

**When You Can't Go On:
Burnout, Reckoning and Renewal**

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Introduction

I've burned out twice, once in my early 30s and again in my mid-60s. What I wanted but could not find was a practical guide by someone who had experienced burnout themselves. In the mid-1980s, there were few resources. When I burned out again in 2018, there were numerous books and articles, but none spoke to my feeling that burnout was more than overwork, or to my sense that our society and economy are the kindling that ignites burnout.

I decided to write the guide I wanted but could not find, a guide to burnout as an intensely profound experience, an experience those who haven't burned out cannot fully understand.

You may find that my experience is different from yours; this is to be expected, for burnout differs with individuals, circumstances and age. What's universal about burnout is that it is a gift of life, an opportunity to look deep within ourselves and an opportunity to change. In the depths of exhaustion, despair and depression, it feels like a curse. But the more profound the gift, the greater the difficulty in understanding and making use of it.

The story about the desert traveler who comes across a hoard of gold coins comes to mind. To maximize the amount of gold to be carried away, the traveler dumps the food and water from his pack and sets off, empowered by the shimmering dreams of all the luxuries and status the gold would buy. Long before reaching the glittering bazaar where gold reigns supreme, the traveler realizes the real treasure was the water and food that he foolishly dumped, for his life depended not on gold but on what he had tossed away.

This book is organized to first offer a hand to hold for those experiencing burnout: you are not alone; I've been in the same place and got through it. So have many others. There are no miracle quick cures (at least to my knowledge), but perhaps reading about my experiences may help in small ways. Over time, small things add up and we feel better.

The second part is intended to help those who want to explore the sources and lessons of burnout. Burnout is a life-changing experience, in a good way, as absurd as that sounds to those in the depths of burnout.

This is my personal account of burnout. I am not a therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist or physician. Those professionals can all provide help; that's what they are trained to do. This is not an expert's clinical guide to burnout, or a survey of the literature on burnout. It is not intended as advice or guidance. I am simply sharing one individual's experience of burnout, reckoning and renewal, and what helped me.

Chapter One: My Experience of Burnout

Before we begin: Please remember I am not an expert in burnout, I am only an expert in my own burnout. This is not advice or guidance. I am only sharing my experience, which might not be relevant to your experience or useful to anyone else. It's very important to me that you keep in mind that I am only sharing my experience and views.

I like working, and I like my work. That wasn't the problem.

The problem was I didn't think I had any limits. I thought that I could keep pushing myself even as I became increasingly exhausted.

But all humans have limits. Mine were not visible to me. Even as I slipped closer and closer to my limits, I did not see the cliff edge just ahead. When I exceeded my limits, I burned out.

Burnout teaches us we all have limits.

What is burnout? In my experience, when our capacity to keep working drops to zero, that's burnout. We want to continue working, but the capacity to do so is no longer in our control. We hit our limit, and there's no fuel left in our tank.

We want the validation, purpose and livelihood we gained from work but we can no longer do the work. This loss of power and control is distressing and puzzling. Why is this happening to me?

Here's what I felt at the bottom of burnout: an exhaustion deeper than I'd ever felt before, a tiredness that never ended, a collapse of my willpower and a depression that never lifted.

I lost the self-discipline that I'd maintained without much difficulty for years. I also lost the *joie de vivre*, the joy of being alive, which had been replaced by exhaustion and a feeling of unending stress: I'll never get out from beneath terrible burdens and never catch up or be free from crushing responsibilities.

Though I didn't want to admit it, I also felt self-pity: I'm trapped, hopeless, and misunderstood.

Even my spouse, who would burn out six months later, made light of my exhaustion, dismissing it as temporary and mere complaints.

Only those who have fallen down the same well can understand, and I didn't have any other burnouts to consult. That's one of the things that makes burnout so painful: the burnout is often totally alone.

Those of us who are accustomed to accomplishing a great deal and being in charge are most devastated by burnout because we pride ourselves on being productive and take-charge.

Our willpower and ability to work hard are lost in burnout: we can no longer force ourselves to take charge, and since burnout is outside of our control, we feel a devastating powerlessness.

Burnout is the loss of self. Our trusted tools no longer work; something in our life is broken, and it's broken us.

Burnout isn't something you choose, it's something that happens to you against your will. Willing it to go away doesn't make it go away.

Burnout is frustrating not just because it's outside our control; it's also beyond our understanding of how the world works. We rely on our intellect, experience and willpower to solve problems, and all three come up empty in burnout: we don't know how to make burnout go away, our previous experience doesn't apply and our will—our most trusted tool in managing the world—has collapsed.

We're completely broken There's nothing left in our tank: no reserves, no willpower, no control of what's happening to us. We haven't just lost our energy; we've lost our sense of who we are.

