Burnout

What it is, where it comes from,
and how to begin to recover.

Burnout is not a weakness.
It is what happens when the load is too heavy for too long.

A PLACE TO START

For anyone who is running on empty, at work, at home, or in caring for someone. Plain language, based on research, with every source named. The last pages show where to continue. Written by someone who is not a medical professional.

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Start anywhere

There is no right order. Go to the page you need today, and print only that page if you like. Every page stands on its own. On a phone, tap any line or box to type.

People use different words for themselves. I use the ones most people have told researchers they prefer, and yours are welcome here.

> If you only have energy for one page today: **Recovery is not a weekend**, page 9.

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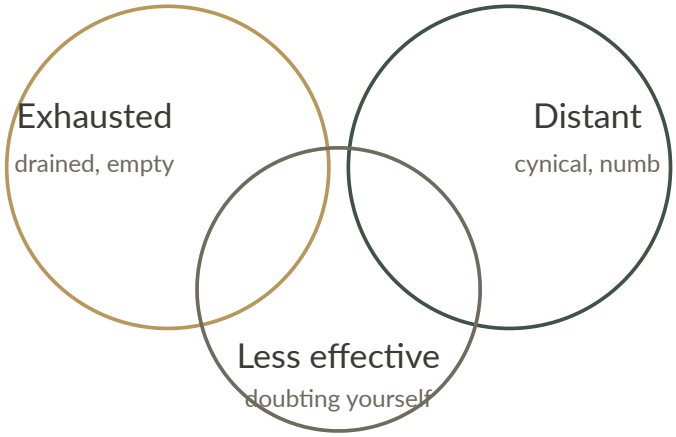
Understanding is the first act of care.

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ONE

What burnout is

The World Health Organization describes burnout as what happens when chronic stress at work has not been successfully managed. It has three parts.



The WHO calls it an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. That does not make it less real. It means the cause sits in the conditions around you, not in a flaw inside you.

STRESS AND BURNOUT ARE NOT THE SAME

Stress feels like too much	Burnout feels like not enough
Frantic, urgent, racing	Empty, flat, hollow
Drowning in tasks	Out of fuel
Still trying hard	Detached, and past caring

Burnout creeps up. It often looks like a busy season, until a weekend off or a good night's sleep no longer resets you.

You did not fail at coping. You coped with too much, for too long.

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TWO

Burnout comes from more than one place

The WHO definition is about work. But researchers and the people living it describe burnout in other parts of life too.

Kind	Where it comes from	What people describe
At work	Chronic stress at work that is not managed	Exhaustion, distance, doubting yourself
Caring	Looking after someone who is ill, ageing, or disabled	More than 60% of caregivers report burnout symptoms in studies
Parenting	Raising children, especially children who need extra support	Running on empty, and guilt about it
Neurodivergent burnout	The daily effort of masking ADHD or autism to fit expectations	Exhaustion that rest alone does not touch
Autistic burnout	Chronic life stress, and expectations that do not fit, without enough support	Long exhaustion, losing skills you had, less tolerance for noise and light, often for three months or more
The invisible load	Remembering, planning, and worrying for everyone	Tired from work no one sees

Often it is not one place. It is several at once: a job, a parent in hospital, a child who needs you to fight for them, and your own health, all asking at the same time.

THE PLACES MY LOAD COMES FROM

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THREE

How it builds, and the shapes it takes

Burnout rarely comes overnight. Many people describe it building like this.

1 **Drive**

High commitment. Your own needs go to the bottom of the list.

2 **Strain**

Irritable, sleeping badly, more cynical, still pushing.

3 **Empty**

Numb, past caring, and the body starts to give way.

It does not always come from long hours. Researchers have described different shapes.

Shape	Where it comes from	What it can feel like
Overload	Relentless workload, perfectionism, high stakes	Frantic, anxious, trapped
Under-challenge	Monotonous, unseen work with no room to grow	Bored, restless, disengaged
Worn out	Trying hard without support, resources, or direction	Helpless, doubting yourself, giving up
Values clash	Being asked to act against what you believe is right	Disillusioned, and deeply tired. Sometimes called moral injury.

THE SHAPE THAT FITS MINE

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FOUR

Why it is not your fault

The psychologists Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter spent decades studying burnout. They found it grows from a **mismatch** between a person and their situation, in six areas.

☐ Workload	Too much, with too little time or help
☐ Control	Little say in how or when you do it
☐ Reward	Good work that goes unnoticed
☐ Community	Isolation, conflict, or a toxic culture
☐ Fairness	Being treated unequally
☐ Values	Being asked to do things that feel wrong

Tick the areas where the mismatch is true for you. They apply at home and in caring, too.

THE MISMATCH THAT WEIGHS MOST RIGHT NOW

A mismatch can be named. What can be named can be changed, a little at a time.

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FIVE

What it can feel like

Tick what you recognise. This is not a test and it diagnoses nothing.

