

THE BURNOUT WORKBOOK



When everything feels like too much.

—
This workbook is for anyone who is
exhausted in a way that sleep doesn't fix.



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A note from me to you

There is a particular kind of tired that burnout produces, and it is unlike any other tiredness I know.

It isn't the tiredness that comes after a hard week, or even a hard year. It's a tiredness that has worked its way into the bones, into your motivation, your meaning, your capacity to feel much of anything at all. So many of us end up feeling like a version of ourselves with the colour drained out. Functional, maybe. Going through the motions, certainly. But not quite present. Not quite there.

This isn't something I only know from the other side of the consulting room.

Before I trained as a psychologist, I was a professional orchestral violinist, a life that taught me, very young, that you are only as good as your last performance, and that rest is something you earn once the work is finally good enough. It never quite was. That, I would come to understand, is the trap.

Twenty years of it. Long hours of practice, underneath them a single hope, a performance that was perfect, or close enough to it. Anything less felt like failure, a verdict on me rather than on the playing. I kept going, partly for the love of it, and partly because it was my life.

I didn't see the signs for what they were, not for years. The motivation thinning. The desire quietly waning. A fatigue that sat over everything like a cloak I couldn't take off. I could feel where it was heading, towards hating the very thing I had loved for decades.

There was a moment when I knew, clearly, that I had to do it differently. I had to wake up, and let that waking up shift my whole perspective.

That shift has stayed with me. In the work I do now, I've learned to be measured, to listen for when I need to rest, to take a breath before I let myself run past empty again.

I know this terrain from the inside, not from a comfortable distance.

And what I notice, again and again, is how rarely we let ourselves take it seriously.

There's a particular cruelty to burnout. It tends to find the most conscientious of us, the most committed, the most capable, those of us who have spent years giving everything we have, and rather longer than that ignoring the signals that something was wrong. By the time we're finally willing to admit it, we've usually been running on empty far longer than we realise, propped up by willpower and the quiet terror of what it would mean to stop.

Let me say something clearly, right at the start.

Burnout is not weakness. It is not laziness dressed up as suffering. It is not what happens to those of us who can't handle pressure. It is a real physiological and psychological state, with specific causes, a recognisable trajectory, and, this is the part I most want you to hear, a genuine way through.

You are not broken. You have been running a system past its sustainable limits for too long, and the system has done what any system does under those conditions. It has begun to shut down.

This workbook is here to help you understand what has happened, not to shame you for it, but to make sense of it. Because in my experience, understanding your burnout clearly is itself the beginning of

recovery. When you stop fighting what's happening and start getting curious about it, something shifts. Not immediately. Not dramatically. But genuinely.

The exercises here aren't demanding. If you're burned out, you're already doing too much. These are invitations to slow down and look, not more tasks to get right.

Be patient with yourself. That, as it turns out, is where we need to begin.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook, with space to write throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling alongside.

If you're currently in the depths of burnout, you may find that even reading feels like effort. That's completely understandable, and it's itself useful information about where you are.

Work through the sections at whatever pace is realistic. There's no timeline for this. Some sections will feel more relevant than others. Follow that. And if something brings up more than you expected, please don't push through it alone. The final section maps the support available to you.

Contents

- 01 What burnout actually is, and how it differs from stress and depression
- 02 The stages of burnout, and where you are now
- 03 What drove you here, the specific causes of your burnout
- 04 Going deeper, the parts that carried you here
- 05 Being on your own side, why everything else in this book depends on it
- 06 What recovery actually requires
- 07 Burnout and identity, who are you when you're not producing?
- 08 Finding the right level of support

SECTION 1

What burnout actually is

And how it differs from stress and depression

'Burnout' is one of the most used and least understood words we have. It has become a catch-all for feeling tired and overwhelmed, which, oddly, means that those of us who are burned out often don't recognise it in ourselves. We assume everyone feels this way.

It was Herbert Freudenberger, back in the 1970s, and later Christina Maslach, whose way of describing it I still find the most useful, who first put language to what was actually happening. Three things stood out.

There's exhaustion, a depletion that runs far deeper than ordinary tiredness. There's a growing distance, sometimes called cynicism, a flatness that can creep into your work, your relationships, your life, and can look from the outside like indifference. And there's a quiet loss of efficacy, the sense that nothing you do makes much difference anymore, that you're less capable than you used to be, that the effort simply isn't landing the way it once did.

