

The risks of burnout



With so many of us plugged into our computers each day, **Jono Bacon** explores how too much can cause us to burn out.



Our expert

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If you're anything like most Linux users, you spend a lot of time in front of your computer. You probably work there, and if not, as someone interested in computers enough to buy *Linux Format*, you almost certainly spend your spare time in front of it. You communicate with it, enjoy entertainment on it, create things with it and learn about the world with it. In a nutshell, computers are so handy that we can often easily spend entire days in front of them.

While computers can bring so much to our lives, they can also be fiendishly addictive, and free software makes them even more compelling. Open source makes computers so much fun, exposing our world to a global community of people like us who work together to make our computers better. Many of us

join this global community, and many of us spend every waking moment thinking about, enjoying, and contributing to open source. It's fun, rewarding, and energising, but it can sometimes come at a cost – burnout.

The risks of burnout

Burnout is a problem that affects all walks of life, all people, and all professions. As such, it is a problem that affects all

communities, and ours is no different. Burnout refers to long-term exhaustion that typically causes lack of interest and focus. Unfortunately it can be devilishly difficult to spot and prevent in our community.

Burnout appears as a series of often subtle changes in personality, perspective, values, and behaviour in the sufferer. As these changes progress, it can be difficult to identify that

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The importance of exercise

Let's be honest, most of us geeks hate exercise. We are so used to sitting in front of our computers that exercise feels like an uncomfortable chore. It is recommended that you try to fit in at least three 30-minute exercise sessions a week to be healthy. The trick is to find exercise that you are comfortable doing

and that keeps you mentally engaged. This doesn't have to be anything sporty – I enjoy drumming, so I tend to play a fast album as my exercise session. You could also:

- » Invest in a video game such as *Wii Fit*.
- » Go for a run around a landmark such as a local castle, park or otherwise.

- » Get an exercise machine (such as a cross trainer or running machine) so you can watch DVDs or television while you exercise.
- » Go for a long walk; this is a great way to stimulate the brain.

Take a little time to try different things and see what works well for you.

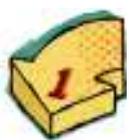


members are suffering from burnout. Unfortunately, burnout is often misdiagnosed as irrationality, short temperament, unusual behaviour or lack of tolerance.

While burnout syndrome is difficult to identify categorically, there is some compelling research. Two psychologists, Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North identified 12 phases that outline the progressively serious steps that are part of burnout; this is known as the Burnout Cycle. These steps don't necessarily happen in a sequential order (it can vary from person to person), and some sufferers will skip some of the steps whereas some will dwell longer on them. These steps offer a list of warning signs for potential burnout victims.

The Burnout Cycle

Let's take a look through the 12 parts of the burnout cycle. As you read this list, remember that these steps are just guidance. I am not a doctor, so you should seek medical attention if you have any questions or worries about these steps. Secondly, remember that not all of these steps affect everyone, and they don't always happen in this order.



A compulsion to prove yourself

Burnout typically begins with a tendency to want to prove yourself. This often stems from a feeling of insecurity that your work is not being respected or valued. When this happens, the burnout sufferer will often try to compensate for it and try to prove themselves.



Working harder

Working long hours is a common sign of the first stages of burnout. With an existing feeling that you need to prove yourself to others, a natural conclusion is that you will work harder, work longer, and provide more and more visible examples of your success to others. In these cases it is not uncommon to stay late at work, or in the case of open source contributions, work later and later. You will often find yourself awake late at night, possibly working until two or three o'clock in the morning under the belief that more will make you feel better and prove your value.



Neglecting your needs

In this stage, simple pleasures such as sleeping, eating, socialising with friends and watching *Seinfeld* are seen as just that: pleasures, and as such a distraction from work. In this situation your desire to prove yourself is strong and your top priority is to find ways of working more and more. As such, you will find it easier and easier to say no to people who want to spend time with you, and you will find it easier to find reasons to work.

Late nights and early mornings will be common, and the lack of sleep will result in an increased caffeine intake and tiredness and irritability during the day. It is also likely that you will be eating junk food, as it is quick and convenient and your tiredness will make cooking seem like more of a chore than it is.



Displacement of conflicts

At this stage some friends and family are likely to notice that something is up with you, and may have asked what is wrong. In this early stage of the burnout cycle you will be firmly of the belief that nothing is wrong, and that friends and family are just being overly analytical. You will shrug it off and suggest that you just have a lot on your plate.



