



Beating BURNOUT

**How to
Refill Your Tank
When Life Has You
Feeling Empty**

SPECIAL REPORT



VIPIINNOVATIONS, LLC

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Running on Empty - How to Beat Burnout Before it Beats You

Peter Gibbons: The thing is, Bob, it's not that I'm lazy, it's that I just don't care.

Bob Porter: Don't... don't care?

Peter Gibbons: It's a problem of motivation, all right? Now if I work my a** off and Initech ships a few extra units, I don't see another dime, so where's the motivation? And here's something else, Bob: I have eight different bosses right now.

Bob Slydell: I beg your pardon?

Peter Gibbons: Eight bosses.

Bob Slydell: Eight?

Peter Gibbons: Eight, Bob. So that means that when I make a mistake, I have eight different people coming by to tell me about it. That's my only real motivation is not to be hassled, that and the fear of losing my job. But you know, Bob, that will only make someone work just hard enough not to get fired.

From the film 'Office Space' (1999)

The now classic cult-hit film *Office Space* seems to portray a corporate recipe for burnout. It chronicles the bleak life of cubicle cog 'Peter Gibbons', who works at a fictional software engineering firm *Initech*. It depicts his aggravating commute, irritating coworkers, a mindless boss, and a personal life on the verge of disaster. The tagline of the movie is, "Work sucks."

While your job may not 'suck', if you've ever worked in an environment that made you feel more like a corporate zombie than a celebrated talent you may relate to the sense of apathy and desperation that causes the kind of stress that eventually leads to burning out. Let's face it, our work can sometimes leave us feeling stressed and exhausted. The stress can take a toll on you physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. Sometimes that stress can take us to the point where we feel like we're hanging on to a very thin thread and, at any moment, that thread can snap.

When you're experiencing the daily or weekly run-of-the-mill type stress, when the weekend comes you pick your 'recharge remedy' – date night, hanging out with the family, a walk in the woods, a cup of warm tea, a good book – and before you know it you're back to feeling right as rain on Monday morning.

But have you ever experienced long stretches of time when you felt more than merely 'stressed-out'? Times when just getting out of bed can feel like you're being asked to lift twice your weight? Have you struggled with the day-to-day stressors of life to the point where you feel like you just don't care anymore? Perhaps you're experiencing that sense of fatigue, lack of drive, and ineffectiveness right now. Perhaps you're burned out. If so, you're not alone.

"I think that burnout happens because of resentment. That notion that, 'wow, I worked 100 hours last week, and I couldn't even have this thing that I really wanted.'" ~ Marissa Mayer, I.T. Executive and former CEO of Yahoo!

We have a complicated relationship with our jobs and businesses, and that has led to a work-life imbalance skewed in favor of work. You don't have to look far for evidence that people are working longer hours, taking on more responsibilities, skipping holidays and weekends and feeling an overall sense of overwhelm at work. Perhaps the effects of burnout are staring back at you every time you look in the mirror.

A Gallup report conducted in 2013 showed that a mere 13% of employees around the world are enthusiastically invested in their work. In the United States the poll indicated that only 30% of the workforce is engaged with work. That leaves a whopping 70% of employees who are disconnected with the work they do. Let that number sink in for a moment – 70% of employees are stressed, unmotivated, disinterested and basically burned out. Are you one of them?

Despite these staggering statistics, there is little understanding, support, or sympathy for burnout. Sharing our sense of overwhelm, our deepest fears and stress is often met with such platitudes as: *suck it up, that's life, or keep calm and carry on*. But 'sucking it up' only intensifies the feelings of helplessness that arise from prolonged stress. What's worse, ignoring chronic burnout can lead to: anxiety, insomnia (sleep disturbances), helplessness, the inability to concentrate, impaired memory, headaches, neck/back pain, gastrointestinal disorders, immune system dysfunction, and depression.

Think your mind is powerful enough to overcome all that stress? It is. But not over the long-term. It turns out that burnout impairs our brain's ability function. Over time our capacity to process memory, concentrate, and the ability to control our emotions becomes impaired.

If all that wasn't enough burnout also decreases immune function making us more susceptible to viruses that cause the common cold and flu. It increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease (heart attack and stroke), and Type 2 Diabetes. Basically, burnout can kill us!

But there is good news. We can reverse the adverse effects of burnout on both our bodies and our brains. But in order to do that we need to better understand what burnout is and what the warning signs are. We need to determine where we are on the burnout continuum and how to prevent it, or how to overcome it if we're in the middle of it.

The 3 Main Elements of Burnout

*Take this job and shove it
I ain't working here no more
From the song, Take This Job and Shove It, Johnny Paycheck*

Can you think of a time you wanted to tell your boss to 'take this job and shove it'? Who hasn't? What's the source of those feelings?

