



COVER STORY

The impact of parental burnout

What psychological research suggests about how to recognize and overcome it

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Candice Roquemore Bonner, PsyD, a clinical psychology resident at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, knows the parenting-while-working juggle well. She moved to Boston with her two children to begin her residency in June 2020, functioning solo until her husband could join them. Managing her burgeoning career and her family's well-being—all during a global pandemic—often left her own self-interest neglected. As a result, she said perpetual exhaustion and high-level irritability became part of her daily routine.

“I’ve been a working student and parent for 5 years, so it’s been a constant juggling act,” Roquemore Bonner said. “But this year elevated my sense of burnout because there was simply no escape.”

The United States has mostly lifted pandemic restrictions (and reinstated some to protect against the COVID-19 Delta variant). Birthday parties are in full swing, youth sports are back, and families are rushing from one activity to the next. While this may be the light at the end of the tunnel people had been eagerly anticipating, parents never had a chance to recover from pandemic burnout before bursting into this new Delta variant phase—which only heightens their risk for issues going forward.

Burnout, a syndrome characterized by “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a decrease in self-fulfillment,” is a result of chronic exposure to emotionally draining environments (Rionda, I. S., et al., *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34066327/>), Vol. 18, No. 9, 2021).

In 2019, the World Health Organization recognized burnout syndrome in its International Classification of Diseases as an occupational condition linked to several health symptoms, such as fatigue, changing sleep habits, and substance use. While burnout is most associated with helping occupations like health care or high-pressure professions like law or finance, a growing body of research suggests burnout can also occur in other roles, particularly with the strain of navigating post-pandemic life.

As Lucy McBride, MD, a practicing internist in Washington, D.C., and author of a widely read COVID-19 newsletter describes it, burnout is the “mental and physical fallout from accumulated stress in any sphere of life,” including parenting (*The Atlantic* (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/burnout-medical-condition-pandemic/619321/>), June 30, 2021). The first research on parental burnout took place in the United States in the 1980s, focusing on parents of children with tumors (Procaccini, J., and Kiefaber, M. W., *Parent Burnout* (https://books.google.com/books?id=PglFAAAAYAAJ&source=gbs_book_other_versions), Doubleday, 1983). More recently, Belgian researchers including Isabelle Roskam (<https://uclouvain.be/fr/repertoires/isabelle.roskam>), PhD, and Moira Mikolajczak, PhD, both professors of psychology at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, theorized that

while severe situations such as a sick child can contribute to burnout, any parent can experience it.

In 2018, Roskam and her colleagues developed a measurement called the Parental Burnout Assessment after surveying more than 900 parents they had determined to be experiencing burnout. From these subjects' testimonies, the researchers extracted four dimensions of parental burnout: exhaustion in one's parental role, contrast with previous parental self, feelings of being fed up with one's parental role, and emotional distancing from one's children.

To learn more about what causes burnout, they later studied more than 17,000 parents in 42 countries around the world and discovered burnout varied drastically by country, based on the differences in Eastern and Western cultural values (*Affective Science* (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42761-020-00028-4>), Vol. 2, 2021). A smaller follow-up study yet to be published suggests rates increased among some populations during COVID-19.

Research by psychologists at the University of Melbourne confirmed those findings in their own study, with all participants reporting higher levels of mental distress during the pandemic but parents of school-age kids reporting much higher rates. The researchers estimated that more than one quarter of Australia's 1.5 million working parents with kids ages 5 to 11 experienced high levels of mental distress during the pandemic, and working parents who were also the primary caregiver were four times as likely to suffer as working parents who weren't simultaneously tending the children (*Melbourne Institute* (https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3456866/ri2020n21.pdf), 2020).

According to Roskam, one component was consistent among all parents who reported burnout, before and during the pandemic. "Burnout is the result of too much stress and the absence of resources to cope with it," she said. "You will burn out only if there is an imbalance between stress and resources."

Recognizing parental burnout

The Parental Burnout Assessment captures the primary symptoms of burnout, which, according to Mikolajczak, usually occur in stages.

The first stage, she said, is overwhelming exhaustion. Depending on how old the children are, parents might experience different types of exhaustion; for example, - Mikolajczak said parents of young children tend to be more physically tired, while those with adolescents or teens may experience emotional exhaustion because of conflicts with their children.

