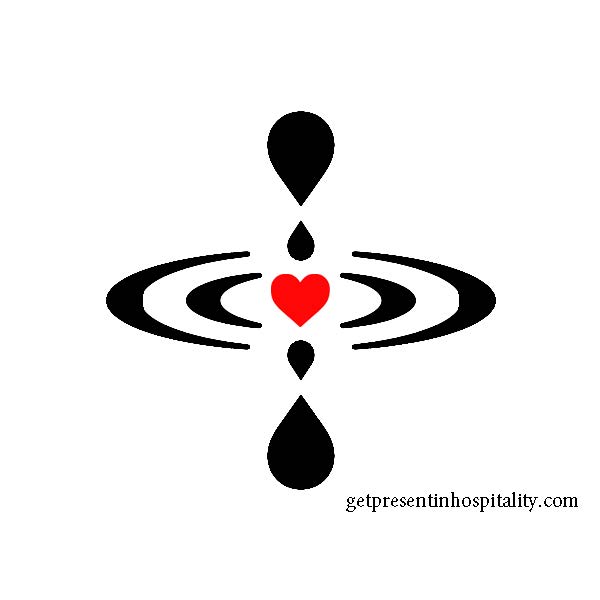
Beat Burnout

Introduction



Introduction



Burnout is on the rise. In a recent survey over half of all workers reported that they were experiencing burnout (Threlkeld, 2021). Moreover, the number of people reporting burnout increased by nearly ten percent in the year between January 2020 and January 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the associated increase in economic and financial instability and the increasingly blurred line between work and home life, are all likely to be at least partly to blame for this steep increase in burnout. But what is burnout, this condition that more than half of all workers are reported to experience?

Put simply, burnout is a feeling of pervasive exhaustion that can result from extended exposure to stress. People who are burned out report feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001) and are unable to find relief from this all-encompassing exhaustion. Traditionally, the exhaustion of burnout has been understood as resulting from too much stress at work (Freudenberger, 1974; Samra, 2018). However, more recent scholarship recognizes that stress coming from almost any source can make someone feel perpetually exhausted and burned out (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020).

Burnout can cause a person to feel emotionally exhausted, cynical, and incompetent (Schaufeli et al., 2001; West et al., 2016). When you’re burned out you may feel that you don’t have any empathy or compassion available anymore. You may not care about some people, causes, or projects that you used to care about and that you feel you should still care about. You may feel that you’re no longer able to be effective or successful. In module 1 we’ll define burnout and talk about some of the causes of burnout in more detail.

The causes of burnout can be understood at a number of levels. At the biological level, burnout may be caused by a dysregulated stress response system. The human brain and body respond in predictable ways to stress. When you’re in a stressful situation, hormones including adrenaline and cortisol are released into your bloodstream (Black & Garbutt, 2002; Tsigos & Chrousos, 2002). These hormones increase your heart rate and blood pressure, getting more oxygen and energy to your muscles and brain. You become more alert, focused, and better able to withstand pain and exhaustion. All of your body’s resources become dedicated to keeping you safe. Anything not necessary for your immediate survival is put on hold. Cellular repair, reproduction, growth, and immune responses are all paused. When stress is short and temporary, these physiological responses are extremely adaptive, allowing you to rally all available resources to overcome a threat. When stress is persistent and ongoing, these physiological systems can get dysregulated, leading to symptoms of burnout including problems with sleep, digestion, mood, cognitive functioning, and emotional wellbeing.

At the psychological level, burnout is more likely when you feel that you don’t have the resources you need to meet a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), or when you detect that you don’t have any control over a situation. When you feel persistently threatened with no way to save yourself or improve your situation, you may start to feel burned out.

At an occupational level, burnout may be more likely when you have too much work, not enough control, insufficient reward, inadequate social support, and when you feel that you aren’t being treated fairly and that your work and actions don’t matter (Maslach and Leiter, 2005).

At a societal level, you may feel burned out if you feel the weight of living in an unjust world full of expectations and demands that you’ll never be able to meet (Eisenstein 2018; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020).

Although things seem grim, with two-thirds of survey respondents reporting that burnout is getting worse (Threlkeld, 2021), there may be steps that you can take to reduce your feelings of burnout. We review some strategies that may be effective in protecting you from burnout in module 2. You may be able to feel less burned out by taking time to relax and unwind, taking part in calming self-nurturing activities (Shields et al., 2020) like exercise, spending time in nature, practicing meditation, mindfulness, and yoga, drinking healing teas, creating art, or even simply by coloring. Giving your brain and your body’s stress response systems regular opportunities to disengage from the source of your stress may help bring everything back into alignment.

You may also be able to change the ways that you think about and approach stress and stressful events. In module 3 we review some changes in mindset that you may be able to make that may help you deal with stress and avoid burnout. You may be able to become better able to see yourself as effective and competent, increasing your sense of control over your world (Bandura et al., 1977). You may become better able to let go of the idea of perfection, allowing yourself to let some things go. You may be able to become more flexible and better able to shift and adapt in order to find novel solutions to some problems. You may be able to change how you view stress, focusing on its potentially beneficial effects.

Keeping burnout at bay may require you to change some fundamental parts of your life. In module 4 we’ll review research showing that focusing on what’s important, working towards a cause that you care about, creating a personal mission statement, and making sure that you incorporate fun and joy in your life can all protect you from burnout.

In module 5 we review some changes you may want to make that may require you to examine deeper parts of yourself. Social support, of a number of different kinds, can protect you from burnout (Heaney & Israel 2008). We’ll review some types of social support and give you the opportunity to think about where your social support comes from. Social support is largely reciprocal and so we’ll also review ways to make sure that people around you can feel safe and supported. We also review ways to set boundaries and to say no to requests, even when they are made by people who you care about.

Module 5 ends by suggesting that you be vulnerable and accept your own flaws and imperfections. Being able to let go of unattainable standards and accept that you are a valuable and worthwhile person even when you are not accomplishing anything and even when you are failing at everything may help you feel less pressure to take on more and more stress.

Beat Burnout

Module 1: What Is Burnout?

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Module 1: What is Burnout?



You open your eyes first thing in the morning and already dread the day ahead of you. You feel exhausted and wish you could spend the day in bed. You get up, get dressed and head out the door anyway. You get to work and feel annoyed with everything and everyone around you. You don’t care about your projects or the people you’re supposed to help. You don’t feel that what you do makes any difference to anything. You get to work anyway, but nothing that you do feels good enough. You feel sure that you’re failing and that everyone sees that you’re failing. You wish that you could have just stayed in bed today.

If any of the above feels familiar, you may be suffering from burnout.

## What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that many people feel after living through stress for a long time (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001).

The term burnout was first used in the 1970s to describe a collection of symptoms often seen in people working in the caring professions, for example, teachers, social workers, therapists, and those working in healthcare (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In response to stress and overwork, people working in helping professions often report feelings of exhaustion, reduced empathy towards their clients, and a sense of reduced efficacy in their work. Since burnout was first identified and defined, it has been recognized as a condition that can affect people working in all kinds of jobs (Samra, 2018). Burnout can also be caused by stress experienced anywhere, not just at work. Stress due to caregiving responsibilities, financial hardship, school, interpersonal conflict, cultural and societal expectations, and even just the stress of everyday modern living can all lead to burnout (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2020).

Although academic psychologists differ in the specific criteria that they use to define burnout, most definitions include an exhaustion component. Exhaustion at a physical, emotional, and mental level is often considered the hallmark of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2001). Exhaustion can be felt as, among other things, a sense of tiredness, low energy, reduced mental functioning, a loss of empathy, a loss of motivation, physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, a sense of worthlessness, or feeling unable to change a bad situation (Maslach & Leiter, 2005).

The most popular scale for measuring burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory, often referred to as the MBI (Schaufeli et al., 2001; West et al., 2016). The MBI categorizes burnout symptoms as falling into three major categories:

* **Emotional Exhaustion** – Feeling like you are emotionally overextended. Feeling drained by interactions with other people. Feeling strained and chronically fatigued. Feeling a sense of deep and profound weariness that isn’t relieved by sleep. If you notice that you are asking yourself “What now?” every time someone approaches you, you might be experiencing emotional exhaustion.
* **Depersonalization or Cynicism** – Negative, cynical, callous, or detached attitudes toward the people around you, especially people who you are responsible for, like patients, students, clients, or your children. Feeling indifferent or distant towards your work. Losing interest in your work. Feeling that your work isn't meaningful. If you feel that you just don’t care about your work or the people you are supposed to be helping, you might be experiencing depersonalization or cynicism.
* **A sense of reduced Personal or Professional Accomplishment** – Negative emotions and thoughts about your achievements and your ability to succeed at work or in life in general. The feeling that you or your work doesn't contribute positively to the people or projects that you serve. A decline in your feelings of competency and your belief that you can be successful.

## Module 1 Exercise 1

Ask yourself the following questions to get an idea of how burned out you might be. Please keep in mind that burnout is not an official diagnosis recognized by the American Psychiatric Association and that this checklist should only serve as a guideline.

**Emotional Exhaustion**

* Do you feel emotionally drained?
* Do you feel like you have less empathy or compassion than you use to?
* Do you feel like you’re working too hard on your job, your relationships, or at home?
* Does the idea of facing the day make you feel tired?

**Depersonalization/Cynicism**

* Have you become more callous towards others?
* Do you struggle to care for the people you normally care about?
* Do you feel like what you do doesn’t matter or isn’t important?
* Do you feel like no one cares about what you do?

**Personal Accomplishment**

* Do you feel overwhelmed by problems?
* Do you feel you are unable to effectively deal with challenges?
* Do you feel like your contributions often make things worse?
* When there is a problem, do you struggle to stay calm?

## Causes of Burnout

Generally, burnout develops after exposure to chronic stress. In most classical definitions of burnout, these stressors are experienced at work. Workplace stressors can include having too much work, conflicting responsibilities at work and at home, low compensation, compensation inequality, low job security, role ambiguity, job complexity, and a lack of control over what you do (Toker & Melamed, 2017).