Being positive is the secular religion of America: the power of a positive attitude can solve any problem and overcome any obstacle. This is the can-do spirit: if you stop being negative, you'll become a winner.

The problem for the burnout is there is nothing left to fuel a can-do attitude, and so revealing the despair we feel draws criticism: stop being so negative, here's a self-help checklist, follow this and you'll be back on your feet in no time.

Being positive has a dual nature. Much of the positivity we hear is phony because it's for public consumption: never mind what you actually feel, just repeat the positive script aloud because that's what makes everyone comfortable.

Burnouts who are unable to repeat the positive script with the expected enthusiasm become castaways; not only does no one understand our distress, we're criticized for not being upbeat.

The implicit message is: you could fix your burnout if you'd just be more positive. Your stress will melt away once you say positive things. But the unending stress doesn't melt away—it melts us away.

The non-burned-out haven't felt so drained that there's nothing left to prop up the expected cheerfulness. With no experience of burnout, they cannot understand the gravity of what we're feeling.

The burnout soon gives up expressing what we're experiencing rather than bear the additional burden of criticism.

This disapproval further isolates the burnout; nobody wants to hear how the burnout feels because that makes everyone uncomfortable.

Whether we want to admit it or not—usually not until much later in the process—burnout is a life-changing experience. This further isolates the burnout because everyone wants us to bounce back and resume the work we did before we collapsed. But the burnout can't do the same work. Going back isn't possible, and nobody wants to hear that.

This inability to return to the harness—and a growing unwillingness to do so—runs counter to the kind of self-help counseling which focuses on helping the burnout strap themselves back into overwork and open-ended responsibility. To reject this is unacceptable to everyone who depended on the burnout being an uncomplaining pack animal.

Burnouts find the world is dead-set on our prompt return to the workload that broke us. The self-help industry is typically focused on helping the pack animal stagger back to its feet because this what our economy depends on: work hard, play hard and strive for achievement, wealth and recognition. Anything less and the economy unravels.

Whether those still have any meaning is not a question anyone other than the burnout wants to ask, as the question challenges their assumptions about what's meaningful and worthy of sacrifice.

The end result is the burnout is alone. Not only does no one understand us, no one wants to understand we won't be resuming our workload.

What the non-burned-out don't understand is the burnout has been so drained there is nothing left. Rewards for our work have vanished, along with the means to carry heavy burdens. The pack animal has collapsed and cannot get to its feet, no matter how many people flog it.

The messages the burnout hears are not helpful. Some might begin as superficially sympathetic, but only as an introduction to *try harder to not be burned out*, even though trying harder is what burned us out.

Everyone is worried because they're not prepared to do everything we can no longer do. They can't help wanting us to get better so we can go back to making their lives easier.

The burnout is annoyed, to the degree we can feel anything at all, because it's now clear that nobody really cares about our well-being. They care about whatever we kept glued together: the enterprise, the household, and the facade of normalcy and cheerfulness.

The burnout no longer cares about any of that because we no longer have the means to care. The burnout may want to care, may feel pressure to care, but neither gives us the means to care.

The tank is bone-dry and so no matter how much the burnout wants to care, we no longer have the energy to care.

The burnout understands others depend on us, and so we feel guilty for being burned out. The burnout understands that others fear the collapse of their own lives should we fail to get back on our feet.

But we cannot help but have mixed feelings that our health matters less than our work. Advice to take a week off, drink fresh lemon juice, take supplements, etc., as if overwork and not taking care of ourselves were easily fixable with superficial cures, isn't helpful.

The burnout never feels more alone than when hearing yet another suggestion to take a few days off, listen to calming music, treat yourself to some luxury, etc., for superficial to-do lists only increase the distance between the castaway and the shore left behind.

Your experience of burnout may have been less difficult. Perhaps you had supportive, understanding people around you who had no stake in whatever collapsed in the wake of your burnout. Others haven't been so blessed.

Dreams are one of the few reliable sources of insight available to the burnout. One of my dreams offers a vivid summary of the burnout's dilemma.

In the dream, I parked my car and crossed a dry creek bed on foot to reach a remote construction site. Unable to locate the site, I retraced my steps and found the creek had become a raging river I could not possibly ford. At that point I realized I'd left my phone in my car. I was stranded and unable to contact anyone.

That's the burnout's dilemma: unable to return to our previous life, unable to communicate with others and unable to find a new beginning.

To paraphrase Samuel Beckett: I can't go on but I must go on.

(Beckett's line was "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.")

Burnout isn't a destination we choose to visit and leave. it's a reckoning no one chooses, a forced quest of discovery, and so we must go on even though we're broken. Although there is no path visible ahead, there is a way forward.

