

# What is burnout and what does it feel like?

In this blog post, Tessa Warinner, wellbeing adviser at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology, discusses 'Burnout' – a rising concern in academia. Tessa discusses what it feels like, its prevalence, impact, and signposts helpful resources for managing it. This post belongs to the **Hot Topic theme: Critical insights into contemporary issues in Higher Education.**

I'm sure you've come across the term 'burnout' while scrolling through your social media and news feeds. I've personally noticed an increase in public conversation about it since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Like many psychological terms, the actual meaning of it can get lost in the chatter. The World Health Organisation (WHO) characterises burnout as 'an occupational phenomenon'. They define it as

*"a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."*

They said that the three main dimensions are as follows:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- reduced professional efficacy.

In my experience as a wellbeing adviser, I've frequently had both students and staff tell me they're feeling burnt out. They usually tell me about experiencing symptoms that closely resemble the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which is the go-to questionnaire for measuring if a person is experiencing this phenomenon. Some of the symptoms are:

- **Exhaustion:** feeling emotionally drained, frequently

frustrated with your work, feeling at the end of your rope, and feeling like it's too much effort to directly interact with people at work.

- **Depersonalisation (or a loss of empathy for others):** feeling afraid that your job has made you more callous towards others, you are out of patience by the end of the work day, and you feel like you are too tired to get up to face another day at work.
- **Personal achievement:** feeling like you haven't accomplished anything worthwhile, you don't feel you're positively influencing others, and you struggle to create a relaxed work environment for yourself and others.

If any of these resonate with your personal experience, you are far from alone. Mental Health UK released a 2024 report about the YouGov poll they ran about burnout. They found that 91% of workers reported feeling extremely stressed out in the past year. One in five workers reported needing to take time off work for burnout symptoms in the past year. It's safe to say that at least one person in your inner circle has felt burned out at some point in their lives. I guess that means you're in good company, right?

### **Can students experience burnout?**

The current definitions of burnout are worded for people working in jobs. In my experience, I have found that students frequently report burnout symptoms while completing their degree. Going to lectures, working on assessments, and attending exams can involve as much energy as someone working a full-time job. Coupled with the rigorous academic expectations that come with attending the University of Edinburgh, it's natural to feel worn down by it. Academic burnout appears to be under-studied, but a 2023 study found that out of the 22,983 students they included in the sample, over half of them were currently experiencing it. They also found that certain factors such as being male, having higher

marks than the class average, and smoking cigarettes led to higher levels of academic burnout.

This study highlights the importance of understanding how burnout does not occur in a vacuum. I tell students (and my co-workers) that it is a very stressful time to work and study. We're collectively doing our best to cope with trying to see our friends and family, exercise, do chores, drink enough water, get eight hours of sleep, keep our screen times low, not get Covid-19, manage our money while we deal with the cost-of-living crisis, and watch our government deal with global geopolitical instability. In my professional opinion, experiencing at least some burnout symptoms is a normal response to these abnormal circumstances.

### **What can be done if you feel burnt out?**

If anything from this post resonates with your experience, it's worth taking this burnout quiz by HealthCentral. This is not a diagnostic tool, but it can help you organise your thoughts around how you're feeling. It can help structure further conversations with medical and mental health professionals. There is also a great book called *Burnout: Solve Your Stress Cycle* by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, which does a deep dive into the phenomenon and has practical tips to help you feel better.

If you are a current University of Edinburgh student and don't know where to start addressing burnout, it's worth referring into Student Wellbeing Services using our referral form. A wellbeing adviser can meet with you to discuss your situation and come up with a bespoke support plan for you. Personally, I usually recommend taking time to rest and getting clinical help to help alleviate burnout. I would put them in touch with their student adviser to discuss the logistics around taking a leave of absence or an authorised interruption of studies, if this is what the student would like. I'm very mindful that students are typically reluctant to take any significant time

off as they would like to graduate within four years, so I would usually find ways to build in more time for rest in their busy schedules. I would also help them find ways they can access therapy to talk more about their feelings. This can be through the University Student Counselling Service or external services located around the city.

If you are a staff member, time and clinical help are also the way to go. I would recommend speaking with your line manager first to discuss your current workload and obligations. There is also the University Occupational Health Service if you don't feel comfortable speaking with them. They will be able to point you in the direction of appropriate services.

*All in all, burnout is a very common phenomenon that at least one person in your inner circle has experienced. Having it is no reflection on your character, or your ability to withstand stressful circumstances. No matter what, you're going to get through it. You're going to be okay.*



**Tessa Warinner**

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# How to prevent burnout as a postgraduate student

Embarking on a postgraduate journey is undoubtedly an exciting and intellectually rewarding endeavour, but it does require a significant amount of time, effort and dedication. How can you get the most out of your studies, without experiencing burnout? MSc Intellectual History student Lena offers her thoughts.

Taking the decision to study at a postgraduate level is a big decision so it's normal to feel overwhelmed and stressed out at times, but in the worst-case scenario – when academia takes over your life a little bit too much, and you cannot seem to catch a breath – it can lead to burnout, adversely affecting your mental and physical wellbeing. To prevent getting to a state like that, I've put together a – hopefully – helpful guide with some simple and practical strategies which have helped me safeguard my mental and physical health throughout my academic journey. You should truly enjoy your time at University, rather than just constantly wishing for all the deadlines and stress to finally disappear.