Feeling powerless can also lead to burnout. If you feel that what you do doesn’t have any effect on the world, or if you feel that you have no control over your day or the trajectory of your career or your life you may be on your way to burnout.

Stress and a sense of powerlessness experienced in any part of life can lead to burnout. Although the burnout concept was originally developed to describe symptoms people feel after overexposure to work stress, it is now recognized that stress, overwork, and feeling powerless in any part of your life can lead to burnout.

## The Physical Sensations of Stress

When you experience stress, your body reacts in ways that you can probably feel. You may feel specific physical sensations as your body recruits the energy and resources needed to respond to the stressor (Black & Garbutt, 2002; Tsigos & Chrousos, 2002).

For example, if you’re crossing the street and see that a car isn’t going to be able to stop in time to avoid hitting you, you may feel energized, focused, and ready to take the action necessary to save your own life, notably running to safety. These sensations are due to your body releasing adrenaline into your bloodstream, your heart rate becoming elevated, your blood pressure increasing, and more oxygen getting to your brain. These physiological responses to stress are extremely adaptive and beneficial, allowing you to quickly get to safety. This stress response may also serve you well in situations that are not life-threatening but that may still require increased arousal and alertness. For example, if you have a job interview. Your body’s stress response may allow you to recruit the cognitive and energetic resources you need to remain alert throughout the process.

## Module 1 Exercise 2

Think back to a time when you were faced with something scary or extremely stressful. This could be a situation where you felt that you were in physical danger, where you were scared for the safety or wellbeing of a loved one, when workplace stressors were particularly extreme, or when you felt the potential for social embarrassment. Think about how your body felt and how you perceived the world. Did you feel your heart racing? Did you get tunnel vision? Did things seem to move in slow motion? Did you have an increased sense of clarity and purpose? Did you feel a sense of increased physical strength or immunity to pain?

Having a sense of how you feel when experiencing stress may help you identify when you may need to step away from the situation and take a break. Once you are able to recognize when your body is mounting a stress response, you can use these internal sensations as a sign that you need to take a break as soon as you can.

## Emergence and Progression of Burnout Symptoms

Burnout starts when you don’t have a chance to recover from stress (Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). Exposure to high levels of stress over prolonged periods of time causes the body to adapt to all of the physiological effects of stress. These adaptations lead to specific symptoms at the physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional levels. These symptoms are the symptoms of burnout.

* **Physical symptoms** – Effects on the immune, cardiovascular, digestive, endocrine, and reproductive systems. Symptoms include headaches, intestinal problems, muscle tension, chest pain, fatigue, changes in sex drive, upset stomach, and vulnerability to disease.
* **Mental symptoms** – Reduced cognitive performance. Impairments in attention, concentration, and working memory. Higher cognitive processes like executive functioning are particularly impaired. Difficulty with thinking clearly, learning new things, forgetfulness, absent-mindedness, trouble staying focused, problem-solving, planning, and self-control.
* **Emotional symptoms** – Stress reduces the capacity to control your emotions (Raio et al., 2013). This may include emotional instability, intense emotional reactions, feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, feeling frustrated and angry, irritability, anxiety, panic, overreacting, feeling upset or sad without knowing why.
* **Behavioral symptoms** – Due to the cognitive problems and the increased emotional reactivity, people with burnout have more interpersonal conflicts. You may be more easily agitated. You may seek out comfort in alcohol, or other drugs, overeat, quit hobbies and sports, or withdraw from social life.

If stress exposure continues, burnout symptoms may progress. You may find yourself going to extreme lengths to avoid responsibility or to reduce complexity in your life. You may become very rigid. Your capacity for creativity, problem-solving, empathy, and insight may be reduced. You may become less able to cope with personal and professional demands. You may be seen as obsessive-compulsive, dependent, paranoid, rigid, indecisive, or suspicious.

If burnout continues to progress you may reach a state of clinical burnout, characterized by reduced motivation and passivity (van Dam, 2021). People in this stage of burnout may exhibit learned helplessness, a phenomenon first described in laboratory animals subjected to unavoidable electric shocks (Seligman, 1972). These animals stopped trying to escape the electric shock, seemingly accepted their fates, and became completely unmotivated. This most advanced phase of burnout is characterized by chronic demotivation where the person believes that they don’t have any control over their situation.

## Burnout at Work

Burnout often results from extended exposure to workplace stressors. Certain workplace conditions and job characteristics can encourage the development of burnout. Factors that can affect the development of burnout include (Maslach and Leiter, 2005):

* **Workload** – Having too much work or not enough resources. Resources can include materials needed to do the job, time to complete the job, and training to do the job.
* **Control** – Being micromanaged, lacking influence, having accountability without power to effect change.
* **Reward** – not enough pay, acknowledgment, or satisfaction.
* **Community** – isolation, conflict, disrespect.
* **Fairness** – discrimination, favoritism, nepotism.
* **Values** – ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks.

The last thirty or so years have seen substantial changes in the workplace and degradation of the trust that employees feel towards their employers (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). Employees increasingly feel undervalued, unappreciated, and underpaid. Many of the changes that have occurred in the workplace in the last generation have negatively impacted the factors that contribute to burnout. For example, people don’t tend to stay with the same employer for as long as they used to. This decreased job security has negative effects on people’s sense that they are in control of their own careers, their sense of community with coworkers, and their sense of fairness. These trends have only accelerated in recent years with increasing automation and the rise of the gig economy.

## Module 1 Exercise 3

How burned out is your job making you? Ask yourself the following questions to get an idea of how susceptible to burnout your job might be making you.

* **Workload** – Do you have enough resources to complete your work every day? Do you often need to provide your own materials or supplies to do your work? Do you often need to work late? Are you often confronted with surprising or unexpected events?
* **Control** – Are you involved in making decisions that affect your work? Do you feel that someone is always hovering over you, judging all of your decisions? Do you have any influence on how things are run? Are you held responsible for things you have no control over? Do you feel that management considers your needs?
* **Reward** – Are your achievements recognized by management? Do you see opportunities for bonuses, raises, or promotions? Do you feel that your work makes a positive difference in the world or to other people?
* **Community** – Do you have supportive interactions at work? Do you have friendly relationships with people at work? Is your workplace a friendly place, relatively free of interpersonal conflict? Do you feel respected by your managers and coworkers?
* **Fairness** – Do you feel that management is committed to treating everyone fairly? Do you feel that rewards, bonuses, raises, and promotions are allocated fairly and transparently? Do you feel that your workplace is relatively free from discrimination?
* **Values** – Do you feel that you have the opportunity to contribute to meaningful projects? Do you feel that your organization is doing meaningful work?

## Burnout in School

School is often stressful. Burnout in students is often experienced as the same three elements that make up burnout in workers, namely exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Salmela-Aro et al. 2009). School-related burnout can arise from excessive school demands, a lack of control, a lack of recognition for high effort or achievement, a lack of interpersonal relationships, and high expectations from significant others like teachers and family members.

## Burnout Recovery

Since burnout develops in response to stress, the most straightforward path to recovery is to reduce exposure to stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). However, many people suffering from burnout experience stress at work or in other environments that they are unable to change. For these people, recovery from burnout may require regularly taking part in activities that replenish cognitive and emotional resources (Toker & Melamed, 2017).

Restful experiences that do not activate the body’s stress reactions are central to recovery from burnout. In recovery from stress, the psychophysiological systems that were activated by the stress are given the opportunity to return to their normal levels (Sonnentag & Geurts, 2009). Effective recovery leaves you feeling regenerated at physiological, cognitive, and emotional levels.

Getting enough sleep is central to recovery from burnout. During sleep, brain physiology returns to normal levels and cognitive abilities like alertness and memory are restored. Hormonal levels also return to normal levels during sleep (Akerstedt, et al., 2009). Most people need between seven and nine hours of sleep every night. If you are regularly getting less than seven hours of sleep a night, recovery from burnout will be all the more difficult.

## Burnout Recovery Stages

The process of recovery from severe burnout progresses through three phases, with an ideal additional fourth phase (van Dam, 2021).

### Phase 1: Recognition of the crisis

Recovery from severe burnout requires you to first recognize that you are at a breaking point. You may start to recognize that you are living in a constant state of severe fatigue and distress and that constant or near-constant exposure to stress is to blame. While in this phase, you may still try to fulfill all of your obligations. However, the impaired cognitive and emotional functioning associated with burnout may make that difficult or even impossible. You may make a lot of mistakes, be unable to concentrate, be emotionally unstable, and be prone to conflict. Your fatigue may prevent you from doing anything and you may find yourself unable to act. Since cognitive functioning is impaired in burnout, you may also struggle to see just how impaired you are.

At this point, you may realize that you are not performing well and that burnout is having a significant effect on your life. For this reason, it would be a good idea for recovery to become your top priority now. This may involve difficult decisions and may even require you to drop almost all of your responsibilities for the next few weeks. You may need a loved one or a therapist to take the lead and actively help you find solutions, and if necessary, communicate with others about the measures being taken.

In this phase, you need to show yourself empathy and understanding. Exposure to stress for a long time got you to this stage of severe burnout. Recovery will also take time. Your body needs to recover and you need to find a way to balance rest and activity.

### Phase 2: Recovery of the stress system

The process of recovery requires that your physiological stress response systems return to normal functioning. In burnout, these physiological systems have been overworked and may be dysregulated. Bringing these systems back to normal functioning requires that you reduce your exposure to stress. This may require some drastic steps including skipping social obligations and avoiding work and household chores. Ideally, you will live in this no-stress state until you feel that your normal functioning is returning. A good sign that your body is returning to normal functioning is that you are sleeping better and are able to feel relaxed. You can then gradually resume some activities.