Revision of values

In this phase, the obsession with work means that traditional values such as friends or hobbies are pushed aside. Here your only evaluation of success is being good at your job. This is a dangerous part of the cycle, as you are actively starting to distance yourself from your friends. You will not see social interactions and time with your family as things to be proud of and rewarding parts of your life, but instead continued distractions that get in the way of feeling rewards from the work you are doing. You will find yourself making excuses to work more often. Evenings and weekends will be taken up with work, and your friends will stop asking you to spend time with them as you are always saying no.

“Working long hours is a common sign of the first stages of burnout.”



Denial of emerging problems

In this phase, cynicism, intolerance, and aggression raise their ugly heads. Colleagues are dismissed as idiots. Your increasing problems are blamed on lack of time, incompetent coworkers, and unfair workloads. You are tired from the lack of sleep, you are probably pretty unhealthy from all the pizza and caffeine, you the pressure to prove yourself causing you to feel sorry for yourself and that other people don't understand the pressure and stress you are under. You are increasingly lashing out and snapping at people, and will find yourself causing arguments and finding it difficult to apologise. Life is feeling rather stressed at stage six.



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Withdrawal

You reduce your social interaction and contacts to a minimum and dial up your work to 11. You are at a point where relief from the feeling of burnout is becoming more and more important. You may start to relieve the stress by boozing more often during the week or possibly even resorting to drugs. Whatever your choice of substance, you appear to be indulging in it a little more than usual – and dangerously so.



Obvious behavioural changes

Your strange and erratic behaviour is obvious to your friends, family, and colleagues. You are not yourself, and your nearest and dearest can see it a mile off. You even more physically exhausted, and you are likely to be experiencing some health problems such as headaches, skin problems and low energy. Your personal relationships are under a lot of pressure and you will start to feel increasingly depressed, particularly when you are alone at night.



Depersonalisation

At this point you feel like you offer no value to the world, and lack confidence in what you could once do. Your life feels like one long series of mechanical and emotionless functions. The previous desire to demonstrate your worth will be decreasing; you just feel like you are going from one step to another.



Inner emptiness

You feel an express sense of emptiness. You resort more to booze or drugs or possibly find relief in overeating, strange and exaggerated sexual behaviour, or other unusual and destructive activities. You are feeling more and more depressed.



Serious depression

At this late stage of the burnout cycle you feel hopeless, lost, and exhausted, and see little cause for optimism for the future.



Burnout syndrome

At this, the most serious level, you feel suicidal and desperate for a way out. You are on the verge of mental and physical collapse and need medical attention.

Detecting and treating burnout

With the risks evident in the list of symptoms, you are sure to be wondering what the best approach is to manage this risk. Understanding the risks of burnout is not only important to help you recognise the symptoms happening in yourself, but also to see burnout happening in those around you. There is also the wider question of how we prevent burnout happening with the communities that we participate in.

Unfortunately, there is no recipe or secret formula for dealing with burnout in a community. The best solution is to subscribe to one simple philosophy that has helped people deal with complex life changes and decisions for years: I've got your back. Although it may seem outrageously simple, the easiest and most applicable method is to first develop a nose for symptoms and then to extend a personal hand of friendship to the sufferer. Having that sense of companionship through a tough time can really help with burnout. To detect the symptoms you should first read, reread, and then read again the 12 items in the Burnout

Cycle. These items provide a core set of knowledge for understanding the nature of burnout. You should then keep a general eye out for these symptoms in your friends, family, and community.

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Specifically look for and be conscious of changes in behaviour. If someone just 'doesn't seem themselves', they may be getting bitten by burnout. It is these changes in behaviour that are the typical signs.

If you suspect that someone is getting burned out, just strike up a personal conversation and be entirely frank. Tell the person you noticed they have been a little different recently and that you are concerned. Ask if they're OK, and whether there is anything you can help with. In many cases the person will tell you what's on their mind, what is stressing them out, and any problems they appear to be having.

With overwork as a common cause of burnout, you should also ask how they're coping with their workload and if there is anything you can do to ease it. This offer of help can in itself be a stress reliever – it's a validation that someone is there to help the sufferer get through their to-do list.