Inger Burnett-Zeigler (<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/faculty-profiles/az/profile.html?xid=22859>), PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, said the pandemic exacerbated the existing issue of exhaustion and burnout among parents she works with at Northwestern's Asher Center for the Study and Treatment of Depressive Disorders. Many parents, she said, focused on child care and homeschooling during the day, relegating their jobs to the evening and, as a result, becoming more irritable and stressed the next day. Typically, she said, burned-out parents present with chronic stress about how they'll get everything done. "That can disrupt sleep, which exacerbates the anxiety and irritability; then it becomes this loop that repeats itself daily," she said.

Next, burned-out parents tend to distance themselves from their kids to preserve their energy. This phase is followed by a third phase when parents notice a loss of fulfillment in parenting. "These parents will tell you, 'I love my children, but I can't stand being around them anymore; actually, I can't stand being a parent anymore,'" Mikolajczak said.

As with job burnout, parental burnout symptoms build on each other; the phase one exhaustion sticks around through the distancing and loss of fulfillment. As a result, Roskam said, parents with burnout typically report a contrast between the parents they were, the parents they would like to be, and the parents they have become. This contrast, she added, can cause burned-out parents to feel inescapable distress, shame, and guilt.

While job burnout can cause significant problems in people's lives, the consequences of parental burnout are different. Unlike a job, parents don't get paid vacation, and they

can't leave their roles to parent other kids the way that someone with occupational burnout can find a new position.

Because burned-out parents often feel trapped in their roles, they may also experience more severe consequences than people experiencing job burnout, such as suicidal and escape ideations (Mikolajczak, M., et al., *Clinical Psychological Science* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2167702619858430>), Vol. 7, No. 6, 2019).

Mikolajczak and colleagues found these ideations were more frequent in parental burnout than in job burnout or depression (*Clinical Psychological Science* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2167702620917447>), Vol. 8, No. 4, 2020).

Burnout can also cause parents to be violent or neglectful toward children, even when the parents are philosophically opposed to those behaviors. In an as-yet-unpublished 2020 study, Annette Griffith (https://www.thechicagoschool.edu/faculty-finder/byname/annette_griffith/), PhD, a professor of psychology at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, found that parents who indicated higher levels of burnout also indicated higher levels of coercive or punitive parenting practices, and the parents who reported the biggest change of burnout level from January to June 2020 had the highest risk for child maltreatment.

The finding that rates of parental burnout increased during the pandemic are unsurprising, as Griffith found many of the conditions present during the pandemic, such as financial insecurity, lack of support, and social isolation, have been found to be risk factors for parental burnout prior to the pandemic (*Journal of Family Violence* (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7311181/>), Vol. 29, No. 4, 2020).

Whether a burned-out parent screams at or spansks their child, this behavior doesn't only harm kids; Mikolajczak said burnout symptoms and consequences can create a vicious cycle. "Parents who do these things often feel shame, so they ruminate on their behavior, then they wake up the next day more tired and sensitive, which compounds the negative behaviors," she said.

Who experiences parental burnout?

Research shows that certain populations are more prone to parental burnout. A study by the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) Consortium, which included Roskam and Mikolajczak, found cultural norms, for example, play a significant role in predicting burnout: Parents from more individualistic (typically Western) countries had higher rates of parental burnout than those from Eastern countries (*Affective Science* (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42761-020-00028-4>), Vol. 2, 2021).

Individualistic cultures tend to value competition, performance, and perfectionism, which increases stress, all the while decreasing resources by discouraging parents from asking for support. And while Eastern cultures typically prioritize children's obedience and respect toward elders, Roskam said Western cultures commonly assert values of self-improvement or independence, which means children can be less likely to follow instructions.

People already experiencing multiple stressors, such as single parents, parents of special needs children, and immigrant parents, may also have a lower threshold for increasing stress because of the ongoing demands of parenting.

"If there are groups already experiencing prolonged chronic stressors, they are going to be at higher risk for vulnerability to mental health issues and burnout," said Lisa Coyne (<https://www.mcleanhospital.org/profile/lisa-coyne>), PhD, a senior clinical consultant at McLean Hospital OCD Institute in Massachusetts and an assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School.