As you reintroduce activities, register how stressed you feel. Start with nonwork activities that aren’t very stressful and do these activities for short periods of time. Alternate your periods of activity with periods of rest or relaxation. At this point, you are re-learning how to alternate your body from arousal to rest. Only add in more activities when you can feel fully recovered after two hours of rest.

Reintegration to work should start gradually. Involve your employer if possible to let them know what recovery involves and what to expect. A healthy lifestyle is important – healthy food, moderate alcohol, moderate exercise, healthy sleep patterns. You may also need to relearn how to be attentive to your body’s signals. You may have learned to ignore signs of fatigue and stress. You may have formed habits where you chose actions based on what you think you should do rather than on how you feel. Relaxation exercises, meditation, and mindfulness exercises can help you become more aware of your body’s signals. It may be helpful to involve your loved ones since your burnout probably affected them too, in the form of irritability and reluctance to take part in social activities.

This phase can last several months. Over this period, you should become less fatigued, more motivated, and better able to perform tasks. Cognitive ability may be particularly slow to recover. Keep this in mind as you reintegrate into work. In this phase you should NOT start psychotherapy – it may be too emotionally demanding and stressful and may hinder your recovery. You should also avoid taking any drastic life actions now, even if they are attempts to solve your problems. Things like divorce, job change, or moving are not a good idea now – they require effort to adapt yourself to a new environment while already being exhausted and experiencing difficulties in cognition.

### Phase 3: Prevention, learning from the past

Here you are almost fully recovered and the time has come to explore the reasons why you ended up with burnout. Knowledge about the factors that contributed to your burnout may help to prevent it from happening again. Fifty percent of burnout patients have a relapse within three years. Factors that influence relapse may include circumstances outside of your control.

For example, an economic downturn may force you to stay in a stressful job, or a family member may become ill, requiring you to take on caretaking responsibilities. However, you may be able to learn ways to increase your ability to cope with stress by proactively learning new ways to solve problems through social skills training, time management, and job crafting. At this stage, therapy may be helpful in teaching you to identify and eliminate dysfunctional behavior patterns by changing dysfunctional thought patterns.

### Phase 4: Posttraumatic growth

Recovery may be considered complete after Phase 3. However, you may be able to grow even further, arriving at a place of increased strength where you can see some good from your struggles. You may be able to reflect on your values, goals, and ambitions and make fundamental changes to your priorities and to how you live your life. Formerly burned-out people sometimes report that their lives are better than before their burnout. They know better who they are and what is important to them in life. They spend more time with friends and family. They have changed their priorities in ways that have made their lives more meaningful, more enjoyable, and happier (Semeijn et al., 2019)

Beat Burnout

Module 2: Manage and Relieve Stress

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Module 2: Manage and Relieve Stress

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## How Stress Impacts Burnout

When you encounter a stressful situation, your body rallies its resources to prepare you to confront and overcome the challenge. When your brain detects a threat, it initiates a sequence of physiological responses, leading to the release of neurochemicals and hormones throughout your body (Black & Garbutt, 2002; Tsigos & Chrousos, 2002). Your adrenal glands release the hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline into your bloodstream. These hormones get you ready either to confront or run away from the threatening situation (the famed fight or flight response). Your heart rate increases, getting more blood to your muscles. Airways in your lungs open up, allowing you to take in more oxygen. Your blood sugar increases, providing your brain and muscles with more energy. Your blood vessels constrict, increasing your blood pressure. All of these effects get you ready to either confront or run away from the threat.

After a few minutes, if the threat is still present, another hormone, called cortisol, is released into your bloodstream. Cortisol stimulates your liver to produce glucose which then travels to your brain and increases your alertness, attention, and focus. Cortisol also prepares your body to withstand pain, injury, and fatigue. Bodily activities that are not immediately necessary for survival, like immune responses, digestion, reproduction, and cellular repair are put on hold, allowing all of your resources to go towards confronting the threat.

This is an amazing system that not only helped our ancestors survive in a dangerous world but has probably also helped you confront and overcome stressors in your own life. If you’ve ever escaped angry wasps, impressed intimidating in-laws, successfully made a big sales pitch, or aced an important exam, you can thank your body’s stress response system for helping you rally the physical, cognitive, and attentional resources you needed.

The body’s response to stress becomes problematic when the stressor is long-term. If your home is constantly besieged by angry wasps, your in-laws are never satisfied, your sales targets are always increasing, or the expectations of your academic performance always rise, you will exist in a constant state of stress, without the opportunity for rest and recovery. Your body’s ability to appropriately regulate the release of stress hormones will be impaired.

The body’s stress response system is naturally equipped with a negative feedback loop – high levels of cortisol usually signal your body to stop the production of more hormones. Normally, this negative feedback loop acts as a brake on the physiological effects of stress, allowing your body to get back to normal levels. However, exposure to chronic stressors can get this system out of whack. If you are exposed to chronic or repeated stressors for too long, your body’s stress response system may become imbalanced in a phenomenon called allostatic load (McEwen, 1998). In the state of allostatic load, levels of stress hormones may fail to get back to normal. These higher levels of circulating stress hormones may themselves have damaging effects on the brain and other organs and may also lead to compensatory changes in other chemical and hormonal systems which then go on to have damaging effects. Allostatic load is associated with damage to the brain and body. Particularly vulnerable to this damage is the hippocampus, one of the brain structures most important to memory. An imbalanced stress response system may be the physiological underpinning of burnout.

## What Is Stress?

You probably know when you feel stressed. But, defining just what constitutes stress can be tricky. As discussed above, stress has physiological effects, like the release of adrenaline and cortisol. However, many of the physiological responses to stress are not unique to stress. For example, levels of the rat version of cortisol increase when male rats are exposed to both a cat and a female rat (Woodson et al., 2003). While the former is probably a source of stress for the rat, the latter is presumably not a source of stress but a source of happy excitement. Stress hormones also increase when people participate in voluntary leisure activities like sports, exercise (Jacks et al., 2002), and even video games (Schmidt et al., 2020).

Stress may be defined by cognitive perceptions rather than by physiological responses. When you confront a stressful situation, your brain analyzes that situation for its significance to your well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A situation is perceived as stressful if it is seen as a threat to your physical integrity, psychological well-being, social connectedness, or sense of self. The resources that you have to deal with the situation, along with the nature of the situation itself, both determine whether the situation will be perceived as stressful. Dimensions relevant to threat perceptions include:

## Threat Versus Challenge

When you judge that you don’t have the resources needed to meet the demands of a situation, that situation is perceived as a threat. In contrast, when you judge that you do have the resources needed to meet the demands of the situation, the situation is perceived as a challenge. Threats are perceived as stressful while challenges are perceived as invigorating or exciting.

## Module 2 Exercise 1

Think back to a time when you were confronted with a difficult situation that you felt invigorated or excited by. This could have been a career challenge like a job interview or a work deadline, an academic challenge like a test or exam, a physical challenge like running a half marathon, a financial challenge like saving for a down payment for a home, or a social challenge, like giving a speech at your best friend’s wedding. Think about the resources that you were able to rally in order to meet the demands of this challenge. It may be helpful to write down all of the specific resources that you used when you met this challenge. Resources can include your cognitive abilities, your physical abilities, your earning potential, support from friends and family, and time to devote to meeting the challenge. Now, think about a situation you are currently facing that is causing you stress. Write down all of the resources that you might be able to rally as you deal with this situation. Having a clear list of all of your resources may help you reframe this stressful situation not as a threat but as a challenge.

## Perceived Control

Situations that are uncontrollable or are perceived to be uncontrollable are more likely to be experienced as stressful (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Notably, the perception of controllability may be more important than whether you actually have any control (Koolhaas et al., 2011). When laboratory animals are subjected to inescapable electric shocks they enter a state of learned helplessness. The animals learn that all of their attempts to escape the shock are futile and so they stop trying. The animals also start to show symptoms similar to human depression and anxiety (Seligman, 1972). Some of the anxiety and depression symptoms can be relieved if the animal is given a lever to press, even if the lever isn’t connected to anything and has no effect on the shocks. The perception of control is enough to make the animal feel a little less stressed.

## Module 2 Exercise 2

The perception of control over a situation is much more important than the actual control that you may have. Like the laboratory animals in the learned helplessness experiments, living through traumatic, stressful, and uncontrollable situations may have taught you to respond to stress by giving up, becoming depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, or helpless. While this response may have been adaptive in the past and may have helped you survive, it might be unhelpful and maladaptive in your current situation. Think about how you respond to stress now. Do you tend to feel that you have the power to effect change or do you feel that you are powerless and have to accept things as they are? Think about a situation that you may feel overwhelmed and stressed by. Write down some potential ways that you can control parts of this situation or effect change in some way. These don’t have to be ways to completely eliminate the problem but small things that you can control. For example, if you are overwhelmed by too much work, you may be able to exert some control by delegating some tasks, extending your deadline, or eliminating other less urgent work.

## How To Manage Stress – Self-Nurturing Activities

No one can completely avoid stress in their lives. But learning to manage your stress may help you avoid burnout. As discussed above, burnout may be the result of a dysregulated stress response system that is unable to return to normal levels. Giving your body’s stress systems the opportunity to return to normal levels may require intentionally taking part in stress-reducing, self-nurturing activities. Self-nurturing activities are activities that you enjoy and that calm you. When you spend time in self-nurturing activities, your body’s stress response systems get a break and may be able to return to normal functioning (Shields et al., 2020).

Many activities qualify as self-nurturing and different people will be nurtured by different activities. The important thing is that your body’s stress response systems should have the opportunity to return to normal. You know that this is happening if you feel a sense of calmness as you perform the activity. Some ideas for self-nurturing activities are listed below.

### Spending time in nature

Nature has healing powers and can reduce feelings of stress in unconscious and automatic ways (Urlich, et al., 1991). Being in nature can replenish your attentional capacities and your cognitive processing abilities (Kaplan, 1995). Being in nature can help you more effectively and more completely recover from stress. In a laboratory study, people who were shown a stressful movie clip and were then exposed to a natural environment showed faster and more complete physiological restoration of their stress response systems than people who were exposed to an urban environment (Urlich, et al., 1991).