Put those three together, the exhaustion, the distance, the diminishment, and you get something that's different in kind from ordinary stress. That difference matters more than you might think.

Stress and burnout are not the same thing

Here's a distinction I come back to constantly.

Stress is a state of too much. Too many demands, too much pressure, too much on your plate. Those of us who are under stress are usually still engaged, frustrated, overwhelmed, longing for things to ease, but still caring, still trying, still in it. Stress is exhausting, but there's an aliveness to it.

Burnout is a state of too little. Too little left.

When the system has been running under overload for long enough, it moves past stress into depletion, and the quality of the experience changes. The frustration gives way to flatness. The desperation gives way to detachment. I wonder if you recognise that shift, the caring that once felt like the most fundamental thing about you, in your work, in your life, quietly beginning to erode.

That erosion of caring is frightening to those of us who have always cared deeply. Because it feels like losing yourself. I want you to know that it isn't. It's a symptom, not a verdict.

How burnout differs from depression

This is one of the questions I'm asked often, and it deserves a careful answer, because the two get confused all the time, and yet call for such different responses.

Burnout and depression share a lot on the surface. Exhaustion, flat motivation, emotional numbness, withdrawal. That overlap is real, and it's part of why untreated burnout can tip into depression. But underneath, the picture is different, and so is the way out, which is exactly why telling one from the other matters.

Depression doesn't stay in one place. It isn't tied to your work, or a single relationship, or a particular loss. It moves into everything, the mood that won't lift no matter what the day brings, the taste going out of things that used to bring you pleasure, a heaviness that colours the way you see yourself, the world, even what's still ahead.

In my experience, burnout, especially earlier on, tends to be more specific to its context. Many of us who are burned out at work still feel flickers of life elsewhere, with our children, in nature, in something creative, even if those moments are getting rarer. The flatness is sharpest around whatever has been the source of the chronic overload. That specificity does fade as burnout deepens, which is one of the reasons catching it earlier is worth so much.

It's also worth knowing that the two often travel together. Long-term burnout is a real risk factor for depression. So if you recognise both in yourself, please take that seriously, and talk it through with someone rather than carrying it alone.

Exercise 1 Stress, burnout, or depression?

Where do you locate yourself?

Reading the descriptions above, where do you find yourself? Does what you're experiencing feel most like too much, stress? Or too little, burnout? Or does it feel more pervasive, present across all areas of life regardless of context?

No wrong answers

There are no wrong answers here. The goal is simply to get clearer about what you're dealing with, because the map matters for finding the way through.

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 2 When did you last feel genuinely well?

A baseline

Think back to the last time you felt like yourself, energised, present, engaged, able to enjoy something fully. How long ago was that? What has changed between then and now?

Why this matters

This question isn't designed to produce sadness, though it may. It's designed to give you a baseline, a reminder that this isn't simply who you are, but a state you have arrived in. Which means it's a state you can leave.

SECTION 2

The stages of burnout

And where you are now

Burnout doesn't arrive out of nowhere. It has a trajectory, a series of stages that we move through, usually without recognising them as stages until we are well down the road.

Knowing roughly where you are on that road isn't an academic exercise. It's practical, because what recovery asks for is genuinely different depending on how far along you are.

These are the phases as I've come to understand them, the language that's made the most sense of what I've seen, and lived.

The driven phase

In the early stage, burnout hides in plain sight, because what it looks like from the outside is success. You say yes to nearly everything. You're the one who stays until it's done, who picks up what's dropped, who is quietly, privately proud of how much you can carry. It feels less like strain and more like momentum.

But somewhere underneath, something is starting to shift. The hours creep later without you ever deciding they should. Weekends get thinner. A day off stops feeling like rest and starts feeling like something you'll have to make up for later. Slowing down, even for an afternoon, begins to feel less like relief and more like danger. Many of us who are high-achieving live here for years without ever recognising it as the beginning of anything.

