Sustainable Pace and Burnout

Version ICD-11 · verified 2026-11-02

Burnout is a mismatch between demands and resources over time — spot the signs, fix the structure first, then protect focus, recovery and boundaries.

Contents

Mental model 2

What burnout is 2

Warning signs 3

The six areas of worklife 4

Workload and on-call limits 5

Saying no with a trade-off 5

Focus, recovery and remote boundaries 6

AI-tool fatigue and keeping skills 7

Asking for help and helping others 7

Further reading 8

Mental model

Burnout is a mismatch between what the job demands and the resources you have to meet it, sustained over time — not a personal weakness. Maslach and Leiter's research ties it to six areas of worklife: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. Fix those structurally first; a weekend off cannot repay a workload that is permanently above capacity.

What burnout is

WHO dimension	Feels like
Exhaustion	Drained before the day starts
Mental distance, cynicism	"Why bother?"; detached from the work
Reduced professional efficacy	Nothing you do seems to land

ICD-11 defines burn-out as a syndrome "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed", with these three dimensions. WHO classifies it as an *occupational phenomenon*, not a medical condition, and says it refers specifically to work — not other areas of life. It is common: State of Devs 2026 found 62% of respondents had experienced burnout at some point in their career.

```
Burnout  = exhaustion
         + cynicism / mental distance
```

```
         + reduced efficacy
Tiredness after a launch = exhaustion only
```

> **Gotcha:** Exhaustion alone is not burnout, and a holiday that fixes it was what you needed. Cynicism and lost efficacy that return a week after you come back point at the job, not at your rest.

Warning signs

Sign	Ask yourself
Sunday dread every week	Which part of Monday?
Cynical about work you used to like	What changed — scope, team, values?
Procrastinating, unable to focus	Too much, or too little control?
Working longer, delivering less	Since when?
Sleep, illness, irritability	Is this lasting weeks, not days?

The signs match the three dimensions and show up before you name them. Around half of State of Devs 2026 respondents reported recent trouble focusing, extra procrastination, unusual drain, or feeling less effective. Track signs weekly in one line; a trend is easier to act on than a feeling.

```
Weekly check (1–5, 5 = good)
2026-10-19  energy 3  focus 3  meaning 4
2026-10-26  energy 2  focus 2  meaning 3
```

```
2026-11-02  energy 2  focus 2  meaning 2
-> three weeks down: raise it in 1:1
```

The six areas of worklife

Area	Mismatch looks like
Workload	More work than hours, with no end date
Control	Responsible for outcomes you can’t influence
Reward	Effort unrecognised, in pay or acknowledgement
Community	Isolated, or constant conflict
Fairness	Promotions or on-call shared unevenly
Values	Asked to ship what you think is wrong

Maslach and Leiter frame burnout as a chronic mismatch in one or more of these areas, which makes them a diagnostic checklist. Name the area before picking a fix: a values mismatch is not cured by a lighter sprint, and a workload problem is not cured by a team offsite. Bring the named area to your manager — it is a concrete, fixable request.

```
"The issue isn't hours this month. I'm on
the hook for the release date, but I
can't change scope or staffing (control).
Can I get a say in what gets cut?"
```

Workload and on-call limits

Limit	Source
Sustain a constant pace indefinitely	Agile Manifesto principles
On-call ≤ 25% of an SRE's time	Google SRE book
≤ 2 incidents per 12-hour shift	Google SRE book
Follow-up time after every incident	Google SRE book

The Agile Manifesto asks that sponsors, developers and users "maintain a constant pace indefinitely" — a sprint that needs overtime to finish is a planning bug. Google's SRE book caps on-call at 25% of an SRE's time and estimates an incident takes about six hours to handle and follow up, which is why it targets at most two per 12-hour shift. Treat those as upper bounds, not quotas.

```
On-call health (last quarter)
pages per shift (avg)    __  target <= 2
out-of-hours pages       __
shifts per person        __  (even?)
incidents w/o follow-up  __  target 0
```

Saying no with a trade-off

Instead of	Say
"Yes" (and work the weekend)	"Yes, if X moves to next sprint"
"No"	"Not this week — Thursday works"
Silent overload	"Which of these three matters most?"

You protect a sustainable pace by making the cost of new work visible, not by refusing it. A trade-off answer hands the priority decision back to the person who owns priorities. Write it down so the trade survives the meeting.

```
"Happy to take the export bug. That
pushes the search refactor past Friday.
OK to move it, or should someone else
pick up the bug?"
```

Focus, recovery and remote boundaries

Practice	Why
Fixed start and stop time	Remote work has no commute to end the day
Notifications off after hours	On-call is the only exception
Focus blocks in the calendar	Deep work needs unbroken time
Real breaks, away from the screen	Recovery is not a reward for finishing

Recovery is part of the work cycle, not a reward at the end of it. Remote work removes the physical edges of the day, so draw them yourself and make them visible to the team.

```
Status: Focus until 11:00 — reply after
Hours: 09:00–17:30 CET
```

```
Slack: notifications paused 18:00-08:00
Urgent: page on-call, not DM
```

AI-tool fatigue and keeping skills

Pressure	Counter
Usage quotas or leaderboards	Argue for outcome metrics instead
Reviewing more generated code	Review time is work — plan for it
Fear of skill loss	Do some tasks by hand on purpose

State of Devs 2026 reports that AI tools may make developers more productive without making them happier, and that heavy-handed mandates such as quotas or leaderboards can hurt job happiness. In the Stack Overflow 2026 survey, a third of developers said they are not happy at work. Choose which work you keep doing yourself, so your judgement stays sharp enough to review what the tools produce.

```
Weekly by hand (no assistant):
- one bug from reproduction to fix
- one design sketch before prompting
- one review read line by line
```

Asking for help and helping others

Situation	Go to
Structural cause (load, control)	Your manager, with the named area

Situation	Go to
Symptoms lasting weeks	A doctor or mental-health professional
Employer support available	Employee assistance programme, HR
A teammate seems off	Ask privately; listen; don't diagnose

Talk to your manager early, with specifics — it is easier to change a sprint than to replace a burned-out engineer. Persistent low mood, sleep problems or physical symptoms deserve a professional, because burnout is not a diagnosis and other conditions look similar. For a teammate, a private question and real follow-through do more than advice.

```
"You've seemed stretched the last few
weeks — how are you doing, honestly?
... Is there anything on your plate I
can take, or raise with our manager?"
```

> **Warning:** If you or a colleague has thoughts of self-harm, contact local emergency services or a crisis line now, not a manager.

Further reading

- WHO — Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon"
- Maslach & Leiter — Understanding the burnout experience
- Google SRE book — Being On-Call

- State of Devs 2026
- Stack Overflow Developer Survey 2026 — Work