This research suggests that getting out into nature is good for your stress levels and can help you recover from stress. Go for a nature walk, hike or a drive in the countryside. Research has even found that experiencing nature in virtual reality is effective at reducing stress (Huang et al., 2020). This may suggest that if you can’t get out into nature, you might be able to reap some of the stress-reducing effects of nature by watching immersive videos of nature. Searching for “nature walk” on youtube results in many long, high-resolution videos of walks through natural settings.

### Physical activity

Exercise has numerous beneficial effects relevant to stress and burnout. Exercise can reduce symptoms of depression (Rethorst et al., 2009) and anxiety (Simonen et al., 2003). Exercise may also counteract some of the damaging inflammatory effects of stress (Febbraio & Pedersen, 2002) and may encourage the growth of new neurons in the hippocampus (Cotman et al., 2007), which may counter some of the damaging effects of stress on cognitive functioning. People who regularly exercise tend to have lower cortisol responses after stress compared to people who don’t regularly exercise (Rimmele, et al., 2009).

Exercise may help protect your brain and body from the negative effects of stress, may help you avoid burnout, and may help you recover from burnout. How intense does the exercise have to be? Maybe not that intense. Research on whether there is any additional benefit to strenuous exercise is mixed and there are clear benefits to even light exercise (Hamer et al., 2012). Simply taking a walk may allow you to access the stress-reducing benefits of exercise. You may be able to get more bang for your buck by making it a walk in the woods, a meadow, the beach, the desert, or a garden so that you can also get your nature fix in.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness practice originated in Buddhist traditions, within a system intended to achieve freedom from mental suffering (Hanh, 1975). Mindfulness was introduced into secular therapeutic settings in the 1980s (Kabat-Zinn, 1982).

There are many different ways to approach and cultivate mindfulness. Generally, mindfulness practice involves three components:

1. Clarity on why you are practicing mindfulness. You should enter into mindfulness practice intentionally seeking to cultivate a specific mindset or way of thinking, such as increased objectivity or reduced reactivity.
2. Attention to your present experience without interpretation, elaboration, or analysis.
3. An attitude of acceptance, kindness, compassion, openness, patience, non-striving, equanimity, and curiosity free from judgment.

Cultivating mindfulness may help you shift your perspective in fundamental ways. You may become better able to observe your own thoughts and feelings as subjective and temporary events occurring within your mind, rather than as reflections of important and objective reality. This enhanced clarity may help you identify sources of stress that you may be able to let go of. You may also become better able to regulate your emotions and may become more mentally and cognitively flexible (Shapiro et al., 2006). These skills may help you more effectively deal with your stress, for example by helping you identify and eliminate goals that are not worthwhile or actions that are not productive.

There are many ways to achieve mindfulness. Renowned Buddhist author, teacher, and mentor Thich Nhat Hanh outlines many ways to reach a state of mindfulness in his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Hanh, 1975). One way to achieve mindfulness is by becoming aware of your breathing. As you inhale, focus on the breath entering your nose and lungs and the expansion of your torso. As you exhale, focus on how the breath feels as it rushes out of your nose. You may find it helpful to count your breaths.

You may also achieve mindfulness in the mundane processes of daily living. For example, when you are washing dishes, keep your focus on the actions that you are taking and on the sensations that you are feeling as you wash the dishes, rather than letting your mind dwell on other things. Practicing moments of mindfulness in your everyday life may help you achieve momentary respite from your stress and may give your body’s stress response systems a break from constant or near-constant activation.

### Meditation

Another way to achieve mindfulness may be to practice meditation. Practicing meditation can have beneficial effects on feelings of anxiety, depression, pain, stress, and mental-health-related quality of life (Goyal et al., 2014).

In practicing meditation, you try to rid your mind of all conscious thought. There are many different approaches to meditation, all with beneficial effects on stress outcomes (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). In transcendental meditation, you use a mantra to transcend yourself to an effortless state where focused attention is absent. In mindfulness-based meditation, you train yourself to completely focus on the present moment (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011). This may involve concentrating all of your attention on a single thing in the present moment, for example, a candle’s flame.

### Yoga

Mindfulness may also be achieved through yoga practice (Brisbon & Lowery, 2011). Yoga encourages mindfulness, attentiveness, awareness of the present moment, a greater sense of control, and feelings of calmness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Practicing yoga can reduce feelings of stress (Riley & Park, 2015). Many of the benefits of yoga can be seen at the physiological level. Yoga practice lowers cortisol levels and reduces inflammation. In addition to these specific effects of yoga, practicing yoga may also help you achieve some of the generic benefits of exercise.

Practicing yoga may give you coping mechanisms that you can use outside of yoga. For example, Hatha yoga emphasizes breathing and postural techniques. These techniques can be used to cope with stress experienced in daily life (Heilbronn, 1992).

Yoga may also increase your self-compassion as you move through postures. When practicing yoga, the focus is often on accepting and honoring your postures as you perform them, rather than on achieving the perfect pose. This emphasis on self-acceptance without judgment may be extremely helpful to people suffering from symptoms of burnout.

### Tea

Certain chemical compounds in tea, called flavonoids, have beneficial effects on the body’s stress response systems, promoting recovery after stress exposure (Perez-Vizcaino et al, 2002). In a study conducted with mice exposed to stress, mice who consumed decaffeinated tea had reductions in their physiological markers of stress, compared to mice who consumed water (Henry & Stephens-Larson, 1984). Drinking tea may protect your body’s stress response systems from becoming dysregulated and descending into burnout.

There are many different traditional and herbal teas, all with beneficial effects on stress. Black tea (Steptoe et al., 2007), green tea (Williams et al., 2020), and many herbal teas all have stress and anxiety-reducing effects (Mao et al., 2016; Ngan & Conduit 2011; Yoo et al., 2011). Your enjoyment of the tea should be central in choosing your teas. Just keep an eye on your caffeine consumption, which may increase anxiety.

Tea is often consumed in relaxing settings and these relaxing settings may themselves have beneficial effects. Many cultures have tea ceremonies that may be meditative and that may enhance mindfulness (Anderson, 1987). Creating a tea-drinking ritual for yourself may help you by providing you with the benefits of the tea itself, and by also creating a ritual with elements of mindfulness and meditation.

### Coloring

In art therapy, art-based activities like painting and drawing are used to help people overcome difficulties and improve well-being, often with the support of a trained art therapist. Creating art can have stress-reducing, relaxing, mood-improving, and anxiety-reducing effects (Sandmire et al., 2012).

Coloring is not art therapy per se but it does provide a safe, easily accessible way for you to self-soothe with creative expression (Flett et al., 2017). Coloring may bring on a mindful, meditative, or attentive state. Coloring may also give you a break from the cognitive demands of everyday life, allowing your inner monologue to go quiet and giving your physiological stress response systems the opportunity to recover.

If coloring isn’t for you, you may be able to access the benefits of art through other small acts of everyday creativity like building with Lego bricks, cooking, gardening, or singing.

## Module 2 Exercise 3

You may be able to manage your stress and decrease some of the negative effects of stress by engaging in self-nurturing activities. You may decide to try some of the self-nurturing activities discussed above including meditation, mindfulness, yoga, physical exercise, art therapy, coloring, getting out into nature, or creating a tea ceremony for yourself. Regularly taking part in one or a combination of these activities may help you slow down your pace, develop a calming rhythm, and allow your body’s stress response systems to return to normal levels. In fact, any activity that you enjoy and that helps you achieve a state of calmness can qualify as self-nurturing.

Brainstorm and then list some activities that may be self-nurturing for you. Self-nurturing activities should help you achieve a state of calmness. Possible activities not already discussed include cooking, singing, playing a musical instrument, gardening, puzzles, textile crafts like knitting or crocheting, fishing, bird-watching, or building with Lego bricks. The specific activity that you choose for self-nurturing isn’t as important as the fact of choosing to regularly spend time in an activity that you enjoy and that brings you a sense of calm.

Beat Burnout

Module 3: Shift Your Thinking

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Module 3: Shift Your Thinking

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## How Do Your Thoughts Impact Burnout?

Stress will probably always be a part of your life. It doesn’t always have to lead to burnout though. You may be better able to cope with stress by changing the way that you think about stress or the way that you approach the world. Here are some things to keep in mind.

## Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the set of beliefs that a person holds about their ability to stay in control when things become challenging or difficult (Bandura, 1997). People with high self-efficacy feel optimistic about their ability to deal with challenges or demands that may come their way. They feel that their actions can affect things or change things for the better. People with a high sense of self-efficacy feel that they have some control over their environments, even when those environments exert challenging demands. A workplace that is downsizing staff is one such challenging environment. Higher levels of self-efficacy predicted better outcomes in all three measures of burnout among nurses working in a hospital that was downsizing staff. The nurses with high self-efficacy showed lower levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism, and higher levels of professional efficacy (Greenglass & Burke, 2000).

In the context of work, self-efficacy is the confidence that you can use your skills to deal with job-specific tasks and cope with job-specific challenges. Feelings of self-efficacy in the workplace can be increased by learning self-management strategies such as goal-setting, finding meaning in your work, or job crafting. People can also be taught to process information in adaptive ways by, for example, avoiding excessive negativity (Unsworth & Mason, 2012).

Self-efficacy may be a resource that people can use to protect against some of the negative consequences of stress. More specifically, having high levels of self-efficacy is protective against job burnout (Shoji et al., 2016). When you feel that your actions can influence your environment, you may feel more empowered to act in ways that may decrease your stress burden and reduce your feelings of burnout.