The straining phase

Here the body starts keeping score in ways the mind can't override. Sleep no longer restores the way it used to, you wake up as tired as when you lay down. Concentration slips through your fingers mid-task. A small frustration, a slow reply, a dropped call, lands far harder than it should, and you're left wondering why you reacted the way you did. You might notice yourself reaching more often for coffee, a drink, anything that promises a little more energy or a little less feeling. Connection with other people starts to thin too, not because you've decided to withdraw, but because there's simply nothing left to bring to it. And the body keeps talking in its own language, headaches, a stomach that won't settle, the kind of minor illness that circles back again and again when the immune system is under siege. This is usually the phase where most of us finally reach for support, and where that support tends to do the most good.

The depleted phase

By now the system has been running past what it can sustain for long enough that strain has tipped into shutdown. The tiredness doesn't lift with rest anymore, it's simply there, all the time, underneath everything. Motivation is hard to find, and what moves in behind it can be frightening in its own way, a flatness, a not-quite-feeling, even in moments that once would have moved you. For those of us who have always felt things deeply, that quiet is disorienting. You might notice a growing cynicism, a distance from the work or the people or the life that used to matter so much, and a creeping sense that you're simply not

as capable as you once were. Many of us in this phase can't imagine feeling any different. I want to name that directly, because that inability to imagine change is the burnout speaking, not the truth.

The crisis phase

In its most severe form, burnout stops you in your tracks. The basic tasks of a day, getting up, eating, answering a message, can start to feel out of reach. Physical symptoms can become serious enough to need medical attention, and sometimes depression or anxiety moves in alongside it, needing its own care on top of whatever you're already carrying. This phase rarely arrives without earlier warning signs that were missed, or pushed aside. If this is where you find yourself, please treat the support section at the end of this workbook as the most important part of it.

Exercise 3 Where are you in the trajectory?

Honestly

Reading the phases above, where do you recognise yourself? Be honest. The temptation for many of us, particularly those used to being capable, is to place ourselves one stage earlier than we actually are.

The evidence

What specific symptoms or experiences tell you where you are?

Exercise 4 The signals you ignored

Looking back

In retrospect, what were the early warning signs that something was wrong, the signals your body or mind was sending that you overrode, dismissed, or promised yourself you'd deal with later?

What made it hard

What made it difficult to respond to them at the time?

SECTION 3

What drove you here

The specific causes of your burnout

Burnout is not simply the result of working too hard. That's the most common misconception about it, and it sends us towards the wrong solutions. Time off that doesn't help because the underlying drivers are still in place. A holiday that brings a few days' relief and then a swift return to exactly where we started.

What we know is that burnout comes from a particular set of factors, some structural, some personal, that combine to wear a system down. Working out which ones are at play for you is essential, because it tells you what recovery has to address.

The structural drivers

Sometimes it really is as simple as chronic overload, too much to do, for too long, with too little time, support, or recovery built in. It's tempting to blame yourself here, to imagine that better time management would have fixed it. But more often the overload was never really yours to manage. It was built into the system around you, an organisation that kept expecting more than anyone could sustainably give, a role that grew far past what one person could reasonably carry, a job that never had a limit placed on what it could ask of you.

Then there's the absence of control, not being able to shape the decisions that shape your own work, your time, your conditions. This turns out to be one of the most powerful predictors of burnout there is, which is why it isn't only the heaviest workloads that break us. It's often the combination that does the real damage, carrying a great deal, and having almost no say in how you carry it.

We're social creatures underneath everything, and how much we're willing to give is shaped enormously by whether that giving is actually seen. This is where insufficient recognition does its quiet damage, not necessarily the absence of a bonus or a promotion, but the sustained feeling of being taken for granted, slowly wearing away the very motivation that let you sustain the effort in the first place.

We were never built to work well in isolation, and the absence of community, trust, mutual support, the sense of being in something together rather than carrying it alone, matters more than most of us expect. When it's missing, it doesn't just sit there quietly. It amplifies everything else on this list.

And unfairness, in workload, in recognition, in opportunity, in basic respect, corrodes something in us far beyond what any single incident would seem to warrant. That's because fairness isn't a nicety we'd simply prefer. It's something closer to a psychological need.

Perhaps the least talked about, and in my experience the most quietly corrosive, is values conflict, being asked, over a long stretch, to act in ways that sit against what you actually believe. Sometimes that's obvious, being asked outright to do something you think is wrong. More often it's subtler than that, working inside a culture whose values simply don't match yours, and swallowing that mismatch day after day just to keep functioning.

