



The Problem with Cut-Offs for the Maslach Burnout Inventory

The MBI was developed as a research instrument to assess burnout as a continuum, ranging from low to high, on three different dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (or Exhaustion*), Depersonalization (or Cynicism*), and reduced Personal Accomplishment (or reduced Professional Efficacy*). The MBI can be used to assess the patterns of burnout within a particular group or individual.

Researcher vs. Practitioner Perspective

The research perspective of a continuum is fundamentally different from that of a practitioner who views burnout as a discrete state – either someone is burned out, or is not. The perspective that burnout is a dichotomy makes it more like a medical disease, rather than a continuum of experience. This practitioner perspective has led people to want to a measure that will provide a “diagnosis” of burnout.

It is challenging to translate the continuous scores of the MBI research measure into a dichotomous burnout classification. As of now, the diagnostic criteria has not been well-specified and the necessary clinical research has not been done.

Invalidity of Statistical Cut-Off Scores

Cut-off scores set up to identify which people are “high” in burnout were published up through the third edition of the MBI Manual (published in 1996). In the 2016 publication of the MBI Manual 4th edition, the cut-off scores were removed due to having no diagnostic validity.

The previously published cut-off scores were arbitrary. “High”, “moderate”, and “low” classifications were calculated by splitting the normative population into thirds – where a person was considered “high” in emotional exhaustion simply because they scored in the upper third percentile of the population. The upper third of a large population is not a definition of people experiencing a severe case of burnout.

The MBI authors realized that the cut-offs were problematic and a “mistake”. For this reason, the cut-offs were not published in the MBI Manual fourth edition and were removed from all associated MBI materials.

*MBI-GS scale names

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Use Burnout Profiles to Classify MBI Scores

Research published in 2016 by MBI authors Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach explored the use of Burnout Profiles to identify patterns of the burnout experience. The profile types are Engaged, Ineffective, Overextended, Disengaged, and Burnout.

The goal with these profiles is to inform the design of burnout interventions. For example, someone who matches the Ineffective profile is experiencing loss of confidence in their abilities and may need a solution involving more recognition for their good work. Whereas someone who matches the Overextended profile is experiencing exhaustion that may be due to long work hours or disruption and may need a solution involving workload or resource maintenance.

Leiter and Maslach used standardized (z) values to calculate an individual's profile. Specifically, they set the following critical boundaries:

- High Exhaustion (Emotional Exhaustion**) at $z = \text{Mean} + (\text{SD} * 0.5)$
- High Cynicism (Depersonalization**) at $z = \text{Mean} + (\text{SD} * 1.25)$
- High Professional Efficacy (Personal Accomplishment**) at $z = \text{Mean} + (\text{SD} * 0.10)$

These critical boundaries are dependent on the population norms for the group. Therefore, profile categorization for an individual may differ slightly based on the population used in the critical boundary calculation. Individuals should review all profile descriptions and use their profile categorization as a reference point to define their burnout experience and plan burnout interventions.

**The profiles have undergone validation for the MBI-GS only (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Since the MBI-GS scales are highly correlated with the other MBI scales, Mind Garden uses the calculations above to categorize participants on the MBI-HSS, MBI-HSSMP, and MBI-ES.

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



[Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual 4th Edition](#)

[Bundle: Areas of Worklife \(AWS\) Manual and MBI Manual 4th Edition](#)

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