## Module 3 Exercise 1

You may be able to increase your sense of self-efficacy by increasing your feelings of mastery (Bandura et al., 1977). Taking on small, easy projects that you know you can accomplish can increase your sense of mastery and increase your feelings of self-efficacy. Think about a part of your life where you feel stressed and feel that you don’t have any control over outcomes. Possibilities include work, your home life, or your caretaking responsibilities. Next, spend a little time brainstorming small things within that part of your life that you can accomplish in less than a day. At work, you may be able to clean out and organize your desk, locker, or workspace. Within your role as a caregiver, you may be able to create a daily or weekly chart listing your responsibilities and times when you can do them. At school, you may be able to write an outline for one paper. Think about a small project that you can start and finish within a few hours. Write down a few possibilities and then dedicate time to working on that one goal. Make sure that you leave plenty of time for accomplishing your goal. Try to dedicate more time than you think you’ll need and try to pick a time when you’re less likely to encounter unexpected distractions. Remember that the main reason you’re doing this is to increase your sense of self-efficacy, and not to get that one thing off of your to-do list. You want to feel that you have the power to create change and that you can effectively deal with challenges that come your way. You will not be able to accomplish this by setting yourself an ambitious goal that you fail to meet.

## Perfectionism

People who are perfectionists are more likely to experience burnout. Perfectionists tend to be overly concerned with making mistakes and with how others perceive them (Garratt-Reed et al., 2018). Perfectionists may perseverate on their mistakes and imperfections. They may spend a lot of time and energy completing largely inconsequential tasks. They may go to great lengths to hide their mistakes or perceived imperfections from others.

Demanding perfection from yourself and others creates unrealistic expectations that are impossible to meet in the real world. If you are constantly pursuing perfection you may find it impossible to ever be satisfied with anything you accomplish.

It can be incredibly difficult to overcome perfectionism. Perfectionists can feel very attached to the perfectionist identity. Perfectionists often confuse their perfectionism for striving, ambition, and the desire for self-improvement. However, there is a difference between perfectionism and healthy ambition. Perfectionism is often motivated by the desire to avoid negative evaluations by other people, rather than a desire to achieve and grow. You may feel that if you reveal any mistakes or imperfections you will be blamed, judged, and made to feel ashamed. Overcoming perfectionism may require you to let go of this fear, accept that you may be judged by other people, and truly believe that your self-worth and value are not diminished by negative perceptions other people may have of you. Once you can make choices and live your life pursuing goals for yourself and not because you want to avoid negative evaluations from other people, you may feel more comfortable with imperfection and less overwhelmed by impossible standards.

## Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to switch tactics, rules, concepts, or mental processes as the situation demands it. Cognitively flexible people can evaluate when the approach that they are using isn't effective and can change course. In contrast, cognitively rigid people tend to continue to use the same, habitual response patterns regardless of whether these response patterns are effective. Research has found that cognitive flexibility is reduced after exposure to stress (Laredo et al., 2015; Plessow et al., 2012). Moreover, animal studies have found that chronic and long-term exposure to stress has particularly damaging effects on cognitive flexibility (Hurtubise & Howland, 2017). When stressed you may find yourself increasingly rigid, blindly following old behavior patterns, and unable to explore new and potentially more effective solutions.

## Module 3 Exercise 2

Think about a stressful situation that you are currently facing or that you have faced in the past. Write down some of the things that you did in trying to overcome this challenge. Now, imagine how someone else may have confronted this situation. You can pick people that you know, famous people, or even fictional characters. Try to pick someone different from you or that tends to do things differently than you do. For example, if you are quiet and cautious, think about how a gregarious and impulsive person might approach your problem. Write down the solutions that they might use, even if they aren’t things that you would consider doing or if they are completely absurd.

For example, if you are struggling with a demanding boss who piles on too much work, and you have been absorbing the work, working late nights for weeks on end, hoping that your boss will notice how hard you’re working and will reduce your workload, you are being rigid in your thinking, continuing with the same behavior patterns despite them not working for you. How might pop star Rihanna approach this situation? She might advocate for herself, look for a new job, or delegate some of the tasks to coworkers or employees. How might Dory from the Pixar film Finding Nemo approach this? She might be willing to be vulnerable and ask for help. Imagining how someone else might approach your problem can help you get out of your rigid behavior patterns and adopt new strategies for confronting the situation.

## Stress Mindset

Your stress mindset is the set of beliefs that you hold about stress and how you think about the effect that stress has on you. It is the framework that helps you select, organize, and interpret information about stress. Mindsets can be very powerful in shaping how you make sense of the world. For example, if your mindset about aging centers on wisdom and respect, you will probably interpret signs of your advancing age differently than someone with a mindset of aging as deterioration.

Stress can be harmful, helpful, or both. Your stress mindset informs which of the numerous helpful and harmful effects of stress you tend to focus on. People who hold a “Stress is enhancing” mindset tend to focus on the beneficial effects of stress. They may view stress as invigorating or motivating. In contrast, people who hold a “Stress is debilitating” mindset tend to focus on the damaging effects of stress. They may view stress as harmful to health, psychological well-being, learning, and growth (Crum et al., 2014).

Your stress mindset can impact your perceived health and your life satisfaction. Compared to people with a “stress is debilitating” mindset, people with a “stress is enhancing” mindset have more adaptive physiological responses to stress, are more likely to approach the source of their stress, and are more likely to try problem-solving strategies (Crum et al., 2017). People with a “stress is enhancing” mindset also tend to be more receptive to feedback. People with “stress is debilitating” mindsets report lower levels of health and life satisfaction compared to people with “stress is enhancing” mindsets.

You may be able to change your stress mindset (Crum et al., 2014). People who watched short videos about the enhancing effects of stress showed more adaptive physiological responses to stress and reported more positive emotions after being exposed to stress, compared to people who watched videos about the damaging effects of stress. Having a “stress is enhancing” mindset may not make stressful situations any less stressful, negative, or threatening. Rather, a “stress is enhancing” mindset may help you better adapt to the stress by recruiting and magnifying your cognitive, emotional, and physiological resources.

## Module 3 Exercise 3

Learning about some of the beneficial effects of stress may help you adopt a “stress is enhancing” mindset. Read the following beneficial effects of stress and then spend some time thinking about some ways that stress may help you in your current situation.

* The body’s stress response works to improve physiological and mental functioning to meet survival demands (Sapolsky, 1996). Stress can help you be your best self!
* Stress can improve your focus, help you think more clearly, and can boost your memory (Sapolsky, 1996). Stress makes you smarter!
* Stress increases levels of hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine throughout your body, giving your brain and body more blood, sugar, and oxygen. This gives you more energy, increased alertness, and narrowed focus. This can help you rise to the challenge. Stress is energizing and invigorating!
* Stress can increase your motivation and initiative. This may drive you to find solutions to difficult problems (Fay & Sonnentag, 2002). Stress gets you going!
* Stress can release hormones that rebuild cells, synthesize proteins and enhance immunity. This may make your body stronger and healthier than it was before the stressful experience (Epel et al., 1998). Vaccinations, where your body is stressed to improve immunity, and exercise, where your muscles are stressed and broken down and then rebuilt stronger, are two examples of physiologically beneficial effects of stress. Stress makes you stronger!
* Stressful experiences can fundamentally change some people for the better. You may be able to learn and grow because of the stress. Stress can enhance mental toughness and can sharpen or broaden your awareness of the world. Stress can give you new perspectives, a sense of mastery, strengthened priorities, deeper relationships, a greater appreciation for what you have, and an increased sense of meaning. Some philosophers and psychologists even suggest that truly transformative change cannot occur without some form of stress or crisis (Holahan et al., 1996). Stress makes you a better, wiser, more resilient person!

## Becoming Mindful of How You Respond to Stress

Becoming more mindful of your stress mindset may help you learn to change unhelpful response patterns. The opposite of mindfulness is mindlessness – acting, thinking, feeling, and reacting in an unconscious, automatic way. Mindlessness may have served you well in the past. It may have allowed you to conserve mental and emotional resources by doing whatever worked in the past. But, mindlessness also has downsides. Being chained to a single perspective and acting out of habit without regard to context, or acting without considering alternatives, often leads to ineffective solutions (Williams, 2008).

When you are mindful, you fully and completely experience the present moment. You are aware of your internal state as well as the state of the environment around you. You are also aware of how your internal state changes in response to your environment. When you are mindful, you aren’t as bound to habitual response patterns. You can more effectively evaluate the situation and select the most appropriate response.

## Module 3 Exercise 4

You may be able to become more mindful of how you approach problems or difficult situations. The first step is acknowledging your experience of stress. Take note of the stress in your life as well as your emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses without judgment and without trying to change anything. Close your eyes and think back to a time when you were stressed. How did your body feel? What was going through your mind? Were you hyper-focused on the source of your stress? Did you avoid thinking about the source of your stress? What were you thinking? What did you do in response to the stress? Did you yell at people close to you? Did you overeat? Did you bite your nails? Did you make extensive checklists? Did you procrastinate?

As you review your responses to stress, be careful not to judge yourself or be too hard on yourself. Similarly, don’t try to justify your actions. You are merely trying to become aware of what you do. You aren’t trying to fix anything and you don’t need to explain or defend any of your actions. By becoming aware of your reactions to stress, in the absence of any cognitive interpretation, you may find it easier to see unhelpful response patterns. By acknowledging your stress, your brain moves away from automatic, reactive processing to more conscious, deliberate processing (Crum et al., 2014).

Once you have acknowledged your stress, you can now be more proactive: actively welcome your stress. When you welcome your stress, it becomes less menacing. Trying to avoid stress may lead to unwanted thoughts that interfere with problem-solving or may lead to cognitive distortions. Avoiding stress can lead to maladaptive behaviors like procrastination, avoidance, or affirmation-seeking. Welcoming stress can reduce anxiety, improve health, and increase your sense of control.

