

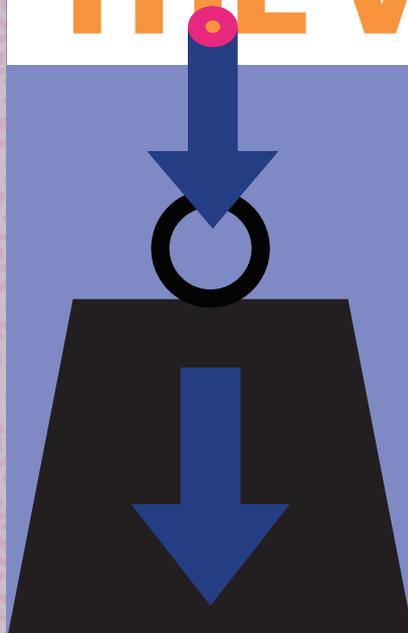
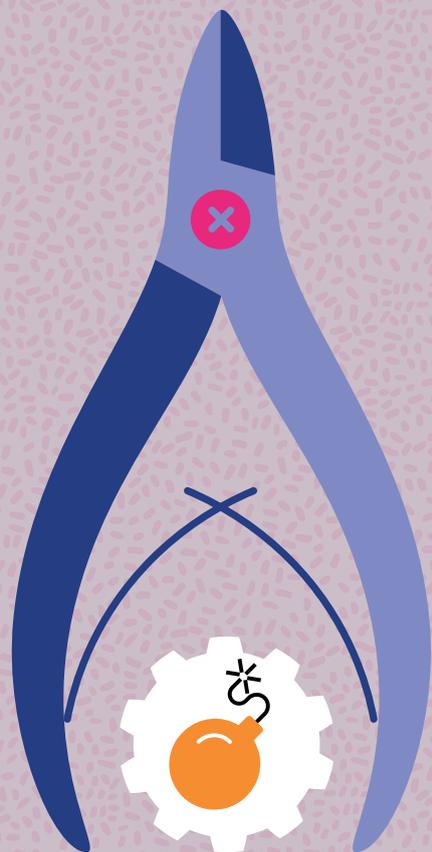


# UNDER THE VOLCANO

The past few years have been tough. With increased pressure on the profession comes the risk that unmanaged stress will lead to burnout. Here's how to tell if you're burned out, and how to take positive steps to overcome it.

**Words** Emma Bennett

was working 12-hour days and getting home at 8pm feeling like I had achieved nothing. I started feeling detached and alone, and was self-doubting and procrastinating. Then came the panic attacks.' Gwyn Malcolm, a podiatrist working in private practice in Scotland, was suffering from burnout. And he's not the only one. Recognised in 2019 by the World Health Organization as an





‘occupational phenomenon’, burnout is described as a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, resulting from chronic, unmanaged workplace stress. It is not classified as an illness or medical condition because it is caused by employment, but it can lead to negative thoughts and feelings. Burnout can affect anyone but is particularly prevalent among healthcare professionals.

Of the 600,000 respondents to the NHS Staff Survey in 2021, 34% said they felt burnt out because of their work (NHS, 2021). The most recent *State of care* report (Care Quality Commission, 2022) highlighted the prevalence of ‘anxiety, stress, exhaustion and burnout’ among workers in health and social care, and drew on research by Samaritans (2021) that suggested the suicide risk rate among UK healthcare workers had increased because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

US research into burnout among podiatric medical students found 65% reported moderate or high rates of burnout: respondents said they felt high levels of emotional exhaustion and anxiety, but low levels of personal achievement (Ansert and Rushing, 2021).

The Saks report, commissioned by the College in 2021, noted the steady decline of the NHS podiatry

## ‘Burnout has always been there but people are more confident to talk about it. This has been building for a long time: when Covid-19 hit, people managed for a while, but now they’re being pushed to breaking point’

Dave James

workforce, with an 8% vacancy rate in England in 2020. This was largely attributed to an ageing workforce, as well as burnout leading people to leave the profession early. In fact, a record 400 NHS staff per week were reported to be quitting in 2022, citing work-life balance as the reason (Savage, 2022).