The personal drivers

Alongside all of that sit the personal drivers, and I want to be careful here, because none of what follows is a character flaw. These are learned patterns, and under difficult enough circumstances, they speed everything up.

Perfectionism shows up more often than almost anything else on this list. Not the wish to do good work, that's healthy, but the inability to let good enough actually be enough. The compulsion to over-deliver, over-prepare, over-check, to pour the same intensity into everything regardless of what's actually at stake. Those of us who are perfectionists don't burn out simply because we work hard. We burn out because we can't regulate our output to match what a situation actually needs, so every task gets maximum effort, and the system never gets a chance to recover. I know this one from the inside, so I say it with some tenderness. The standard is the problem here, not your failure to meet it. There's a gentler way to hold it, and we'll get there properly soon.

And then there's the trouble with no. The difficulty holding work within sustainable limits, protecting your own time and energy, refusing what genuinely can't be absorbed, all of it means the demands simply expand to fill whatever space you leave open. This is rarely only a professional habit. More often it runs down into something deeper, into what you believe about your own worth, about what makes you acceptable, about what might happen if you ever stopped giving everything. That's exactly where the next section goes.

Exercise 5 What specifically drove your burnout?

Mapping your landscape

Looking at the factors above, overload, loss of control, under-recognition, absence of community, unfairness, values conflict, perfectionism, the trouble with no, which resonate most clearly? For each one that feels relevant, write a sentence or two about how it has shown up in your specific situation.

Not a checklist

You're mapping your own particular burnout landscape, not diagnosing yourself against a checklist.

Exercise 6 What you have been unable to say no to

What's hardest to refuse

What specifically have you found it most difficult to limit or refuse, and what have you told yourself about why? What do you fear would happen if you said no?

What it reveals

This question often reveals more about what's driving the burnout than any amount of reflection on what you've been doing.

SECTION 4

Going deeper

The parts that carried you here, and what they were protecting

We've just looked at what drove you here, the overload, the perfectionism, the trouble saying no. I want to go a layer beneath that now, because in my experience this is where the most lasting change tends to happen.

Burnout rarely comes from simply taking on too much. More often, it comes from parts of you that couldn't seem to do otherwise. The part that couldn't say no. The part that needed everything to be perfect. The part that felt safest when it was producing, indispensable, holding everything together for everyone.

Thinking in terms of parts

I've found it helps, again and again, to think of these not as flaws to correct, but as parts of you. And not as enemies, but as protectors. Because that is almost always what they are. Each one is, in its own way, trying to keep you safe.

The part that drives you to over-deliver may be protecting you from a fear of not being enough. The part that can't rest may be guarding against a belief that your worth has to be earned, and re-earned, and earned again. The part that says yes to everything may be protecting you from the fear of disappointing people, of being seen as selfish, of being left.

These parts are not the problem. They are, if anything, the reason you have managed to carry so much for so long. They have worked extraordinarily hard for you. The difficulty is simply that they don't know when to stop, and burnout is, in a sense, what happens when a protector keeps running long after the thing it was protecting against has passed.

What they're protecting

Underneath these hard-working protectors, there is almost always something younger and more tender. A part of you that learned, somewhere along the way, that love, or safety, or belonging, had to be earned. Through effort, through achievement, through being useful, through never being a burden.

The protectors work so relentlessly precisely because they are guarding something vulnerable. The perfectionism isn't really about the work. The inability to rest isn't really about the to-do list. They are standing guard over an old, quiet fear that if you stopped, if you let yourself be ordinary, or tired, or in need of something, you might not be okay.

What happened, the question I find most useful

This is the point where the question can change. Not "What's wrong with me that I can't stop?" but something gentler, and far more honest: what happened that taught me I mustn't?

Because these parts learned their jobs somewhere. Usually early. The child who was praised mainly for achievement, and learned that this was how to be loved. The child who became the capable one, the helper, the one who held things together, because that was the role that earned a place. The child who sensed, rightly or wrongly, that rest, or needing things, or falling short, was not safe. The very patterns that burned you out as an adult were often, once, the intelligent strategies that kept a younger you afloat.