## Center Your Values

People generally only feel stressed when there is something on the line that they care about. If you feel stressed about work it’s probably because you care about your career or the financial well-being of your family. If you feel stressed about housework it’s probably because you care about having a clean and comfortable home. If you feel stressed about caretaking responsibilities it’s probably because you love and care for someone. Turning your focus to the things that you care about may help you reframe your stress as a signal or sign of who or what you care about, your ambitions, or your values. Once you have clarified what matters to you and why you do the things that you do, you may feel a renewed passion to invest your resources fully into achieving your goals. You may also realize that some of your stress doesn’t serve anything meaningful. You may be able to eliminate goals, responsibilities, or tasks that aren’t closely aligned to your desires, conserving physical, mental, and emotional resources for the things that you do care about.

Once you have acknowledged and then welcomed your stress, you are now ready to view your stress not as an impediment to your goals, but as a resource for achieving them. You can arrive at a place where you see your stress response as an asset, as something that increases your energy and your focus. You can then use this increased energy and focus to serve your goals, values, passions, and desires. Moreover, once you view stress as beneficial, you may be able to stop stressing about stress. You may be able to more effectively direct your actions into productive work. You may even be able to identify opportunities in stressful situations. Can you use this situation to build or strengthen social connections? Can you learn new skills? Can you grow or learn from this situation? You may find that difficult, stressful times lead to personal and spiritual growth.

Understanding the potential beneficial or enhancing effects of stress doesn’t mean that you ignore the negative effects of stress. You can acknowledge that stress has both beneficial and debilitating effects and that the effects of stress are not uniform and are unique to each situation and context. You may be able to harness the beneficial effects of stress while minimizing the damaging effects. Using your stress response to your advantage, rather than fighting against the stress response, is inherently mindful.

Ultimately, a mindful approach to stress means that you are consciously aware of the stress in your life. You use your conscious awareness to act deliberately to support your values or the people and things that you care about. Acting mindfully can mean any number of actions. It might mean choosing to persevere through a stressful situation. It might mean choosing to get away from the stress. It might mean choosing to completely abandon a goal, or it might mean reframing your actions. Any of these responses may be appropriate. A mindful approach to stress doesn’t prescribe any particular course of action but instead encourages you to get out of habitual response patterns and recognize and then respond thoughtfully to your stress.

For example, imagine a business owner confronting the fourth straight quarter of unprofitability. This business owner may choose to respond by persevering in the business, transitioning to a different business model, shutting down the business, or coming to view this business as a way to acquire skills and connections necessary for a future business. Any one of these decisions may be the correct one. They all require the business owner to confront the stress and evaluate what is important and valuable. Taking a mindful approach to your stress may help you respond adaptively and in ways that are consistent with your values and the things that you care about.

Beat Burnout

Module 4: Learn How To Manage Your Time

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Module 4: Learn How To Manage Your Time

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## Time Management Strategies

Dealing with the stress in your life may require you to intentionally and proactively manage your time. Some tips that may help you more effectively use your time include:

### Get more sleep

Many people don’t get enough sleep. Physicians recommend that adults between the ages of 18 and 65 get between seven and nine hours of sleep per night. However, nearly half of Americans only get between five and six hours of sleep per night (Jones, 2013). Sleep numbers for the rest of the world are not much different.

Insufficient sleep is itself a stressor. Insufficient sleep has many of the same effects on the brain and body that stress has (McEwen, 2006). People who don’t get enough sleep show many of the same physiological effects as people who are overstressed. Inadequate sleep and overexposure to stress may exacerbate your feelings of burnout. Insufficient sleep may deplete the cognitive resources that you need to deal with stress in your life. Making sure that you get between seven and nine hours of sleep every night will be crucial in ensuring that you can effectively deal with stress.

### Prioritize your responsibilities

Effective time management may require you to triage expectations on your time. Consider how urgently each task needs to be completed as well as how important the task is. Note that a task can have high urgency but low importance or vice versa. For example, if you are leaving for an overseas vacation in one month, researching restaurants in the area where you will be staying and securing your passport both have the same urgency. Securing your passport probably has much higher importance, however. By assigning all of your tasks with urgency and importance levels you can determine where you should focus your energy. Doing this also means that the most urgent, most important tasks will be done first and that any tasks that you don’t get to will be less urgent and important.

### Don’t multitask

The human brain cannot effectively process two distinct thoughts simultaneously. This implies that multitasking may be impossible. Research has found that when people think they are multitasking, performing two or more activities at the same time, they are actually alternating between the activities (Pashler, 1994). While you may be trying to help your child with her homework while you simultaneously finish up your own work, you are actually constantly switching between the two activities. There are inherent limits to the processing capacity of the human brain. As you switch from one task to the next, part of your attention lags and remains on the previous activity (Leroy, 2009). People do better at mental tasks when approaching them singly and sequentially. Decide which activity you will deal with first and then focus completely on that activity before moving on to the next activity.

For large tasks with multiple components, you may find it helpful to divide the task or job into phases. Try to finish each phase or task before starting on the next phase. Approaching projects in this way may help you conserve your cognitive resources. Not using your mental resources to switch between subtasks may mean that more of your mental capacity is left to performing the task itself. If possible, try to break down the task into phases or subtasks that can be completed within a single sitting. Doing this allows you to further conserve your cognitive resources. When you get back to the project you will be able to start at a distinct phase and not have to expend mental energy trying to remember where you left off.

### Manage expectations

Focusing on a single activity at a time may be difficult if you have work that you need to accomplish while also remaining available to offer support, advice, assistance, or guidance to others. You may plan to dedicate the morning to your own project but then become continually sidelined as other projects come in. Getting back to your own project may then require you to expend mental energy on attentional switching. If this is your situation you may need to manage the expectations that other people have of you, your availability, and how you will manage and control your own time. You may need to establish clear times when you will be unavailable. This may require that you renegotiate obligations and assignments with your employer. Expectation management can also be done within the home. You may need to make it clear that for the block of time that you have dedicated to exercising, learning a second language, managing household finances, or organizing the garage, you are unavailable to help with homework, planning the shopping list, or locating lost items.

## Focus Your Efforts on What’s Most Important

Spending time doing things that are important or meaningful may help you stave off burnout. People working in the medical field have some of the highest rates of burnout. A robust body of research exists exploring factors that may encourage or discourage burnout amongst people working in medical fields. A 2009 study found that doctors who were able to spend a significant amount of time working on the part of the job that was most meaningful to them were less likely to show symptoms of burnout. The particular task that brought them meaning varied across individual doctors. Some doctors found meaning in caring for patients, others in conducting research or in teaching students. Some doctors even reported that administrative tasks were most meaningful to them. The specific task that the doctor found most meaningful didn’t impact burnout, only whether that doctor was able to spend a significant portion of time on that part of the job (Shanafelt et al., 2009). Twenty percent seems to be an important cutoff - Physicians who spent at least twenty percent of their time on meaningful work had a rate of burnout roughly half that of doctors who spent less than twenty percent of their effort on meaningful work.

## Module 4 Exercise 1

Think about what is most meaningful to you in the part of the day where you spend the most time. At work, think about what part of your work brings you the most meaning. You may get meaning from providing a valuable product or service to your clients or community. You may get meaning from creating something beautiful, elegant, useful, or interesting. You may get meaning from solving interesting and difficult problems. You may derive meaning from your relationships with your coworkers or employees. You may get meaning from organizing and creating order from chaos. Think about every aspect of your work and which parts of it make you feel most satisfied and proud. What do you feel excited to tell your partner or friends about at the end of the day? There are no wrong answers. The task or part of your work that brings you meaning may differ from the aspect of work that brings your coworker meaning.

You can also think about what is most meaningful to you about your housekeeping or caregiving responsibilities. Do you derive meaning from providing your loved ones with nutritious and tasty meals, from providing your children with enriching and entertaining activities, from providing a clean and comfortable home, or from creating an emotionally available safe space? Once again, there are no wrong answers. Every person will derive meaning from different activities.

Once you have identified the tasks that bring you meaning, think about how much of your time is spent on that meaningful activity, versus all of the other activities that you need to spend time on. Being able to spend at least twenty percent of your time on the activities that bring you the most meaning may help you keep feelings of burnout at bay.

## Create Greater Meaning With a Community of People

Despite all your efforts to rethink your stress, focus on meaning, and work on projects that you feel passionate about, you may still find yourself feeling burned out if you feel that all of your efforts aren’t making a difference in the things that you care about. People working in the caring professions like nurses, social workers, and teachers may be particularly susceptible to burnout because they can start to feel that their efforts to help people are ineffective in the face of larger societal forces. Poverty and discrimination can have devastating effects on vulnerable people. People who dedicate their lives to helping vulnerable people can easily become burned out if they feel ineffective and powerless in the face of larger societal forces. A teacher, no matter how talented and dedicated he may be, will have limited influence on a child living through poverty, neglect, and abuse. This sense of powerlessness can contribute to burnout.

Activist and community organizer Grace Lee Boggs has said “Building community is to the collective as spiritual practice is to the individual”. When you feel ineffective in your pursuit of goals that are important to you, you may find it helpful to engage in collective action. Acting as an individual may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Acting as part of a collective, joined in a common cause, may help to counteract many of these feelings. Activism and collective action may also counteract feelings of powerlessness. The teacher struggling with powerlessness in the face of childhood poverty may be able to address some of these feelings by joining a group advocating for increased financial assistance to low-income families. A doctor dismayed by the number of patients presenting with advanced stage disease that may have been treated if detected earlier may find meaning in advocating for more inclusive, comprehensive health coverage. A social worker upset by criminal recidivism may join a group advocating for better rehabilitation programs. Collective action advocacy to address the social determinants of poor outcomes can increase morale and can stave off feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy, and burnout (Eisenstein, 2018).

## Create a Personal Mission Statement

The challenge for most people isn’t figuring out the principles, values, or ethics that are most important to them. The challenge is staying loyal to those values in the face of setbacks, roadblocks, and competing requirements. You may know that you value quality time with your family and that it’s important to you that you regularly have family dinners together. However, your job may often require you to work past dinner time. Having a personal mission statement can help remind you of what you value most. A personal mission statement can help you resolve the various ethical dilemmas and choices that you face every day (Marci, 2015).