In the three years since the Covid-19 pandemic began, changing workloads and poor work/life balance have been compounded by significant economic pressures, including rising fuel, energy and equipment costs. More and more people are struggling to cope. Research by charity Mental Health UK (2021) found one in five UK workers felt unable to manage pressure and stress levels at work, and 46% felt ‘more prone to extreme levels of stress’ compared with a year before. What can be done?

### Helpless and alone

Gwyn runs Foot Monkey Podiatry in Kirkcaldy. ‘About a year ago, I realised something wasn’t right,’ he says. ‘The panic attacks and anxiety are not normal.’ Gwyn was working long hours running his busy practice while receiving, he felt, little thanks. It was grinding him down. ‘I was working hard trying to help people and getting a bad attitude from them. That had an impact on me, and I started having a negative outlook.’

Things recently took a turn for the worse when Gwyn, his wife and their son, who is disabled, all caught Covid-19. ‘I started having night terrors where, in my dreams, I believed I had killed my son. I’ve suffered from panic attacks and

anxiety since we went back to work five weeks into the first lockdown. We had to go face-to-face with patients because the NHS was only seeing chronic and critical cases, so the rest lay on our doorsteps. That took its toll.’

Gwyn says this feeling of ‘permacrisis’, as the UK lurches from the pandemic to the cost-of-living crisis, is putting unmanageable pressure on people – especially those running a practice. ‘The business has to be covered before you can draw a wage, so you’re hit twice,’ he says. ‘In the middle of the pandemic, another podiatrist and I moved premises to rent a place further out of town because the rent was through the roof. But while we’re saving on rent, everything else has gone up.’

### Asking for help

It took months before Josie Griffiths realised something was wrong. Josie, who now runs J Griffiths Podiatry in Bolton, left the NHS in 2015 after an increasing workload made her feel extremely anxious and depressed.

‘I thought it was normal to pull into a layby on my way to work because I felt so unwell,’ she says. ‘I was so overwhelmed, feeling like I couldn’t give patients what they needed. I’m quite a responsible person and I need to please people. But we were put in clinics where we had to discharge patients, who had been having treatment for 20 years, because they no longer qualified for help. There was a backlash from that. People were unhappy and there was a lot of confrontation.’

### RECOGNISE THE SIGNS OF BURNOUT

- Racing thoughts and overthinking
- A negative outlook
- Self-doubt and low self-esteem
- Feeling overwhelmed and anxious
- Feeling trapped or helpless
- Feeling detached and alone
- Constantly tired and drained
- Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done
- Irritable and snapping at loved ones.

## Supporting colleagues



**Anwar Ali, trade union rep and employment relations officer at the College, explains what employers can do to protect colleagues from burnout.**

### Look out for warning signs

You might notice increased absences or colleagues being late more often than usual. Excessive fatigue, being unable to complete tasks on time and an overall lack of engagement and enthusiasm are all clues they could be struggling.

### Keep communication open

A lack of control and stability at work can be a trigger for burnout, which may be particularly crucial for those on fixed-term contracts and subject to a probation period. Ensure they are being adequately supported, with regular and meaningful catch-up meetings in place. There should be a safe environment for people to raise any concerns they have, such as an unreasonable workload.

### Set clear expectations

Ensure job descriptions are clear with carefully outlined roles, duties and responsibilities. Colleagues shouldn't be expected to do work outside of this.

### Have a healthy working environment

Create a good work/life balance with reasonable working hours. Offer flexible and remote working where possible, allowing people extra time with family and friends.

All UK workers are entitled to an uninterrupted break of at least 20 minutes if they're working six or more hours. And they shouldn't be expected to sit at their desk or take calls during that period. Instead, there should be an appropriate area – peaceful, well ventilated and well lit – available.

### Duty of care

All employers have a duty of care to protect staff from burnout, with a formal procedure for reporting anyone feeling unwell. If staff are suffering from stress, there should be an appropriate stress risk assessment to investigate, identify and address the root cause.



'In 2011, I felt so unwell that I went to a GP, who advised me to take some time off work and prescribed me antidepressants. When I came back, no one asked me how they could help or referred me to occupational health. I felt like there was no support. I probably needed longer off work, but I felt I had to get back because we were all under a huge amount of pressure and there were several people off sick with stress at the time.'