This isn't about blaming the past, and it certainly isn't about trying to get rid of these parts. They have served you. The aim is to understand them, because in my experience, a part that feels understood, rather than fought, begins to relax. And when the part that has been driving you can finally trust that it does not have to run you into the ground to keep you safe, something shifts. The over-functioning eases, not because you forced it to, but because the fear underneath it has, perhaps for the first time, been met.

This is slow work, and the deeper layers of it are often best done alongside a therapist. But even beginning to see your burnout this way, as a set of parts that have been working hard to protect you, carrying something from long ago, changes everything. You stop being a person who failed to cope, and become a person whose protective system did exactly what it once learned to do, and now needs something different from you. Not to be overridden, but to be understood.

Exercise 7 The parts that carried you here

The parts that got you here

Which parts of you have been running the show? The one that can't say no. The one that needs it perfect. The one that feels safest when producing. The one that overrides your limits and keeps you going. Name the one or two that feel most familiar, and, if you can, describe the voice each one uses, and the situations where it shows up most strongly.

What they're protecting

Now get curious, rather than critical. If this part is working so hard to keep you going, what might it be afraid would happen if it stopped? What is it trying to protect you from, failure, rejection, not being enough, letting someone down? And what younger, more vulnerable part of you might be underneath it, that the protector has been guarding all this time?

What happened

Gently, and without blame, where might this part have learned its job? What did you learn, growing up, about rest, about worth, about what you had to do or be in order to feel safe, loved, or accepted? You don't need a complete answer, or any answer at all today. Even beginning to see that this part was once trying to help you is enough to start changing your relationship with it.

SECTION 5

Being on your own side

Why everything else in this book depends on it

Somewhere in the last few pages is a version of you still at the desk long after the light outside has changed, telling yourself you'll eat properly tomorrow, pushing the ache in your shoulders down because there isn't room for it today. What would you say, if that was someone you loved sitting there instead of you?

Most of us, when we imagine kindness towards ourselves, picture something soft, a little indulgent, permission to lower the bar. That isn't quite it. Kristin Neff, who has spent decades studying this, describes something closer to what you'd actually need. Meeting yourself with the same warmth you'd offer someone struggling, rather than the same judgment. Remembering that struggling like this doesn't set you apart, it's what happens to anyone carrying too much for too long. And staying close enough to what you're actually feeling to respond to it, rather than either drowning in it or refusing to look.

This matters more than it might sound like it should, because every practical thing this book is going to ask of you, eating without guilt, stopping before you've earned it, asking for help before you're in crisis, depends on believing you're worth those things in the first place. You can know intellectually that lunch matters. But if some part of you believes your worth is still being decided by how much you produce, you'll skip it anyway, quietly, almost without deciding to. Self-compassion isn't a nice extra alongside the practical changes. It's the ground they have to stand on, or they don't hold.

The beliefs driving all of this, that you have to earn rest, that slowing down means falling behind, that saying no risks something you can't afford to risk, aren't going to disappear because you've read a workbook. What can change is your relationship to them. You can start to notice the belief arriving, the way you'd notice a familiar voice, and choose not to hand it the whole conversation. That part of you that's terrified of being left behind is not wrong to be afraid. It's just operating on old information. It doesn't need to be argued with. It needs, more than anything, to be met.

And if you're someone who has to stay, in the job, the relationship, the situation that's costing you, for reasons that are real and not simply a failure of nerve, self-compassion is not a consolation prize. It's what makes staying survivable rather than corrosive. It's the difference between enduring something while quietly punishing yourself for not escaping it, and enduring it while still, somehow, remaining on your own side. The next section is about exactly that, what recovery can look like when the circumstances haven't changed yet.

None of this happens because you decide it should, in one sitting, with enough willpower. It happens slowly, the way trust rebuilds with anyone you've let down before, including yourself. Be patient with how long it takes to believe that you're allowed this.

Exercise 8 The voice you'd use for someone you love

Try this

Think of a moment like the one at the start of this section, you, still pushing through, still not stopping. Write down, in full sentences, exactly what you would say to someone you loved in that moment. Not advice. Just what you'd say.

Reading it back

Read it back, slowly, and notice what happens when you imagine it said to you.