The process of writing a personal mission statement helps you identify your core values and beliefs. It is an opportunity to write a synopsis of who you are and what you want to do. It allows you to define what success means to you. The process of writing a personal mission statement takes time, introspection, and self-awareness. Having a personal mission statement to refer to will make it harder to stray away from your core values. Once you have completed the mission statement, keep it close by and refer to it regularly.

Your personal mission statement will become the criterion by which you measure everything else in your life. Your mission statement can help you measure how you are living up to your standards and values. This may help you when you are suffering from burnout. Referring to your personal mission statement may help you identify things that are adding to your stress or to your workload but that don’t contribute to your values, passions, goals, and dreams. You may be taking on a lot of responsibility at work but then realize that this career isn’t something that you care about.

## Module 4 Exercise 2

Craft a personal mission statement. One way to create a personal mission plan is to use the INSPIRE method (Adapted from Li et al, 2017).

* **Identify your core values** – What are the values that underlie your decisions, guide your actions, and influence how you view success? This requires reflection and introspection. Be truthful and authentic. To help identify your core values, write down your proudest moments – what is the common thread that links these accomplishments? For example, you may be proud of overcoming an addiction, having a good relationship with your partner, and getting a promotion at work. What do these moments, and the fact that they make you proud, say about you? The proud moments listed may imply that you value stability, hard work, integrity, and honesty. Alternatively, if you’re proudest of your vegetable garden, your thriving side-hustle, and your high level of physical fitness your values may include creativity, innovation, growth, and independence. Think about your role models. What characteristics do you admire in them? Narrow your core values to between three and five. Your core values define what you believe in and are the lens through which you view the world. Examples of core values include innovation, community, balance, diversity, inspiration, collaboration, integrity, competency, fairness, dedication, hard work, and respect.
* **Name the people, projects, or goals that are important to you** – Who or what are you willing to work for? These can be people like your family, friends, or people that you work with. These can also be goals like protecting the environment, creating art, or starting a business.
* **Set your vision** – Think big. Begin with the end in mind. What is your vision for a better world? What is the change that you want to make in the world? Visualize yourself celebrating at your retirement party. What did you accomplish? Your vision is what the world will look like after you have accomplished your goals. For example, if independence and entrepreneurship are among your core values, you may decide that founding a business that goes on to dominate the market is your vision of success.
* **Plan how you will achieve your vision** – This is the essence of the mission statement. What is the goal that you need to accomplish to achieve your vision? What are some of the challenges you need to overcome and how do you turn those challenges into achievements? Break your big goal down into smaller goals and plan how you will achieve one goal at a time. Establish a path that will allow you to achieve those goals. The initial goals set by someone with a vision to start a successful business may include securing start-up capital, manufacturing a product, and generating sales.
* **Identify activities that align with your mission** – Use your mission statement to help define the ways that you will allocate your time and energy. Remember that spending at least twenty percent of your work time in activities that you find meaningful will help you stave off burnout. Sort through your current activities and opportunities to determine how well each activity aligns with your mission or can provide you with skills, experiences, or connections you can use to achieve your goals. Give yourself permission to say no to opportunities that do not align with your mission so that you have room to actively seek out opportunities that do align.
* **Review, revise and refine your mission statement** – Developing a mission statement is an iterative process. Mission statements need to be continually reviewed and revised on the basis of your current passions and refined so that they can be easily remembered and acted upon. Revisit your mission statement at least once a year. At a minimum, revisit when you have had a role change or change in passions or goals. Continue to revise until it is simple to understand and remember, resonates with you, and can inspire you daily.
* **Enlist others to help you accomplish your mission** – Share your mission with others. Seek out mentors that can help you reflect on your mission and how well your current activities align with your mission. Find people that can help you strategize how to achieve your goals.

## Include Relaxing and Fun in Your Planning

Burnout is caused by chronic and long-lasting overactivation of the body’s stress response systems, leading to persistent dysregulation and an inability to return to normal functioning. Making sure that you schedule time for rest, relaxation and fun may allow your body’s stress response systems to return to normal levels and may help prevent or even reverse burnout.

How you spend your leisure time influences recovery from stress and burnout. Absorbing leisure activities like exercise, creative hobbies, and social activities, are better than passive activities like watching TV or scrolling on social media. Activities as diverse as jogging, gardening, painting, or playing board games all help your body recover from stress. These activities are mentally, physically, or socially engaging and may prevent the development of symptoms of burnout (Toker and Melamed, 2017).

You should choose a leisure activity that you enjoy and that provides you with relaxation, mastery, and a sense of control, and that helps you mentally disengage from work.

## Module 4 Exercise 3

Identify leisure activities. It might seem that completely disengaging, as you might do while watching TV, is the most relaxing thing that you can do. However, passive activities don’t help you recover from burnout as effectively as more active leisure activities. Being mentally involved in something other than your stressor can help turn your attention away from the stress, allowing you to disengage more completely from the stress.

It can be difficult to get motivated to spend your limited downtime being active when you are already feeling tired and overworked. Try to identify some active leisure activities that you may be able to do every day. If you feel overwhelmed, start very small and easy. For example, commit to walking to the end of your block, coloring in an adult coloring book for ten minutes, or calling a friend on the phone every day. Write down an achievable goal for yourself and commit to engaging in your leisure activity every day. Create a weekly calendar or checklist where you can mark that you have completed your daily leisure activity.

## Weekends and Vacations

You should make time for fun and relaxation regularly, scheduling daily, weekly, and yearly breaks for yourself. Ideally, you will be able to spend some time every day in active leisure, spend a little more time on leisure during your weekends, and be able to go on at least one annual vacation and experience even more extended leisure time.

Weekends are especially beneficial and what you do with your weekends impacts how effective they will be at reducing your stress burden. If your weekends are full of nonwork hassles like housework, family or partner conflict, and other problems of daily life, burnout will be more likely. Moreover, working on the weekends also contributes to burnout (Fritz & Sonnetag, 2005). Preventing and reversing burnout requires that you take time away from work and other responsibilities to engage in activities that you do purely for enjoyment. Insufficient social activity during weekends also predicts low recovery from burnout. Spending time with other people can be a way to recover from work demands. Weekends may give people time to strengthen their social networks and to draw support from those networks.

The physical and mental separation from your job that occurs when you go on vacation can halt the stress response cycle (Westman & Eden,1997). Vacations need to be satisfying to have stress-reducing effects. Vacations that include experiences of relaxation and detachment from work positively influence health and well-being. If you have to work while on vacation, or if you have to engage in demanding caretaking responsibilities while on vacation, the positive effects on health and well-being will be diminished or even reversed. When planning a vacation, it can be tempting to pack in as many activities and excursions as possible. However, this may result in a vacation where you are putting in significant work organizing transportation, finding directions, and managing time. These activities may keep your body’s stress response systems active throughout and may not give your physiological stress response systems the chance to recover.

Beat Burnout

Module 5: Take Better Care of Yourself

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Module 5: Take Better Care of Yourself

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## How Positive Social Relationships Impact Burnout

Having someone that you can talk to, who listens to you, and who provides you with social support can protect you from burnout (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Your social support can come from family, friends, colleagues, supervisors, therapists, clergy, or anyone else that you feel comfortable talking to and who listens to you. You don’t need to have an extensive social network to reap the benefits of social support. What’s important is that you feel supported by the people around you; The number of people around you matters far less (Pines et al., 2002).

Spending time with a network of people who you feel safe with and who help you feel supported may protect you from many of the harmful effects of stress (Pines, 1983). You may be better able to let your guard down and your physiological stress response systems may have a chance to get back to normal levels when you are in the presence of people around whom you feel safe, protected, and supported. This is particularly important in times of prolonged stress when your physiological stress response systems may be working on overdrive for extended periods.

Burnout is more likely to develop when your body is constantly releasing high levels of adrenaline, cortisol, and other stress hormones without breaks. Being around people that you trust and that you feel comfortable with can decrease the presence of these stress hormones in your body, even in times of stress (Kirschbaum et., 1995). Giving yourself periodic breaks from having to be on high alert and responsive may help to conserve your cognitive, physical, and emotional resources and may protect you from developing many of the negative health effects of stress.

Social support from coworkers and supervisors can be extremely helpful in staving off burnout in the workplace (Greenglass et al., 1998). Coworkers and supervisors can provide important information and practical support in times of stress. Organizational support is also important. Feeling supported by your employer or by the organization at large can protect against burnout, even within highly stressful workplaces. People who feel that they can trust their organization, that they’re not in danger of being let go, and that they can rely on the organization to provide the resources they need are less likely to succumb to burnout (Himle et al, 1991).

## Forms of Social Support

Social support can come in many different forms, all of which can contribute to protecting you from burnout (Heaney & Israel 2008):

* **Emotional support** – Empathy, love, trust, and caring. This is the support that lets you feel safe and that you can let your guard down. The person who listens nonjudgmentally as you vent about work is providing you with emotional support.
* **Instrumental support** – Tangible items and services to help you accomplish things. The person who brings you dinner when you’re overworked or who gives you a ride when the bus is late is giving you instrumental support.
* **Informational support** – Advice, suggestions, and information that you can use to solve your problems. The coworker who tells you about an easier way to do something, or the guidance counselor telling you how to fill out your college applications is giving you informational support.
* **Appraisal support** – Information that helps you evaluate and improve your own performance. Constructive feedback and affirmation qualify as appraisal support. A performance review from a sensitive and empathetic supervisor that outlines your strengths and offers suggestions for further growth may serve as appraisal support.

Often, the same relationship can provide you with more than one of these forms of support. Your partner may listen to you talk about your hectic workday while making you dinner and then respond with advice and affirmation that you are on the right track. Importantly, most relationships, with notable exceptions including the relationship that parents have with their minor children and the relationship that mentors have with their mentees, require that both parties give as well as receive support as needed. Your best friend may bring you dinner and listen to you talk about your demanding boss when you are in a time of high stress, but if you don’t reciprocate when your friend is experiencing high levels of stress, you may find that this friendship weakens over time and that you lose this friend as a source of support.

