

MEMBER RESOURCE

BURNOUT & CUMULATIVE STRESS

The specific kind of empty this job causes.

CODE ONE SUPPORT

BURNOUT & CUMULATIVE STRESS

Burnout doesn't announce itself. There's no single job you can point to. You just notice, one day, that you're running on less than you used to have – and you can't remember when that started.

Most people expect stress to come from a bad job. A fatality, a violent scene, something that shakes you on the spot. Cumulative stress is different. It's not one job – it's every job, adding a small amount of load that never fully clears before the next one arrives.

WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS

Your nervous system is built to activate under stress and then stand down once the threat passes. That works fine for a single incident. It works much less well when the incidents keep coming faster than you fully recover from the last one. The load doesn't reset to zero between jobs – it stacks. Months or years of that stacking is cumulative stress, and burnout is what it looks like once it's gone on long enough.

This is why burnout can hit people who've never had a single "bad" incident. You don't need a defining moment. You just need enough ordinary hard days, back to back, without enough real recovery in between.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

You used to care about outcomes. Now you notice you're going through the motions – competent, professional, but flat. You're snapping at people over small things at home that never used to bother you. You've started dreading shifts you used to feel neutral about. None of it traces back to one incident. It's just there, and it's been building for longer than you've been willing to admit.

HOW IT SHOWS UP

- Physical and emotional exhaustion that rest doesn't seem to fix
- Cynicism or detachment about the job, the public, or your organisation
- A reduced sense that the work matters or that you're any good at it
- Irritability that shows up more at home than at work
- Dreading shifts you used to feel neutral or even good about
- Going through the motions – competent, but disconnected from the work

Worth noticing: burnout is often mistaken for a personal failing – not resilient enough, not committed enough. It isn't. It's the predictable result of giving more than you're recovering, for

longer than your system can sustain. That's a workload and recovery problem, not a character one.

WHY IT HITS THIS JOB HARDER

Most jobs give you a natural stopping point — a project finishes, a quiet period arrives, you get a real break. This one doesn't work that way. The call volume doesn't care how tired you are. The job after a hard job arrives on schedule regardless of whether you've processed the last one.

There's also a culture problem underneath the physiological one. Pushing through is often treated as the job description, not a warning sign. Admitting you're running low can feel like admitting you're not cut out for it — even though the opposite is closer to true. The people who last longest in this work are usually the ones who learned to manage their load deliberately, not the ones who never felt it.

Shift work compounds all of this. Irregular sleep, disrupted routines, and a body clock that never quite settles all reduce your actual recovery capacity — meaning the same workload costs you more than it would with a normal schedule.

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS

Name it as accumulation, not a single problem. You can't fix cumulative stress by processing "the incident," because there isn't one. The fix is recognising the pattern and treating recovery as an ongoing requirement, not a one-time repair.

Protect recovery the way you protect equipment. Nobody skips maintenance on gear that keeps them safe. Sleep, movement, and time fully off duty are maintenance for the thing you actually rely on most — you. Scheduling them deliberately, rather than hoping they happen, is the difference that matters.

Set actual limits, and hold them. Not every shift, not every bit of overtime, not every extra commitment is yours to take on. Saying no to some of it isn't weakness — it's resource management, and it's what keeps you able to show up properly for the ones you do take.

Watch for the "still going" trap. The fact that you're still functioning isn't proof you're fine. People run on empty for a long time before it catches up with them. "I'm still getting through my shifts" is a low bar — it's worth checking in on whether you're actually doing well, not just still upright.

WORTH SITTING WITH

When did you last feel genuinely recovered, rather than just rested enough to go again?

Is there a specific part of the job you used to care about that you've gone flat on?

What's one thing you're currently saying yes to that you could actually say no to?

IF THIS IS URGENT RIGHT NOW

This resource isn't a crisis tool. If you're having thoughts of suicide, of not wanting to be here, or of harming yourself – stop reading and reach out now:

AU: Lifeline 13 11 14 **US:** 988 **UK:** Samaritans 116 123 **CA:** 1-833-456-4566

This resource will still be here when you're ready.

Rick – Founder, Code One Support

Firefighter · Former Infantry · Trauma & Grief Peer Support

MORE FROM CODE ONE SUPPORT

If this helped, here's where to go next.

MEMBERSHIP

CODE ONE PEER SUPPORT

Real conversations with a trained peer who's lived this job. Not a crisis line, not corporate wellness – ongoing support, on your terms. Plans from AU\$29/month.

SELF-GUIDED WORKBOOK – \$27

THE CODE ONE DEBRIEF

A structured post-incident recovery workbook. Seven sections. Private, practical, yours to keep.

FREE – WEEKLY EMAIL

THE HANDOVER

One practical mental health tool every week, written for first responders and their families.

FREE DOWNLOADS

THE 3-MINUTE RESET, AFTER THE JOB, LIVING WITH THE JOB

Quick regulation tools, a guide for volunteers, and a guide for partners and families.

TikTok & Instagram: @codeonesupport · codeonesupport.com · info@codeonesupport.com

This resource is for informational and educational purposes only and does not replace professional mental health support. If you are in crisis, contact your local 24/7 crisis service.

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