## Understanding Burnout



Before delving into the advice on how to prevent burnout, it may be helpful to briefly cover what the phrase 'burnout' actually refers to. It's commonly understood as a state of chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by feelings of cynicism and detachment from work or, in the case of students, from studies. Often, burnout is not the result of a brief stressful period but rather a consequence of prolonged exposure to stressors, overwhelming workloads, and a lack of adequate coping mechanisms. A few common signs that are usually understood to indicate burnout (although these can vary from person to person) include persistent fatigue, decreased productivity, increased irritability, diminished enthusiasm, and withdrawal from social activities.

## **Managing your Studies**

The first area to be tackled when attempting to create a sustainable framework for avoiding burnout during your

postgraduate career is probably the most obvious and intuitive – your studies. I'll will begin this section with something that we've all probably heard time and time again in a University and work context – time management. There is a reason why people talk about it so much. Ultimately, it is the tool that will help you stay calm in the first place, no matter how massive the workload may seem.

While an undergraduate degree may have allowed you to be more flexible and do assignments at the last minute, a postgraduate degree is often far more time-consuming. Additionally, you are usually expected to engage far more deeply with the topics you are working on. Frequently your lecturers want to see you really delve into a topic for an essay, which is considerably more difficult to do if you only started looking at the question the night before. So, although it may be a tedious task to do, and you might not want to hear it because you have already heard it a thousand times, before you think about anything else sit yourself down and develop a realistic and efficient time schedule that includes your academic work as well as other personal commitments.

A schedule has helped me to prioritise tasks based on their deadlines and importance and to structure my work days based on three main components – readings for upcoming classes, research for assignments, and writing for assignments – and your schedule may look very different, depending on which programme you do and how your classes and assignments are structured. However, the most important thing is that you create a time management system for yourself. Having a system in place means that you do not have to wake up each morning stressed and panicked at the prospect of all the things you need to do.



One crucial aspect to consider when setting up your daily, weekly, or even monthly schedule is to be honest with yourself regarding whether your short- and long-term goals are realistically achievable. It is probably not ideal to simply put down, 'Write your essay on Friday'. Seeing this when you first open your physical or digital planner will very likely leave you overwhelmed with trying to figure out what to exactly do that day. When proactively planning your day or week, it may be much more helpful to break down all your larger tasks into smaller, manageable steps and, most importantly, celebrate your accomplishments, no matter how small they may seem, along the way. Did you write one page today? That is already one page closer than yesterday and one step closer to finishing your essay altogether! Please don't forget to give yourself credit for all the work you do on a daily basis since it is often much more than you think. Being proud of yourself for all the tasks you do, no matter how big or small, will not only make you feel better each day but also help you stay motivated in the long run.

Establishing clear boundaries is another important element when attempting to create an achievable and realistic time schedule. Saying no to things you may not have the time for and would not enjoy enough to warrant compromising other aspects of your academic and personal life is crucial. As much



as it may be tempting to 'do it all,' it is essential to recognise that attempting to juggle too many things at once can lead to exhaustion and will ultimately compromise not only the quality of academic work you put out, but also the quality of time spent with friends and family outside of your University life.

Lastly, I would like to remind you that during your time in Edinburgh, you should not hesitate to utilise the available support systems. You don't have to go through everything alone. Making an effort to connect with academic advisors, the student support team at the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology (also known as HCA), and other students can be beneficial for you in many ways. Regular communication with HCA staff and students can provide you with valuable insights and guidance for your academic work, as well as a sense of belonging. It can also help reduce potential feelings of isolation that may be especially strong if you have just recently moved to Edinburgh and have not met many people yet.

## **Making Self-Care a Priority**

As a postgraduate student, it can be quite easy to become completely absorbed in your studies. After all, pursuing a postgraduate degree is expected to push you to your academic limits so that you can potentially join the ranks of those researchers whose work you have always admired. When I first started, I found myself quickly setting aside everything in my life that was not related to my studies so that I could make enough time for reading, researching, and writing. This is only natural, you likely chose to pursue a postgraduate degree because you are incredibly passionate about your field of study, so it is to be expected to want to dedicate all your time and energy to it.

However, if the basics of taking care of yourself physically and mentally start to disappear from your daily routine, your body and your mind will eventually find it increasingly

difficult to deal with the workload and the stress postgraduate degrees can bring. On the other hand, if you get the basics right, you will be able to sit at your desk energised and ready to do your best rather than constantly feeling tired and sluggish.

## Simple Steps

Firstly and most obviously, get enough sleep. Sleeping well and enough is essential for your cognitive function (concentration, memory and resilience against



stress) and improves your overall wellbeing. Attempt to establish a consistent sleep routine that works for you personally. If you have never been a morning person, there is no reason (other than a 9am class) for you to force yourself to be up at dawn every day to be productive. If you work better in the evenings, prioritise the evenings as your study time and leave the rest of the day for lighter tasks. The critical thing in this instance is consistency. Find a sleeping routine that works for you and your body and leaves you feeling energised throughout the week.