## Module 5 Exercise 1

Think about which of the above forms of social support are present in your life and which are absent. Do you have people that give you unconditional love, that you trust and that you know care deeply for you? Do you have people that can help you in tangible, concrete ways when you need it? Do you have people that can give you helpful advice or can point you towards sources of useful information when you need it? Do you have people who will be honest, yet caring, with you about how you may be able to improve?

For each of the above types of emotional support, name at least one person who you can go to for that type of support. Write down what their support has looked like or what you imagine it might look like. You can have the same person or you can have different people providing you with each type of support. Having a clear idea of who you can turn to for which type of support can be extremely helpful when you are living through a period of high stress and need support.

If you find that your life is lacking in one or more types of support, you may want to seek out that support preferentially. For example, if you are lacking in appraisal support, you may want to seek out a mentor. If you are lacking in emotional support, you may want to put effort into strengthening your relationships with friends or family. If you are lacking in informational support, you may want to seek closer bonds with coworkers. Knowing the specific type of support that you need in your life can help you seek out that specific type of support. Importantly, most relationships require the reciprocation of support. If you feel that your life is lacking a particular type of support, be prepared to give that type of support.

## Setting Limits

William Ury, coauthor of the influential negotiation book “Getting to Yes” recognizes the value of “no”. Selectively saying no to some of the requests for your time and energy can help you define what you want to focus on and can help you concentrate your limited cognitive, emotional, and energetic resources on the things that you value most. As Ury puts it, every important yes may require a thousand no’s (Ury, 2016). Many people find it difficult to say no, especially if the person that they need to say no to is a valued connection. People thus may find themselves saying yes to almost every request on their time and energy and become overburdened and burned out.

One way to say no in a way that may help to preserve a social bond may be to use what Ury calls a “positive no”. When you use a positive no, you hold firm on your boundary, while still recognizing the needs of the other person. You remain clear on what you are unwilling to do while being open to contributing to solving the problem in a way that the other party will find acceptable. For example, if you are asked to work over a holiday. Say no, I will not be working over that holiday. But here is my proposal for getting the necessary work done while I spend the holiday with my family.

In the positive no technique, the no is sandwiched between two yeses. The first yes makes it clear what your needs and values are. The no asserts your power and the second yes reconfirms and strengthens your relationship. The key to using the positive no technique is respect, for yourself and for the other person (Ury, 2016).

## Module 5 Exercise 2

List out some of the demands on your time and practice the positive no technique for each. Try this for as many of the demands on your time and energy as possible, even on the demands that you intend to do. Practicing the Yes-No-Yes technique in a variety of situations may help you in situations where you need it.

How will you sandwich the no in between two yeses in a way that will allow you to say no to the request while maintaining your social bonds?

For example, if you are asked to buy Christmas presents for your partner’s family.

* **First Yes** – Expresses your needs and values: “I am very busy right now preparing for the holiday.”
* **No** – Asserts your power and your boundaries: “I won’t be able to shop for your family this year.”
* **Second Yes** – Reconfirms your bond with the person and offers another type of support: “I can help you by giving you the shopping list that I used last year”

## Develop More Loving Bonds

In her 2010 book “The Gifts of Imperfection”, author and researcher Brene Brown identifies vulnerability as the root of deep connection (Brown, 2010). In order to feel truly safe and connected to someone in a deep and authentic way, people need to feel that they can be their complete and imperfect selves. True connection comes from feeling that you can be totally exposed and still be loved, accepted, and valued for who you are.

Creating relationships that allow you to feel vulnerable takes compassion and acceptance. Acceptance of yourself and your own flaws along with the imperfections, flaws, and mistakes of the other person. Your deepest relationships, where you can be your imperfect, vulnerable self without fear of rejection or humiliation will be reciprocal relationships between equals. You listen to the other person and accept them as imperfect rather than trying to fix them or solve their problems for them. You stand with them as equals as they work through their problems.

Cultivating deep bonds requires that you see people as they truly are and listen to them without judgment and without any agenda other than wanting to hear them and support them. Listening, being present, and not having any other agenda can be much more difficult than it seems. When someone is being vulnerable with you and looking to connect, it can be easy to respond in ways that make people feel unsafe being imperfect. We are all guilty of these at times. Here are some examples:

* Expressing shame on behalf of the other person. You may react in ways that confirm their worst fears. You may become so overcome with emotion that the other person has to work to make you feel better. “Oh my gosh! How embarrassing!” or “That’s so terrible!”
* Expressing pity rather than empathy and connection. “I’m so sorry for you” “You poor thing”
* Reacting with disappointment or implying that you feel let down. “How could you do something like that?” “I never would have expected you to do something like that”
* Reprimanding or looking for someone to blame. “What were you thinking” or “She’s the worst. I’ll get revenge for you.”
* Being dismissive, trying to reassure or comfort without acknowledging the situation or the role that everyone had a part in. Giving someone space to be vulnerable means allowing them to be imperfect and to take ownership of their faults. “You must be exaggerating” “It couldn’t have been that bad” “He must have done something to provoke you” “I know that you would never do something like that on purpose”
* One-upping or trying to make everything about you. You may do this in an attempt to connect or find common ground but it often comes across as dismissive. “That sounds just like what happened to me” “If you think that’s bad…”

## Module 5 Exercise 3

For the preceding list of ways that people respond in ways that reinforce negative feelings and can make other people feel unsafe being vulnerable, note down which ones you may be guilty of. Try to remember times when someone was opening up to you and being vulnerable and you responded in one of the ways above. This may be very difficult. Owning up to times when you may have been unsupportive may make you feel ashamed. Every person has done at least one of these in their lives and is probably guilty of having done each of them at one time or another. It can be extremely difficult to be available and non-judgmental when someone is vulnerable. Learning to recognize your own patterns and the ways that you may respond in unhelpful ways may help you develop deeper bonds with people. When you can be vulnerable and imperfect around people and can accept when they are vulnerable and imperfect, you build strong connections that can help you in times of high stress.

When conflict arises, as it inevitably does, a relationship based on acceptance and compassion emphasizes boundaries and accountability over shaming and blaming. For example, rather than shaming a friend who is disrespectful of your time, you can be clear in your boundaries and clearly state the consequences. “If you keep ditching me and ghosting me, I won’t agree to spend time with you anymore”. Compassion and accountability are compatible. You can confront, discipline, challenge or oppose someone without berating or insulting them. The key to this is separating the person from the behavior. You don’t have to hate someone or make them feel bad in order to assert your boundaries and be clear in stating behaviors that you won’t accept.

## Cultivate Acceptance of Yourself

Your value as a person is not dependent on your professional accomplishments, your appearance, your weight, your job, your education, how much money you have, your relationship status, approval from other people, your mental health, your sobriety, or anything else. All human beings, including you, are worthy of love, respect, and belonging. You are enough just as you are, right now. Despite your imperfections and vulnerabilities, you remain worthy of love, belonging, happiness, peace, and contentment.

In fact, your flaws and imperfections are a part of who you are. If you try to distance yourself from the parts of you that are less than perfect, you may find yourself trying to compensate by pushing yourself towards unattainable perfection. This constant search for approval and validation may lead you to take on too many projects, an inability to say no, and eventually to burnout. When you accept that your flaws are a part of your complete self, you may be better able to focus on the things that matter to you and let go of things that don’t matter so much.

Accepting your flaws and imperfections may require you to confront parts of yourself that make you feel afraid and ashamed. For example, you may fear that you are an inadequate parent. This fear may drive you to say yes to every request from the PTA, leaving you feeling overburdened and burned out. In confronting your fear, you accept that you aren’t able to do everything the PTA wants you to do but that you are still a worthy person and a good parent to your child. You can then say no to some of the PTA’s requests knowing that you remain a worthy and valuable person and a loving and attentive parent, even when you aren’t active in the PTA.

## Module 5 Exercise 4

This may be a very difficult exercise, requiring you to confront your vulnerabilities and express personal fear. Please only proceed when you feel emotionally and mentally stable or when there is a trusted and safe person readily available for you to seek comfort in. Look at a part of your life where you feel overburdened and burned out. Brainstorm the reasons why you may be taking on so much in this part of your life. What fears drive your behaviors? What vulnerabilities are you trying to protect yourself from? What shame are you trying to hide? Do you feel like an imposter at work and so take on every project that comes your way? Do you feel unlovable in your relationship and so take on more than your share of the housework? Do you feel inadequate as a son or daughter and so continue to do everything your parents ask of you?

Self-acceptance means gathering the courage to be imperfect. It also means having the courage to say no and set boundaries. Self-acceptance means allowing yourself to be vulnerable. Being vulnerable means opening yourself up to criticism. Letting yourself be publicly imperfect or not conforming to expectations can be very difficult. You may get pushback on your authentic self.

This open acceptance of your own flaws and the abandonment of the ideals of perfection can make some people very uncomfortable. Coming to the realization that you are worthwhile regardless of how much or how little you take on and accomplish can be one of the most difficult things that you will do, but it may also be the thing that sets you free from burnout. Recognizing that you remain a valuable, important, worthwhile, loveable person regardless of how much you take on and regardless of whether you are successful may free you from feeling that you always need to be alert and vigilant.

## Conclusion

You may be able to overcome burnout in any number of ways. Incorporating more relaxation and downtime into your life, saying no to more and taking on less, adopting a new stress mindset, finding safety and comfort in your social support, and accepting your imperfections are just some of the ways to protect against and counteract burnout. While the methods all differ from one another, and you may be more comfortable with some of the suggestions than with others, they all require you to value yourself and your wellbeing. It can be extremely difficult to slow down and to prioritize yourself. Being aware of your own needs and making your needs a priority may help you maintain a well-regulated stress response system and avoid or recover from burnout.

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