- [ ] Tired in a way sleep does not fix
- [ ] A weekend off no longer resets me
- [ ] Dreading the day before it starts
- [ ] Numb, flat, or far away
- [ ] Tired but wired, awake at night
- [ ] Getting ill more often
- [ ] Headaches, a tight jaw, or an upset stomach
- [ ] Every decision feels too big
- [ ] Snapping, then feeling guilty
- [ ] Bitter about what is asked of me
- [ ] Pulling away from people
- [ ] Doubting I am any good at this
- [ ] Ashamed I cannot keep up
- [ ] Pretending everything is fine
- [ ] Noise and busy places are harder to bear
- [ ] Other: _____

Please see a doctor if

your low mood lasts most days for two weeks or more, you have lost interest in almost everything, or you have thoughts of not wanting to be here. Burnout can look like depression, and like some physical conditions, so it is worth having both checked. If you feel unsafe, use the crisis lines on the Where to continue page.

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SIX

The load I carry

Burnout often comes from carrying many roles at once. Writing them down makes the load visible, to you and to others.

MY ROLES

Role	What it asks of me	What could be dropped, shared, or delayed

> FOR EXAMPLE
>
> **Daughter:** hospital visits, calls, forms. **Could share:** ask my brother to take the Tuesday visits.
> **Parent:** school meetings, homework. **Could delay:** the after-school club decision, until January.

You cannot pour from an empty cup, and you were never meant to hold every cup alone.

SEVEN

Recovery is not a weekend

Burnout builds over months, so recovery takes time too. Rest is not only sleep. Notice which kind you are most short of.

Kind of rest	What it can look like	Mine
Body	Sleep, lying down, gentle movement	
Mind	One task at a time, no decisions for a while	
Senses	Quiet, low light, fewer screens	
People	Time alone, or time with someone easy	
Feelings	Somewhere to put it down: a page, a friend, a therapist	

Recovery is rarely a straight line. Good days and hard days both belong. What matters is the direction, over weeks.

Rest is not giving up. It is how you come back.

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EIGHT

The conditions for recovery

You cannot rest your way out of a situation that keeps draining you. Recovery needs both rest and a change in the load.

Less load

Drop, share, or delay one thing this week.

Real rest

Rest before you are empty, not only after.

Sleep and rhythm

Regular times and morning daylight steady the body.

Movement

Gentle and short. A walk counts.

Your people

Someone who listens without fixing.

Boundaries

A clear no protects the yes that matters.

Nature

Time outside, among trees if you can.

Help

A doctor, a therapist, a carers service. You do not have to do this alone.

Finish the stress cycle

Walk, stretch, shake out, breathe, or cry. The body needs to feel the danger has passed.

Lower the bar

For now, good enough is more than enough.

Micro-rest

A full lunch away from screens. Messages off after a set hour.

Low-pressure joy

Music, nature, reading, making, just for the pleasure of it.

For how stress works in the body, there is also *Your nervous system*, free on my site.

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NINE

Asking for what you need

Burnout makes asking feel impossible. A few clear sentences, written down, can carry you.

At work

A workload review. Time off, or a phased return. One point of contact. Fewer meetings.

With a doctor

What has changed, since when, and what you can no longer do. Ask about time off and support.

At home

Name the load, and ask for one thing to be taken off it.

If you care for someone

Ask about respite, a carer's assessment, or a support group.

> THREE SENTENCES
>
> "Over the past six months I have been carrying my work and my mother's care, and I am exhausted. I cannot keep this pace safely. I am asking for a workload review, and for Fridays off for the next two months."

WHAT HAS HAPPENED, WHAT IT HAS COST, AND WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

For more, there is *Advocating for yourself*, free on my site.

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TEN

Where to continue

This guide is a place to start. Here is where to go next.

TO READ MORE

Your national health service's website, and the Cleveland Clinic Health Library, both written in plain language. From me, free: *Advocating for yourself*, *Your nervous system*, *Neurodiversity*, *Burnout at work*, and *Caring and grief at work*.

TO FIND SUPPORT WHERE YOU LIVE · WORDS TO SEARCH, ADDING WHERE YOU LIVE

What you are looking for	Words to search
Someone to talk to	*talking therapy near me · counsellor [your town] · burnout support group*
At work	*employee assistance programme · occupational health · phased return to work*
If you care for someone	*carers support [your area] · respite care [your area] · carer's assessment*
Autistic burnout	*autistic burnout support · autistic-led support group [your country]*
Your rights	*time off for stress [your country] · reasonable adjustments*

WHAT I FOUND, AND WHO I WILL CONTACT FIRST

If you are struggling tonight and cannot wait, please do not sit with it alone. In Scotland, 111 reaches the NHS 24 Mental Health Hub at any hour, and Samaritans are on 116 123, free, day or night. In the United States and Canada, call or text 988. Anywhere else, findahelpline.com lists the lines that operate in your country. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

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Where this comes from

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Why it is free

My own burnout came from carrying many roles at once. This guide is yours to keep, print, and hand to someone.

I am not a medical professional. This guide diagnoses nothing and is not medical advice. If something in your body or mind worries you, please see a doctor.

Valerie McIntyre-Baird

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