

Stress & Burnout



What is Stress?

Stress is the body and brain's natural response to a demand, challenge, or change. It activates physiological systems — including the release of adrenaline and cortisol — to help a person focus, react, and adapt.

Not all stress is harmful.

Positive stress (eustress) can enhance motivation, performance, and resilience; for example, starting a new job, preparing for an exam, or managing a meaningful challenge can sharpen concentration and build confidence.

Negative stress (distress) occurs when demands exceed a person's coping capacity or continue for too long without relief.

Chronic negative stress can disrupt sleep, weaken immune function, impair memory and concentration, increase irritability, and contribute to anxiety, depression, cardiovascular problems, and burnout. When unmanaged, it can also affect relationships, decision-making, and overall wellbeing.

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged negative stress. It often leads to feelings of helplessness, detachment, and reduced performance at work. In the assistance dog training field, burnout can affect trainers who work with both dogs and clients under emotionally demanding circumstances.

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Signs & Symptoms

1. **Physical Symptoms:** Chronic fatigue, insomnia, headaches, muscle pain, and frequent illness.
2. **Emotional Symptoms:** Feelings of apathy, frustration, irritability, or overwhelming emotional exhaustion.
3. **Cognitive Symptoms:** Difficulty concentrating, decision-making fatigue, or feeling detached from the work or clients.
4. **Behavioural Symptoms:** Increased cynicism, procrastination, withdrawing from colleagues, or a drop in work quality.

How to Manage Stress and Prevent Burnout

- **Recognise the Warning Signs:** The first step in managing burnout is identifying the symptoms early. Being aware of physical, emotional, and behavioral cues allows trainers to take action before burnout takes hold. For example, a trainer noticing increased irritability or a sense of emotional detachment may realize they need to take a break and recharge.
- **Set Boundaries:** Clear boundaries between work and personal life are essential for preventing burnout. It's important to know when to stop and take time for yourself. For example, a trainer might set limits on the number of training sessions in a day, ensuring that they don't overextend themselves physically or emotionally.
- **Practice Stress Management Techniques:** Regular relaxation activities such as mindfulness, yoga, or deep breathing can help manage stress and prevent it from building up over time. For example, taking 10 minutes each morning for a mindful breathing session can help trainers start their day with a clear and calm mindset.

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- **Seek Professional Support:** Talking to a counselor, therapist, or mentor can provide valuable support and guidance when stress becomes overwhelming. External perspectives can offer strategies for managing workload and stress more effectively. For example, a trainer might seek out a therapist to discuss the emotional challenges of their work and develop strategies for coping with stress.
- **Take Regular Breaks:** Ensure you schedule regular time off to rest and recuperate. A day off, or even a short break during the day, can give your body and mind the chance to recharge. For example, a trainer might plan a weekend getaway, engaging in a completely different activity to disconnect from work and return refreshed.
- **Reflect on Your Achievements:** Regularly take stock of your progress and successes, no matter how small. Celebrating achievements can help reframe your work in a positive light and reduce feelings of inadequacy. For example, after a challenging week, a trainer might reflect on the small victories, such as a dog successfully learning a new command or a productive client session.

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Preventing burnout is essential for sustaining a long and fulfilling career in assistance dog training. Trainers who manage stress and avoid burnout are more effective in their roles, offer better support to dogs and clients, and maintain their own wellbeing.

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