According to professor of psychology at the University of California and expert on occupational burnout, Christina Maslach, burnout is a syndrome characterized by three elements: exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of personal accomplishment.

Let's take a closer look at these three elements of burnout:

Exhaustion. You know what it feels like to be exhausted – when you're drained and your reserves are completely used up. It's a result of being emotionally, intellectually, and/or physically overextended. Exhaustion makes it difficult to concentrate and it can feel as if your brain is lost in a fog. Do you feel like your 'get up and go' has 'got up and went'?

Cynicism. Have you ever caught yourself believing that people are solely motivated by self-interest? Cynicism can make you feel distant and cause you to withdraw from others. This negatively impacts your relationships and interferes with the ability to get the job done. Are you experiencing a sense of depersonalization and lack of emotions towards work, bosses, colleagues, coworkers, or clients?

Inefficacy. Do you feel as if you don't have the power to produce the results you want? Feeling a sense of low personal accomplishment – which leads to feelings of incompetence - is another indicator of burnout. Inefficacy leads to lower self-esteem and self-confidence. Does it feel like you're constantly spinning your wheels, and you never quite reach the results you're after?

Some other common indicators of burnout include:

- Putting little or no effort into projects, tasks, or relationships.
- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling helpless and lethargic.
- Experiencing long-term emotional and psychological pain.
- Feeling a long-term loss of hope.

Do any of the above descriptions resonate with you? Maybe you've felt that way at some point in your life. Maybe you're feeling it right now. Or perhaps it describes someone you know. If so, it may be worthwhile to look more deeply into the

syndrome known as burnout. With greater insight, finding solutions and taking preventative steps becomes possible.

Causes of Burnout

*“Workin' 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin'
Barely gettin' by, it's all takin' and no givin'
They just use your mind and they never give you credit
It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it
9 to 5, for service and devotion
You would think that I would deserve a fat promotion
Want to move ahead but the boss won't seem to let me
I swear sometimes that man is out to get me!”
(Lyrics from the song, 9 to 5 by Dolly Parton.)*

After surveying more than 10,000 people across a wide range of organizations, Christina Maslach and her associates determined that most workplace burnout fell into one of six areas:

1. Workload – too much work, too few resources.
2. Control – accountability without authority, lack of employee input.
3. Reward - discrepancies/incongruities between effort and financial rewards and/or absence of recognition, acknowledgment, appreciation, or credit.
4. Community – suffering isolation, high conflict work environment, and lack of respect from bosses, coworkers, or customers.
5. Fairness – experiencing inequality, punitive discipline, preferential treatment, and/or discrimination.
6. Values – facing conflict between personal and business values and ethics clashes.

Is it any wonder so many of us feel like we ‘...*want to move ahead but the boss won't seem to let me.*'? Dolly Parton's ditty became a rallying cry of sorts to acknowledge the every day struggles and frustrations employees face. Turns out she may have been on to something.

Since, according to Business Insider, the average person spends somewhere around 90,000 hours of their lives at work, knowing where to find the source of your own workplace burnout makes you better equipped to avert and eventually eliminate it from your life.

Once you know what to look for, and with a little effort, recognizing the signs of burnout and taking measures to avoid it can become second nature. So now that you know what signs to look for from your work environment it's time to get a little more personal and see where you can find the signs of burnout in your life.

Time to dig a little deeper. Take out a pen and a piece of paper and answer the following questions to see where you fit on the burnout continuum.

Reflecting on the past 6 months indicate for each statement with either '*mostly true*' or '*mostly false*':

1. Are you regularly pessimistic and cynical about your work/boss/coworkers/clients?
2. Do you feel like you're always forcing yourself out of bed to get to work?
3. Have you had trouble 'getting into' your work?
4. Do you find yourself frequently irritable and short tempered with your boss/coworkers/clients?
5. Do you feel fatigued most of the time?
6. Are you finding little or no satisfaction in your efforts/achievements?
7. Does work regularly leave you disillusioned?
8. Are you consistently numbing your feelings through self-medication (TV, food, alcohol, other)?
9. Are you experiencing sleep disturbances (insomnia, restless sleep, can't get to sleep) as part of your normal routine?
10. Are you a perfectionist?
11. Are you experiencing chronic physical pains (headaches, neck, back pain, other) for no apparent reason?
12. Do you say 'yes' to requests more than you say 'no'?
13. Do you feel an inability to influence decisions at work?
14. Are your job expectations unclear?
15. Is your work a mismatch for your values?

How many did you mark as '*mostly true*'? How many came up as '*mostly false*' for you? If you scored more '*mostly false*' chances are your stress is under control. If you scored more than a couple as '*mostly true*' it might be time to take pause and ask yourself if burnout is impacting your life and if so, consider if you're ready to do something about it. Whether you scored high or low on the continuum, we're all at risk of suffering from burnout at least once in our lifetime.