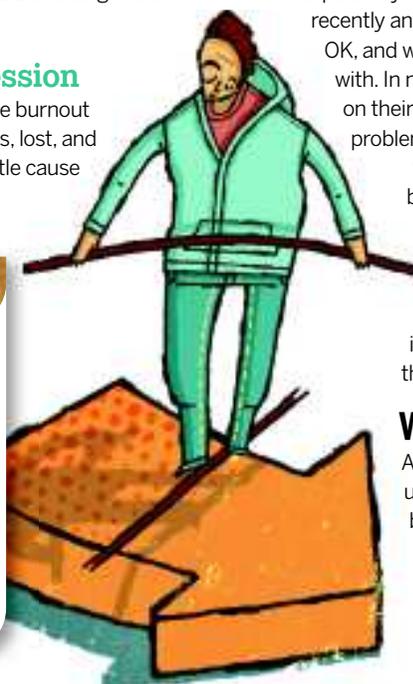
Work/life balance

At the centre of the somewhat unpleasant universe that is burnout is the problem of balance. Although there is little concrete scientific evidence to determine who is likely to be affected by burnout, mere observational evidence suggests that technical folks, musicians, counsellors,

Eating well

Healthy food plays an incredibly important role in preventing burnout. Like anything else it is about a balance. A common story in burnout is that when people feel stressed they look for relief, and fatty food is a common way of distracting yourself from the stress. In addition to this, try to ensure you are not drinking too much – we are all well aware of the risks of too much alcohol, particularly on a regular basis.

Unfortunately for many, healthy food tastes boring. There are some surprisingly tasty dishes out there though, and great website to find recipes is www.cookinglight.com.



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authors, and teachers have a higher than normal risk of reserving a place on the dreaded Burnout Cycle.

Balance is a surprisingly complicated goal for many to achieve, particularly if your community is online. Years ago it was easier to get balance: you simply switched your computer off and went and lived the parts of your life that didn't involve a mouse and a keyboard. As the internet has steamed into our lives more and more, the amount of time in our lives that doesn't involve said mouse and keyboard is being reduced.

In addition to the familiar tools of the workplace, such as email, office suites, web browsers and accounting packages, we now have social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace; blogging sites such as Blogger and WordPress; microblogging with Twitter and Identica; and online chat services such as Skype, Google GChat, MSN, Yahoo IM, and AIM. Let's also not forget the entertainment on the web: countless websites, animations, videos and articles are all there to attract us to the computer. We can then seal the deal with the countless other online facilities such as internet banking, reviews websites, mapping tools, online shopping, games and more.

Break free

It's easy to see how this merry band of pixelated distractions can take control, and it's not uncommon for people to spend an entire day and most of an evening in front of a computer. This is itself not exactly healthy: computers are great, but everyone should spend some time away from them to decompress, get some fresh air and energise other attributes of the human condition, such as getting out, playing sports, spending time with friends, romantic embraces, and other things that don't involve staring at a screen.

The problem is that when the rest of your life is wrapped with window borders, you are only ever a click away from either work or other commitments, such as community. While we want to encourage our community members to throw themselves into our goals and enjoy every moment of it, it's important to ensure that in the process of doing so they don't neglect other parts of their lives.

Addiction has affected many online communities: there are contributors and members who spend every conceivable moment of their lives embedded in the community. This can

Variety is the spice of life

A great way to prevent burnout is for you to step away from your computer and do something else. This is a great opportunity for new hobbies and pastimes such as music, learning a new language, cooking, sports, socialising with friends, or anything else.

The most important point to remember is that while you may find it relaxing to do different things on your computer, it is still intensive screen time. It is highly recommended that you find something to do that completely disconnects you from the machine.

“We all know people who appear to be constantly online.”

be seen everywhere. We all know people today who appear to be constantly online at all times of the day, always responsive to chat messages and queries and seemingly never away from their screens.

Many people can wake up at 7am, work all day, spend the entire evening in front of the computer in pursuits of their own, head to bed at 1 or 2am and spend a valuable six hours sleeping, only to wake up and repeat. That may be OK because these people can easily go away for a weekend or spend a few evenings doing something else, and go on vacation without getting jittery. For some, though, even

spending one evening – let alone a whole weekend! – away from their familiar screen can seem like too much. In these cases we are seeing strong signs of addiction.

You should be very cautious of addiction: it is never healthy in anyone. Unfortunately, the nature of addiction typically means that these people are in a state of denial about their condition. Just as with alcohol, cigarettes, or gambling, claims that “I could stop if I wanted to” are often thrown in the general direction of naysayers, but this claim is rarely, if ever, tested. The reason for your caution is that at some point an addicted member will burn out. It may take longer than expected, but when it does, it could have catastrophic results. Keep an eye on your community members and how much they are online: if it feels too much, a quick and sensitive word in their ear can help them get away for a few days.

Watch yourself

This has been a slightly different article for LXF, but one that we feel is an important topic to share. Burnout can have complex and long-lasting effects on our lives, and just having a basic understanding of the symptoms can be enough to prevent it in yourself and your friends. The real key to understanding burnout is that rest and diversity in what you do is important to help you enjoy and be successful in your passion. No matter how much you love open source, you have look after yourself first. **LXF**

