

The phases and tipping points of burn-out

There are several phases a person goes through before ultimately experiencing burn-out. These phases progress from being rested to feeling tired, overloaded, stressed, and finally burned out.

People often slip from one phase into the next without even noticing. In the early stages, the typical response is to work even harder and strive to perform better. This is often because they don't want to burden others or don't dare to ask for help. As a result, they enter a negative spiral that's difficult to break and frequently goes unrecognized until it's too late. Only in the final stage is help sought or accepted at the point when they can no longer manage on their own. From that moment on, recovery can take months.

The burnout working group of the Netherlands Institute of Psychologists (NIP) has developed a model to map out the phases and relevant tipping points.



Rested



Tired



Overloaded



Stressed out



Burnout

Healthy work environment

In every phase, it is essential that a person experiences a healthy and safe work environment. Not only in the later stages, but especially when they are still well-rested, in order to prevent future complaints.

Key elements of a psychologically healthy and safe work environment include:

- Acceptance of imperfections
- Strengthening self-leadership
- Feeling, recognizing, expressing, and guarding boundaries
- Identifying energy drainers and energy boosters

Link <https://www.psynip.nl/secties/arbeid-organisatie/over-de-sectie-ao/ao-projectgroepen/werkgroep-burn-out/>

The phases and tipping points of burn-out

Rested



Physical	Restorative sleep, waking up feeling refreshed, and being able to meet daily demands.
Emotional	Coping with everyday setbacks, experiencing resilience, feeling energetic, and starting the day with a sense of joy.
Cognitive	Thinking clearly, analyzing effectively, making plans, and carrying them out.
Behavioral	Demonstrating self-leadership: taking initiative, practicing self-care, and maintaining a healthy balance between effort and relaxation.



1st tipping point

Approach to prevent tipping: Pay attention to sleep quality and consciously build in moments of rest throughout the day.

Recovery takes days

Tired



Physical	Difficulty getting out of bed.
Emotional	Feeling somewhat down, irritable, tired, and restless.
Cognitive	Reduced sense of clarity and overview.
Behavioral	During a regular workweek: feeling tired in the evenings and still (somewhat) fatigued on the first weekend day.

..... Gradual transition

Overloaded



Physical	Normal rest and sleep are no longer sufficient. Energy levels only return to normal after (a week of) vacation.
Emotional	A sense that everything extra is too much. Symptoms of stress begin to appear.
Cognitive	An increased need for recovery and a buildup of recovery deficits. The mind feels tired. Tasks still get done but just barely, lists are needed to keep track of everything and to remember things.
Behavioral	Activities that could actually provide energy such as an evening with friends, a partner, art, or sports are cancelled. Complaining increases, responsibilities are often shifted onto others, or one continues working stubbornly and in isolation.



2nd tipping point

Approach to prevent tipping: Take a short break from work, resuming tasks can follow soon after. Exercise at a lower intensity and reduce frequency during the week. Include at least one daytime nap (20–30 minutes). Create space for recovery by actively discussing this need with your employer.

Recovery takes weeks

Stressed out



Physical	Sleep problems become chronic, getting too little sleep almost every night. Waking up tired and feeling restless or fatigued, yet still able to “switch the engine back on.”
Emotional	Even before the workweek begins, there’s already a sense of tension about the days ahead. A negative attitude, cynicism, and withdrawal increase. Genuine connection or collaboration becomes difficult.
Cognitive	Functioning is driven more by pitfalls than by strengths. For example, acting out of perfectionism rather than striving for quality. Several cognitive tasks become challenging, such as maintaining an overview, making and executing plans, making decisions, and completing work takes longer than it did when well-rested.
Behavioral	Enjoyable activities turn into obligations: “I have to go to a birthday.” There’s a strong need for rest and doing nothing. Children and partners feel like too much, and colleagues are avoided.



3rd tipping point

Approach after tipping has occurred: Recovery takes months and should begin very gently. Engage in light physical activity for example, alternate half an hour of activity with half an hour of rest. Include one or two extended rest periods each day.

Recovery takes months

Burnout



Physical	Sleeping without recovery, feeling completely exhausted, extreme fatigue. Even simple tasks feel overwhelming. After just half an hour of light activity, exhaustion sets in. Often accompanied by significant physical complaints that obstruct any upward recovery.
Emotional	Tired, gloomy, listless, seeing no way out. No interest in others, and possibly anxiety about returning to work or speaking to others.
Cognitive	Reading a book or magazine becomes impossible. Various cognitive functions are no longer manageable. Poor organizational ability, scattered thinking, and mentally distancing from the source of exhaustion.
Behavioral	Doing nothing, no motivation, unable or unwilling to take on anything. Tasks are not carried out properly.