your independent practice, you are probably like most therapists and are trying to manage an oversized caseload. It can feel challenging to keep all those clients straight; not to mention the gravity and massive responsibility that naturally comes with this line of work. If even the simplest tasks and commitments are making you feel overwhelmed, you might be experiencing burnout.

Feeling physically unwell

Burnout will inevitably take a toll on your body in combination with your brain. You might just feel a general feeling of rundown and unwellness accompanying your fatigue; or you'll experience specific ailments, like stomach aches or headaches. You also might find that you catch colds and flus more frequently and easily, and have a hard time bouncing back quickly.

Lack of passion for work

It's tough when you reach the point of not being able to find excitement or joy in the work you do, even on a good day. If you're no longer able to feel active engagement with any aspects of your job, it's possible you burned out without even realizing.

Questioning career choice

Occasional doubt is normal, but when you start experiencing an existential-level questioning of all of your life choices and your identity at large, it could be yet another side effect of burnout. The key here is noticing when you can no longer separate the day-to-day challenges from a persistent, strong pull to leave the profession entirely.

Causes of Burnout

Research has theorized that burnout could stem from a variety of different causes, and we can identify a few likely culprits that may plague therapists specifically:

Challenging working conditions

Oftentimes, our working environments consist of high workloads and limited resources. Many direct care settings are understaffed and contain frustrating management structures and inefficient workflows.

Independently employed clinicians in private practice struggle with the same subpar work-life balance and lack of support. Young clinicians may have insufficient training, leading to a higher chance of burnout in the profession. Low wages can contribute to personal stress, and working with difficult populations is a significant factor as well.

Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a term used to describe the challenging impact one feels as the result of helping others, particularly through their experiences of trauma and stress. It is often mistaken for burnout - and while it differs from the cumulative suffering discussed in this article, it is important to note that it can be a major contributing factor. The empathy it requires to listen to the pain of our clients results in experiencing many of their difficult feelings along with them; and unfortunately, that takes a toll on our own wellness.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma is a term often used interchangeably with compassion fatigue, but there is a slight differentiation. It specifically refers to the impact that hearing traumatic narratives has on the therapist's worldview, and how the effects of experiencing their traumas secondhand can mirror the symptoms of the people who endured the actual trauma. It is expected that humans will be changed by the stories we hear, but this phenomenon can have detrimental impacts on our work if not properly managed over time.

Tips to Prevent Burnout

Burnout is always a risk in this field of work; therefore, active prevention is your best defense in advance of a larger future issue on your hands. Here are some tips to prevent burnout as a therapist:

Reduce workload

The first step in preventing getting overworked in the first place is to properly manage the amount of work you have on your plate. Smaller caseloads are proven better for both the therapist and the client - you'll be a better therapist when you have enough energy to meet the needs of a more manageable amount of clients, plus you won't be as exhausted. In some cases, changing jobs might be necessary to seek a position that affords a more modest workload.

Seek support

Adequate supervision is crucial for therapists, as is having safe spaces to talk through the challenges you're enduring as a result of client work. Depending on your employment situation, it may be necessary to seek outside supervision to provide or supplement your professional support. In particular, group support can be extremely beneficial - you'll give and receive support from colleagues who will empathize with your experiences and validate your feelings.

Further your skills

Making sure you have armed yourself with the necessary tools to serve your clients is important to prevent feelings of frustration and inadequacy in your work. Continuing education also helps motivate you to move forward in your profession, and can help to assert the worthiness of the important work you're doing.

Recovering from Burnout

Preventing burnout is the ideal, but sometimes it happens anyway. Here are some key strategies for treating burnout:

Rest

Oftentimes, the first line of defense is simply sleep. Take a vacation or a leave of absence, and allow your body and brain to rest and recharge. If you are sleep-deprived or suffering from prolonged fatigue, you will inevitably be struggling to think clearly, take care of yourself, and perform well at work. Stepping away and prioritizing rest for even a short while can do wonders. Beyond that, it may be necessary to consider making some long term changes - whether that is reducing your caseload or changing jobs, or whatever needs to happen to allow you to slow down moving forward.

Reconnect

Now is the time to pause and start practicing what you preach. Incorporate mindfulness into your days. Exercise, journal, seek your own therapy, and spend quality time with loved ones. Revisit your values and remind yourself of your strengths. Focus on your own healing, remembering the adage about putting your own oxygen mask on first.

Conclusion

Burnout is extremely common for therapists - but it need not be inevitable.

Therapists should always have established self-care practices in their personal toolboxes. This will help prevent and treat episodes of burnout if they do arise.

One of the most important things a therapist can do is check in with themselves regularly, and be constantly assessing themselves for signs of burnout so they can address any issues promptly and effectively.

Remember, therapists need care too! Need more helpful tips on how to thrive as a therapist? Sign up right [here](#), and we'll send some extra support straight to your inbox.