Though this quiz is not meant to replace a clinical assessment, it can help inform you where you fall in the burnout risk scale and indicate whether it's time to simply ease off the gas or time to get serious about seeking relief from burnout. So what can we do to avoid or at least minimize its effects on our lives?

How to Avoid Burnout

When exploring ways to avoid burnout, let's first address the unhealthy strategies many of us lean on to cope with the burdens, demands and responsibilities of life. That's right, we're looking at you - *instant gratification*. Immediate gratification offers the promise of a quick fix to help us heal from burnout. You know the drill – retail therapy, self-medicating with food (or caffeine, or sugar, or fat), TV binge watching, or adrenaline-fueled activities, for example.) But those strategies are merely stopgap measures that, over time, actually hurt our chances of recovering from burnout.

“Self-discipline is often disguised as short-term pain, which often leads to long-term gains. The mistake many of us make is the need and want for short-term gains (immediate gratification), which often leads to long-term pain.”

~ Charles F Glassman, *Brain Drain: The Breakthrough That Will Change Your Life*

When you reach the bottom of that carton of Ben and Jerry's do you really feel much better? Of course you do! But those good feelings vanish quickly and can actually contribute to the intensity and duration of burnout rather than alleviating it. Who among us hasn't suffered from 'food regrets' from time to time? But there are healthier ways of dealing with burnout. So if 'accomplishments' like binge watching an entire season of Game of Thrones in a weekend or buying that latest widget you don't need aren't cutting it for you anymore read on.

Burnout won't simply 'run its course'.

Turns out, burnout is like a virus. It's insidious. It's invisible. It can knock you off your feet, often before you even realize what hit you. But unlike a virus, burnout must be proactively treated or it will never go away. Luckily there is a way to 'treat' burnout - a way to eliminate it from your life and get back to feeling more yourself. And the good news is the treatment is simple!

All it takes is a few modest changes in attitude and behavior to help refuel your tank, keep you in the race, and ensure you'll eventually cross the finish line. There is a catch, however: the nature and symptoms of burnout (apathy, fatigue, and hopelessness, for example) can make it challenging to move from inertia to momentum. So, while the solution may be simple, it's not effortless. But the effort you do put into recovery will be worth it in the end - promise!

“Energy and persistence conquer all things.” ~ Benjamin Franklin.

Whether you have a case of full-blown burnout or you suspect you are heading in that direction there are strategies to prevent burnout from taking hold of your life.

Check out the following approaches to help prevent burnout:

Reevaluate your priorities. What do you want out of your life and/or work? What's really important to you? Take stock of the areas in your life causing chronic stress and resolve to eliminate them.

Set boundaries. There are many ways to establish healthy boundaries at home and at work. While there's just no escaping certain demands, other responsibilities are 'optional'. Focus on the non-compulsory duties and resist the urge to say 'yes' by practicing saying 'no'. Another way to setting boundaries is to use a calendar to establish clear lines between work and personal time and make the promise to yourself you'll stick to it.

Scheduled binge. We often fill our days with work priorities without a second thought. How would it feel if you were to fill a day (once a week, once a month) to indulge yourself with what you love – a *binge day*? So you love gelato, movies, and massages? Why not schedule a day to do it all? What's all that work for if not to allow yourself some of life's little pleasures on a regular basis?

Spend time with friends. Socializing with colleagues after work can often feel like a continuation of the workday only with hot wings, nachos, and a margarita in hand. But connecting with people outside your professional circle gives you time to unplug from work and redirect your energy and focus. Sharing the stresses of work with non-coworkers can be an opportunity to hear fresh perspectives. It can also help to feel connected to a community outside of work.

The suggestions above can help alleviate stress and help avoid burnout. But what if it's too late to avoid burnout? What if you're in the middle of your own burnout hell right now? Will those solutions help? Perhaps, but if you're suffering from a full-blown case of burnout prioritizing, setting boundaries, splurging, and socializing, can feel like spitting on a five-alarm fire – sure, you're doing something, but it's not very effective.

Hands down, the best way to deal with burnout is to avoid stress altogether. But let's face it, we live in the real world, who's able to do that?

Sure, resigning from work, getting divorced, and quitting school are all options that might immediately eliminate the stressors at the core of our burnout. But those drastic decisions can set us up for a whole new set of stressors. How does being unemployed with bills to pay reduce stress, for example?

While few of us have the luxury of quitting work without a safety net or taking extended leave, there are always ways to carve out time for yourself at work to recover: asking for fewer responsibilities, cutting back on hours, setting more realistic expectations, taking a demotion, and delegating tasks are less drastic options to consider first.

“How beautiful it is to do nothing, then rest afterward.” Spanish proverb.