Compounding individual risk factors with systemic oppression can further heighten that vulnerability. Riana Elyse Anderson (<https://sph.umich.edu/faculty-profiles/anderson-riana.html>), PhD, an assistant professor of health behavior and health education at the University of Michigan, said parents of color face unique strain, especially during the pandemic.

Alongside everyone's fears of contracting COVID-19 and ongoing racial trauma in the wake of George Floyd's murder, Black parents are also less likely to have protective factors like economic security and feelings of social support. "The pandemic really pointed to how challenging it was to manage all these stressors with thinning coping resources," said Anderson.

[Robyn Koslowitz \(https://www.drrobynkoslowitz.com/about/\)](https://www.drrobynkoslowitz.com/about/), PhD, a clinical psychologist and director of the Center for Psychological Growth of New Jersey, said some parents who had traumatic childhoods tend to carry unproductive beliefs about their role as parents. “Many clients I work with believe they don’t have the same capacity other parents have because they never experienced normal parenting,” she said. “That shame can contribute highly to burnout.”

As common as parental burnout is, parents can use what psychologists have discovered about risk factors to both reduce their risk and mitigate existing symptoms by finding creative ways to rebalance their stress and resources.

How to manage parental burnout: Advice for supporting yourself and clients

Talk about it

Open sharing about feelings of burnout can facilitate social support, a much-needed resource for stressed-out parents short on coping skills. But admitting you’re struggling isn’t always easy; burned-out parents often feel isolated and ashamed, which can prevent them from healthy dialogue with supportive people.

Data suggest parental burnout is a lot more common than most parents think: According to the IIPB Consortium study, up to 5 million U.S. parents experience it each year. The first step, Mikolajczak said, is understanding you’re not the only one snapping at your kids or camping them in front of the TV all day. Talking about parental burnout openly can further normalize the syndrome, she said, removing some of the shame from the experience.

Koslowitz recommends finding other parents experiencing similar feelings.

Because shame only compounds burnout feelings, the key is to share your experiences in a nonjudgmental atmosphere. While the internet can facilitate

such connections, Koslowitz cautions against relying on social media for validation. Instead, seek out virtual communities where rules about shaming are enforced, such as moderated social media groups or message boards.

If your burnout is impairing your functioning or causing suicidal ideation, it's important to reach out to a mental health provider for professional support.

Reevaluate your stress

For parents who reported higher levels of burnout during the pandemic, lockdown alone wasn't the primary risk factor. Instead, a team composed of Belgian, Dutch, and U.S. researchers found that cognitive appraisal—people's individual perspectives of the lockdown—was also to blame. “How much parents experienced burnout depended on how they saw the lockdown,” Roskam said. “For some, it was an opportunity to take much-needed time with their kids, while others saw it as a nightmare.” Predictably, those with a negative perspective reported increased feelings of exhaustion in parenting.

If you're feeling exhausted by your parenting role, reappraise your perspective. Look for opportunities to grow or areas of your life you're grateful for. It may help to reframe the difficulty as a challenge—something you can overcome—rather than as a threat that positions you as a powerless victim (Drach-Zahavy, A., & Erez, M., *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749597802000043>), Vol. 88, No. 2, 2002).

Reappraisal won't expunge the difficult circumstances from your life, but it can provide a resource to help you cope.

Make small changes

Parental burnout can hit particularly hard because, unlike occupational burnout, it's not always possible to take a vacation—which may leave you feeling like you can't escape the stressor. When your stress level outweighs

your resources, Mikolajczak suggests finding smaller ways to lower stress levels.

“We tend to see one or two big factors as responsible for stress—perhaps your son is difficult and your husband is never home, which you can’t change,” she said. “But one has to remember there are many stressors tipping the scale.”

Rather than fixating on the big stressors, Mikolajczak advises rebalancing the changeable ones that contribute to your feelings of exhaustion over time. For example, if your chore list exhausts you, offload a few jobs to your partner or kids. If a child’s constant activities are a burden, cut down on commitments or schedule carpools with other parents. The key, Mikolajczak said, is to be flexible and balanced.

Grow your parenting skills

Parents should consider adding skills to their parenting toolboxes, according to Coyne. “Because burnout is marked by a disconnect in how you’re parenting now and who you were before, growing in their parenting skills can give parents a sense of efficacy in decreasing parenting-related stressors and, as a result, mitigate feelings of burnout,” she said.