The signs of burnout are often there long before you reach crisis point, says Laura Walker. She worked

as a mental health nurse before her own experience of burnout led her to qualify as a coach and mentor, supporting many people working in the caring professions.

She recalls: 'All I did was work and there was no pleasure in my life. I didn't want to see people and I wasn't fun to be around. I was irritable, snapping at loved ones and waking up exhausted. But it was only when I woke up in the middle of the night having a panic attack that I did anything about it.'

She says acting upon those signs

early and taking the time to care for yourself is the best way to stop burnout in its tracks.

For Gwyn, it took two years to find the courage to tell his wife how he was feeling. He has since cut down his hours at the practice by finishing on time and taking every Friday off. He takes his mind off work by tackling building projects in his clinic and gets satisfaction from seeing a job completed. He has also started seeing a clinical psychologist, and says talking openly makes everything seem a little less gloomy.

### Speak to an expert

After seeking help, Josie is in a much better place, with several coping strategies to hand to help her look after her mental health. 'I have stopped drinking alcohol, I minimally monitor my phone, I do mindfulness and meditation and keep as physically active as I can. That keeps a lid on it,' she explains.

'I know my triggers now – I start to detach myself and struggle with things on my own, and I'll start feeling tired and go to bed earlier. If I notice that coming on, I will journal my thoughts and speak to a colleague to figure things out.'

## 'Podiatrists often work alone so having a mentor or colleague to discuss issues and share ideas with, and who will notice when you're struggling, is really valuable'

Josie Griffiths

Feeling overwhelmed and isolated during the pandemic, Josie reached out to life coach Dave James after seeing him speak at a conference. Dave worked as a podiatrist for 11 years, both in the NHS and in private practice, until burnout led him to sell his business in 2018. Josie says: 'I'd been to various therapists and never had a positive outcome. But when I spoke to Dave, his experience as a podiatrist made me feel like he instantly got it.'

'Working with Dave has been a safe space to talk about things I don't talk about with other people.'

Scan to view references



### RESOURCES

- College members can access a free counselling service. Support is available 24/7 by calling **0800 389 0287** and quoting your membership number
- Men can get support from **andysmanclub.co.uk** and anyone can speak to Samaritans for free by phoning **116 123**
- Find a qualified counsellor at **bccp.org.uk/find-a-therapist**
- Try a mindfulness or meditation app such as Headspace
- Use this toolkit to tackle workplace stress: **bit.ly/HSE-stress-toolkit**

He introduced me to mindfulness and helps me to work through problems I'm having at work. The most important thing is to find someone you trust and have the space to talk about anything and not be judged for it. Podiatrists often work on their own so having a mentor or colleague to discuss issues and share ideas with, and who will notice when you're struggling, is really valuable.'

Dave has been coaching more people suffering from burnout since the pandemic, but recognises it is not a new problem: 'It's always been there, but we're becoming more aware of it and people are more confident talking about it. When I first worked for the NHS in a community trust, I did 50% clinical and 50% managerial work and I had the flexibility to manage my workload. When we went into a hospital, it became a much more high-pressure environment. This has been building for a long time: when Covid-19 hit, people managed for a while, but now they're being pushed to breaking point.'

'I decided to sell my practice after I realised what was important to me. Before I was channelling other people's visions for my business, not my own. I always encourage my clients to look inside themselves to find what's important to them.'

It takes determination and self-belief to realise something is wrong and tackle burnout. Asking for help is a brave and powerful first step. **TP**

## How to manage burnout

### Advice from life coach and mental health professional

**Laura Walker and podiatrist-turned-life-coach Dave James.**

- Seek help. Talking to someone takes huge courage but seeing your GP is an important first step.
- Reconnect to something that's important to you outside of work, and to the people you enjoy spending time with.
- Talk to yourself as you would to your best friend – they're often kinder to us than we are to ourselves.
- Be aware of your energy levels and what invigorates you (sun, exercise, friends) and learn when you need to step back.
- Try mindfulness and meditation to help you make better decisions.
- Set clear boundaries. Saying no to things you don't want to do gives you time to say yes to the things you do want to do.
- To-do lists are fine, but it's even better to put actions in your calendar. Knowing you have scheduled time to deal with something can free up your mind.
- Set three non-negotiables every day for your self-care. This could be as simple as drinking enough water, going outside once a day or exercising.