So when burnout gets the best of you and it's time to re-set and replenish your energy reserves, go back to the basics of self-care:

Rest. The first step in recovering from full-blown burnout is to rest, rest, and then rest some more. One burnout sufferer (with the understanding of his wife and kids) spent six months of weekends doing nothing but sleeping to recover from his exhaustion. Another took a leave of absence from work for two months and sat on a chair on the porch of her childhood home staring at the woods and listening to the sounds of nature.

While these may sound like extreme actions, reclaiming rest and sleep are the cornerstones of recovery. Do you have unused or overdue vacation days? Do you have a sanctuary where you could recharge your energy? Even a single day off can make a huge difference.

Sleep debt is fast becoming recognized as a new social ailment that affects our ability to function. It also plays a significant role in prolonging burnout. Sleep hygiene is the practice of setting up a routine that supports a good night's sleep.

Good sleep hygiene includes:

- Limiting daytime naps.
- Avoiding stimulants (alcohol, nicotine, sugar) close to bedtime.
- Exercising (as little as 10 minutes makes a difference).
- Avoiding food 4-5 hours before bed.
- Avoiding light from bright screens (TV, computer, tablet, and smart phone) one hour before bed.
- Using calm bedroom colors.
- Hanging blackout curtains.
- Using a white noise machine.

Get moving. No, we're not talking about packing up the house and heading to points beyond, although there's nothing wrong with a fresh start. We're talking about getting physical. You might be thinking, *'Hang on! I'm burned out! Where am I supposed to get the energy to work out?'* Not in the mood to hit the gym (or even leave the house)? No problem. The kind of movement we're suggesting doesn't require training for a triathlon, trying to lose 25 pounds in a month, or relocating to India to learn yoga – overdoing it is what likely set burnout in motion in the first place.

Think, instead, of low-intensity restorative exercise. Simply walking around the block (or the backyard), stretching on the living room floor or deep breathing boosts metabolism, aids in digestion, and clears the mind, and fires endorphins – all of

which can have a positive impact on recovery. Choose baby steps over the triathlon, at least to start.

Set goals. Again, you may be thinking *'the last thing I want to do when I'm burned out is set more goals for myself. I'm lucky if I can drag myself out of bed!'* And you're right. Setting goals can feel like it'll take a Herculean effort when you're overwhelmed. But goal setting doesn't need to be difficult or ambitious and it's absolutely critical to recovery.

When you are in this state, goal setting feels nearly impossible. Start by setting small, achievable goals before tackling your next big dream – return that phone call or email, do the laundry, walk the dog, cook a healthy meal, for example.

But remember, if you haven't run around the track since high school, even a walk around the block can leave you winded and sore. The same goes for setting and achieving goals – slow and steady – even the smallest achievement is a success. It took time to get to this place; it'll take time and patience on the road to recovery.

After getting into the rhythm of these basics – weeks or months later – you'll have recovered some strength and be in a better position to take on life's bigger questions and challenges as they come.

Remember Peter, our cubicle drone from the film *Office Space*? In the end he doesn't quit his job. He just stops showing up. In a meeting with efficiency consultants he gives them a laundry list of what's wrong with the work environment. The result of his blistering honesty? He's offered a promotion. Let that sink in for a moment.

Peter Gibbons is an exhausted drone in a dreary soul-crushing job doing just enough to not get fired. He's basically burnout personified. But the minute he realizes he's unhappy and has had enough he takes a risk. He takes action to change his situation by expressing his truest self and he's rewarded with a promotion. Though it's not the end of the story for Peter, in that moment his life does change for the better.

And burnout doesn't have to be the end of the story for you.

Burnout is a serious condition. Suffering from burnout can impact all aspects of life, but it doesn't need to be a life sentence. Armed with the right mindset, being open to asking yourself some tough questions, and a willingness to feel some (temporary) pain, burnout can provide an opportunity to self-reflect, take stock, and ultimately become more self-aware. It offers a chance for you to turn inward and discover the connection (or disconnection) between your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, values, and the work you've chosen to do. And it can help you determine what steps you need to take to get in alignment with the people and things that matter most in your life.

Once you know the causes and the signs of burnout it can be easy (and even fun!) to implement small, yet significant changes to your lifestyle. With a few small transformations under your belt you'll feel more empowered, more competent, and more confident in making even bigger changes.

In other words, there is hope. If you're open to it, recovering from burnout can be a springboard into a new, brighter, and more hopeful chapter in your life – an opportunity to rediscover the person you are now and the person you want to become.

The next time you're feeling at the end of your rope ask yourself, what is my burnout trying to tell me? The answers may be the key to permanently eliminating burnout from your life and living life as your truest self. The cost of burnout far outweighs the investment in a truly balanced and fulfilling life.