While Roskam said reading books about parenting can increase feelings of failure and shame for many, other resources can provide a much-needed confidence boost in parenting by providing targeted skills. Look into local seminars, ask about mental health and parenting resources at your child’s school, or find a therapist who uses evidence-based behavioral training programs for parenting.

Stop saying ‘should’

Research suggests parents who are perfectionists and those who put pressure on themselves experience higher rates of burnout (Sorkkila, M., & Aunola, K., *Journal of Child and Family Studies*

(<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-019-01607-1>), Vol. 29, 2020).

Finding practical ways to relieve that pressure can reduce burnout risk.

“Sometimes our demands are top-heavy because we have particular expectations about how things should be done—how well we should be doing things and how happy we should be doing them,” said [Natalie Dattilo](https://physiciandirectory.brighamandwomens.org/details/13805/natalie-dattilo-psychiatry-boston) (<https://physiciandirectory.brighamandwomens.org/details/13805/natalie-dattilo-psychiatry-boston>), PhD, a clinical psychologist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and an instructor at Harvard Medical School. “These unrealistic expectations increase our load, and they are some of the first things we can take off the plate,” she said.

Dattilo commonly recommends her patients avoid “should” statements, which she says add shame. For example, if you’re overwhelmed and tell yourself you “should” spend more time playing with your kids, you’ll only feel badly when you don’t measure up. Try swapping your “should” statement with “It would be great if I had more energy to play with my kids.”

“That reframing can help parents deal with their current reality rather than what they think they should be doing, so they can deal with their circumstances the best they can with the resources they already have,” Dattilo said.

Take microbreaks

Self-care is a vital component of recovering from any type of stress, but it’s not necessarily realistic for everyone to plan a kid-free getaway to recover.

But even tiny breaks can help—for example, locking the door in the bathroom for 5 minutes to take deep breaths or sitting in your car to listen to a guided meditation after grocery shopping can enhance resilience in parenting.

“Rather than a whole weekend of vacation or even an hour, focus on finding opportunities for relaxation and pleasure in ways that are manageable for you,” Burnett-Zeigler said.

Self-compassion can add another resource to help you manage stress, according to Burnett-Zeigler. When you take breaks, try to find small ways to recalibrate your thinking. Acknowledge the pressure you may put on yourself for how you should be doing or feeling and remind yourself that you're doing the best you can with the resources you have.

Find meaning

When you feel detached from something you care about, Debbie Sorensen (<https://www.drdebbiesorensen.com>), PhD, a Denver-based clinical psychologist, said it can be helpful to reconnect with your values and reorient yourself to the meaningful aspects of parenting. “We can really get lost in the drudgery, and it takes work to carve out special moments with your kids that remind you parenting can be fulfilling,” she said.

Even if it feels overwhelming, practice behavioral activation by planning a small, low-stakes activity—a trip to the park or watching a favorite movie—to do with your kids. Remind yourself in the experience or debrief after about your kids’ positive qualities, as well as the skills and qualities you bring to the table as a parent. Remembering the meaning you’ve felt in the past as a parent can provide a resource when exhaustion and resentment return.

Parenting, like any realm of life, can be both difficult and rewarding at the same time. “Some of these feelings of resentment, shame, or guilt for parents come up because we live in a society that says we should love our kids unconditionally, and if we’re frustrated, we’re bad parents,” said Anderson. “But that you love your child and acknowledge parenting as a very difficult thing can be true at the same time.”

Further reading

Is parental burnout distinct from job burnout and depressive symptoms?

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2167702620917447>)

Mikolajczak, M., et al., *Clinical Psychological Science*, 2020

[Aiming to be perfect parents increases the risk of parental burnout, but emotional competence mitigates it \(https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-021-01509-w\)](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-021-01509-w)

Lin, G.-X., et al., *Current Psychology*, 2021

[How to avoid burnout when you have little ones \(https://www.nytimes.com/article/parental-burnout-guide.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article\)](https://www.nytimes.com/article/parental-burnout-guide.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article)

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[COVID-19 restrictions: Experiences of immigrant parents in Toronto](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7870386/)

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