Eat well and regularly. Cooking may not be the first thing on your agenda, especially during deadline season, but putting a little effort into your nutrition and limiting the takeaways will make you feel much better physically, positively impacting your ability to focus on work. Also, consider

finding a way of moving your body every once in a while, even if it is just a short walk through the Meadows to break up those long library days. If you need an incentive, grab a coffee or a hot chocolate with a friend to get you outside. Even though Edinburgh is not always blessed with the sunniest weather, when the sun does come through, your body will be thanking you for getting some fresh air and a bit of Vitamin D.

Consider trying out some form of mindfulness/relaxation techniques to slow you down during a hectic university day. I will be the first to admit that I have always struggled to understand how people could sit still when the to-do list seemed endless. I was convinced that even sparing 10 minutes for meditation or some light yoga would rob me of valuable time that I could spend being productive. However, over time, I have started to recognise that when you feel overwhelmed with work, it is not always the most helpful to just keep going but rather to stop for a second to breathe and gather yourself again. It ended up helping me immensely to take control over the feelings of panic and stress that often felt not controllable at all. Give a mindfulness activity of your choice a go and see how you feel after. It never hurts to try new things, and it may help you to ground yourself a bit on those days when it all becomes a little bit too overwhelming.

Lastly and most importantly, don't forget to have fun! You are obviously in Edinburgh to study and challenge yourself academically, but don't completely neglect your hobbies and those activities that you know bring you joy and relaxation. Ultimately, engaging in non-academic activities, whether as part of a society or individually, will undoubtedly provide you with a necessary break from the demands of postgraduate life and ultimately help you achieve a better work-life balance. And it can be anything! Maybe try doing something that you loved to do as a child, such as painting and crafting, or try something entirely new to challenge yourself.

Whatever it is, please do not let postgraduate studies keep you from pursuing your hobbies; if anything, it will help your academic performance if you are well-balanced and happy with what you do every day.

There are some of the strategies which have helped me personally with my wellbeing throughout my studies thus far. However, don't forget that if you feel you need help you can reach out to the student support team, who can help you and direct you to appropriate support services if necessary.

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## **Boost your mood**

It's November. It's cold, dark, and very, very grey. The weeks are filled with endless assignments, frustrating group projects, hours of staring at your laptop screen, and most likely a lot of reading. Asha, a final year History student, looks at how to improve your mood when it starts getting dark at 3pm.

Every year without fail, I fall into the same mid/end of semester slump. And this semester, when we are staying inside way more than before and there is less to look forward to, I definitely rely on a lot of ways to boost my mood. Sometimes I just have to resort to lying in my bed, but most of the time these work pretty well for me!

### **Talk to your friends and laugh**

If you're struggling to keep your mood up during the semester, make sure you make time to talk and laugh with people who boost your mood. Try and avoid talking about deadlines or classes and take a bit of time to think about other things that make you smile. This could be playing a game, walking up

one of Edinburgh's many hills, or just going for a coffee!

## **Go for walks in nature or change your surroundings**

It's amazing how much getting out of your room and changing your surroundings can affect your mood. If you are stressed or anxious about deadlines, try taking a long walk and stretch your legs. Holyrood park is a great place to do this, and the beautiful views of the city can help clear your head. Just being surrounded by trees can really help me to feel a lot better. If you need a change of workspace try going to a café or a different library that you haven't been to before – this could help you get some new ideas and boost your mood.

Sometimes I find it really easy to get to the end of the day and realise that I've spent most of my day staring at a screen, whether that be my laptop or phone. Try and take a bit of time away from screens and giving your brain a rest.

## **Be kind to yourself and take a day off!**

When I'm feeling really stressed and I am looking for small ways to boost my mood, treating myself to small things can really help. Taking a day off, or lighting a few candles, or buying yourself some cake can be the little mood booster that you need to regain the will to live.

## **Cook yourself a tasty and healthy meal**

Cooking for yourself and looking after your body are really important parts of self-care and cooking a tasty meal for yourself after a hard day can really boost your mood. For me, this is a chance to have an hour away from my phone or laptop, and either spend some time in my thoughts, or even better, enjoy the company of your flatmates and cook for them! I find cooking really therapeutic, and even if you don't think you're very good at cooking, challenge yourself one day to cook something, it can really transform your mood!

## **Finally – ask for help!**

Whether it's from friends, family, tutors or student support, there are loads of people out there willing to help you. If you're stressed about an assignment, do not hesitate to contact your tutor, and do not forget, it's their job to help you!



## **Find even more inspiration to keep your mental health and wellbeing healthy**

'Let's Talk Mental Health and Wellbeing' runs 9-27 November with events and ideas to support mental and wellbeing. Find out more on the EUSA website, [www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/letstalk](http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/letstalk)

The University's Health and wellbeing pages are a great source of information and support, [www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing](http://www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing)

Keep moving without leaving the room with live streamed exercise classes courtesy of the Sport & Exercise team, [www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing/live-streaming-exercise-classes](http://www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing/live-streaming-exercise-classes)