

A New Approach to Understanding the Burnout Experience

Most burnout measurement treats exhaustion as the defining feature of the experience i.e., if you are worn out, you are burning out. A study by Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach - the researchers who created the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the most widely used burnout measure in the world - challenges that assumption.

Across two large samples of healthcare workers (1,766 participants in Study 1 and 1,166 in Study 2), Leiter and Maslach examined how the three dimensions of burnout – exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy – cluster in real people. Rather than treating burnout as a single experience that simply varies in severity, they asked whether distinct patterns might emerge, and what those patterns might tell us about the different kinds of distress at work.

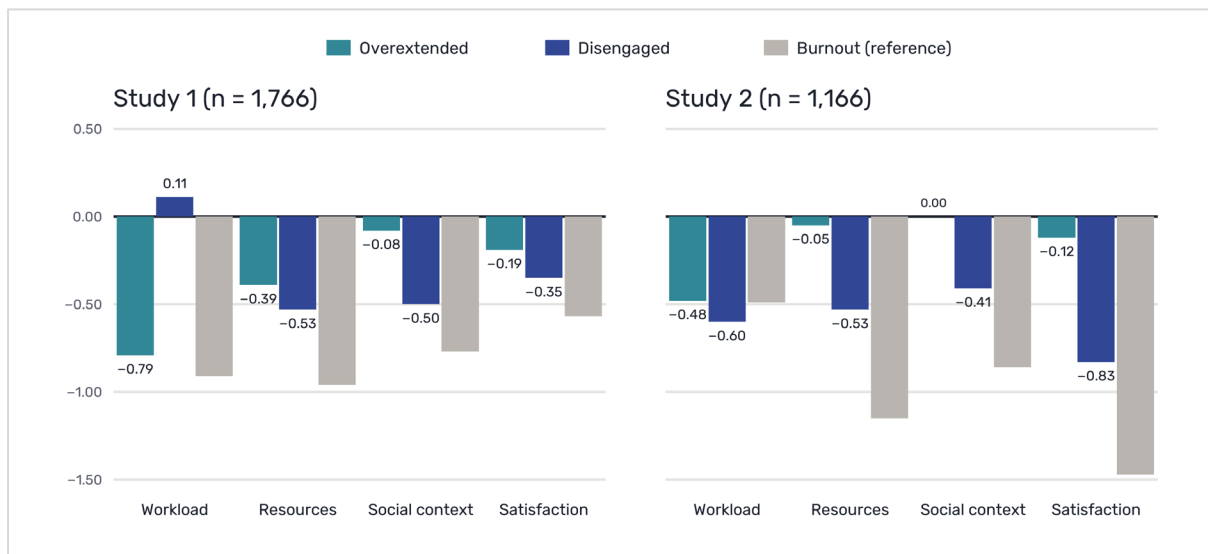
Five profiles were identified across both samples:

1. **Engagement** – low on all three dimensions (exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy).
2. **Overextended** – high exhaustion only, with cynicism and efficacy at moderate levels.
3. **Ineffective** – reduced professional efficacy only, with the other two dimensions not particularly elevated.
4. **Disengaged** – high cynicism only, with exhaustion relatively low.
5. **Burnout** – high on all three dimensions.

At the positive end sat **Engagement** (low on all three dimensions); at the negative end, full **Burnout** (high on all three).

The findings that matter most for the distinction in this article are in the different patterns of organisational experience each profile showed.

- On **workload**, the Overextended group was significantly more distressed than the Disengaged group in the first study, as expected given their high exhaustion. In the second study the two groups did not differ significantly.
- On **resources** (a composite of values alignment, control, reward and community), the Disengaged group scored lower than the Overextended group in both studies, and the difference was significant in the second.
- On **social context** and **job satisfaction**, the Disengaged group was consistently more negative than the Overextended group, despite reporting lower exhaustion.
- The **Disengaged** profile was more negative than the Overextended profile overall, and closer to the Burnout profile in its pattern of workplace experience, which the authors take as a sign that cynicism may be a more central feature of burnout than exhaustion.



Bars show standardised means of organisational constructs by profile; below 0 = less favourable than the sample average. Source: Leiter & Maslach (2016), *Burnout Research*, 3, 89–100. Latent profile analysis of two healthcare samples.

The implications for intervention are stated plainly in the paper: ***"Making workload more manageable is less likely to be as relevant for those in the Disengaged profile. Rather, their primary concerns seem to focus on values and social relationships, so effective interventions would need to address these problems."***

In other words, the person who is tired (Overextended) needs rest and workload relief. The person who is cynical and disconnected (Disengaged) needs something completely different: access to meaningful work, values alignment, and a stronger sense of connection to what they are doing and why. Rest, for the Disengaged profile, addresses the wrong problem.

This is the research behind the distinction between burnout and what we're calling values fatigue. The Overextended profile maps closely onto the exhaustion most people mean when they say burnout, and rest genuinely helps it. The Disengaged profile, closer as it sits to full burnout, maps onto something else again: a mismatch between what someone does all day and what really matters to them. No amount of leave fixes that on its own. It needs a different kind of conversation, the kind the [Work Values Inventory](#) is designed to start.

Full reference: Leiter, M. P., & Maslach, C. (2016). Latent burnout profiles: A new approach to understanding the burnout experience. *Burnout Research*, 3, 89–100.

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