Chapter Two: Triage

Nobody knows what will be most helpful to someone else in the depths of burnout; I certainly don't. I do know that if a weekend getaway and a shopping spree resolve your exhaustion, you aren't burned out. If you're burned out, planning a getaway is a joyless burden, never mind getting to the hideaway, and shopping is just another ordeal.

I titled this chapter *Triage* to introduce the idea that the goal is to *stop the bleeding and start the healing*. Burnouts aren't bleeding from open wounds, but we're wounded physically and psychologically nonetheless.

Triage is the process of prioritizing care to those most in need. The burnout is the person most in need, so we must start caring for ourselves. The goal is to reduce whatever is causing burnout so it doesn't get worse and take the first steps toward healing ourselves.

We can't help anyone else unless we first help ourselves.

Get Help

Let's start with the obvious: if you need help, get help. In my first burnout at age 33, I became very depressed and sought the help of a psychiatrist. I chose to see a medical doctor (psychiatrists are MDs) because I wanted someone who looked at the entirety of my health, not just my depression.

In my second burnout at age 63, I consulted my doctor (*primary care physician*) and asked for a battery of tests to confirm the burnout hadn't damaged my health, and to check if some unknown medical issue might have triggered my burnout. Fortunately, the test results were normal. But it was certainly prudent to check and prudent to seek help. Exhaustion has many possible sources, including Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS).

As the visibility of burnout increases, the number of professionals with experience helping burnouts has also increased. Not all physicians and mental health professionals have experience treating burnout.

The psychiatrist my spouse consulted after she burned out gave her a prescription for an anti-depressant and sent her on her way without asking about the life circumstances causing her depression. It may require a search to find professionals with experience treating burnout.

Research has found (*Scientific American*, January 2022, *The Long Shadow of Trauma*) that having someone with whom we can share our experiences, is the key difference between those who struggle with the aftermath of trauma and those who manage to have fulfilling lives despite traumatic experiences. As one researcher put it: "Of course, it's unpleasant, it's a disaster. But it's not so disastrous if you can share it."

It's not helpful to suffer in silence, so finding someone with whom you can share your experience is an important step toward healing.

How Long Will It Take to Get Through This?

It's natural to ask, "when will it end?" because we're suffering and so we hope burnout will end soon. In the depths of her burnout, my spouse sought answers to the question "how long will it last?" in others' experiences.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Some burnouts report being back to normal in a few months while others report still being burned out a year later.

No one can say how long it will take to emerge from burnout because it depends on the individual's circumstance and age, and whether the sources of burnout are identified and reduced or eliminated.

In my experience, it's not helpful to focus on speeding up the process. Just as it took a long time to burn out, it may take an equivalent period of time to work through the reckoning and the renewal.

Burning out and recovering from burnout are both imperceptible as they're happening. It's a process of small steps that can't be leapfrogged or hurried.

It's akin to watching a deep cut heal. You want it to heal immediately, but this can't happen as you wish. The wound heals in its own time, without you noticing it until you notice the pain is gone and it's healed.

Burnout is like this. You'll notice when you feel better, but expecting rapid healing is frustrating. Healing proceeds on its own time.

Trying to get through burnout as fast as possible as if the recovery were a task that can be accelerated by sheer will is what burned us out in the first place.

One of the lessons of burnout is that we're not in absolute control of the recovery process any more than we were in absolute control of our slide into burnout.

If we'd had total control of everything, we wouldn't have burned out in the first place.

Our mind and body are one, but each operates at its own pace. Our mind may desire to push us to get through burnout in a set length of time, as if the recovery was just another deadline to meet. But our body doesn't respond to the mind's manic deadlines; the body will heal itself in its own time, not according to the mind's schedule.

Our emotional health recovers on its own pace, too, and can't be hurried.

Our burnout-impaired intellectual capabilities also take their own time to recover. My memory, ability to focus and my overall judgement were all impaired by burnout. It took a long time for me to regain my pre-burnout capabilities.

Burnout teaches us to become patient. I am an impatient person and so learning this was difficult. But there really isn't a choice, as becoming frustrated and anxious about the speed of one's recovery only adds stress that further delays recovery.

Rather than focus on trying to hurry what cannot be hurried, we serve our best interests by focusing in making progress one step at a time. Making small improvements is what we do control,

My view is that burnout is life-changing experience. It is not a destination you visit and then return from unchanged. Four years after hitting bottom, I am still learning about my post-burnout self and life. I say more about this in the section *Where we are now*.

To read the rest of the book, please buy a copy. The author, who has no other source of earned income other than his writing, thanks you for supporting his work. KINDLE: <https://amzn.to/3FNLpRJ>

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