Exercise 9 The belief behind the push

Naming it

What's the belief that shows up most often when you try to rest, or slow down, or say no? Perhaps it sounds like "If I stop, everything falls apart," or "If I'm not useful, I'm not safe." Write it down exactly as it speaks to you.

Sitting with it

Gently, ask how old that belief feels. And what it might mean to remind that part of you that it isn't alone in this, that so many of us are carrying some version of the same fear.

SECTION 6

What recovery actually requires

And what to do when change is not yet possible

Recovery from burnout is consistently misunderstood, and that misunderstanding is one of the reasons so many of us recover just enough to return to exactly the conditions that burned us out, and then burn out again.

The most common misconception is that recovery is mostly about rest. Rest is necessary, the depleted system needs it, but on its own it's almost never enough. If you rest and then go back to the same conditions, the same patterns, the same inability to limit your output, you'll most likely end up in the same place.

Rest is the beginning of recovery. It isn't recovery itself.

Genuine recovery asks for something different in kind from what most of us attempt. Let me walk you through what I mean.

The first thing is stopping, genuinely stopping, for long enough that the nervous system can begin to settle. Not a weekend. Not a holiday half-lived through email. For many of us in moderate to severe burnout, this means weeks rather than days of significantly reduced demand. And here's something worth noticing. How hard stopping feels is not a side issue. It's diagnostic. The difficulty of stopping tells us a great deal about what has been driving the burnout in the first place.

The second is an honest look at the drivers. Burnout has specific causes, and recovery means understanding yours clearly enough to know what needs to change, not just what needs to pause. This is where a lot of recovery stalls. We rest, feel a bit better, and return to exactly the same conditions, because nothing structural was ever clarified.

The third is actual structural change. Sometimes that's external. Renegotiating workload, addressing expectations, changing roles where it's possible. Sometimes it's internal. Working with the perfectionism, the boundary difficulty, the people-pleasing. Usually it's both. Recovery without structural change is temporary recovery.

The fourth is rebuilding your relationship with rest, pleasure, and restoration. Burnout erodes not only your energy but your capacity to receive nourishment from life. The things that once restored you may not feel accessible anymore. The ability to rest without guilt has often been lost entirely. Rebuilding that isn't indulgence. It's repair.

And then there's a fifth reality that rarely gets spoken about honestly enough.

Sometimes you know what needs to change, and you still cannot change it.

When change is not immediately possible

This is exactly where being on your own side stops being a nice idea and starts being something you actually need.

Reading all that, you may feel a wave of relief. You can see clearly what needs to change. Or you may feel something quite different. You can see what needs to change, and you cannot yet see a realistic way of changing it.

Perhaps reducing your workload would help, but you need the income. Perhaps leaving the job would improve your wellbeing, but there are family responsibilities, financial commitments, or simply a lack of other options. Perhaps the things contributing to your burnout are real and significant, and not immediately alterable.

If that's where you find yourself, I want to be clear. Recognising reality is not the same as giving up.

A lot of burnout advice focuses heavily on changing external circumstances. That's often necessary, but it isn't always immediately possible. When the circumstances can't change right now, the question shifts from "how do I get out of this?" to "how do I suffer less within this, while creating the conditions for change later?"

And this distinction matters, because burnout is rarely caused by circumstances alone. More often it develops in the meeting place between external pressure and the way we've learned to relate to it. The demands are real. So are the internal expectations, beliefs, and habits that decide how we carry them, which is the very territory the previous section opened up.

Even when you can't change everything, there is almost always something that can shift. You may not be able to leave the job, but you may be able to stop holding yourself to impossible internal standards within it. You may not be able to reduce your responsibilities, but you may be able to stop adding unnecessary ones. You may not be able to change your workload, but you may be able to notice, and slowly stop, the places where you override your own limits.

Sometimes recovery begins not with changing the situation, but with changing the relationship you have with yourself inside it.

Exercise 10 What is actually within your control?

Two columns

When we're overwhelmed, it's easy to see only two options, change everything, or endure everything. Reality is usually more nuanced. On the page below, draw two columns. In the first, what is genuinely outside my control right now? In the second, what remains within it?

Things that may belong in the second column

How I speak to myself

The standards I hold myself to

What I agree to take on

How I spend small pockets of time

Whether I ask for support

Whether I rest when the chance arises

Whether I acknowledge my limits rather than overriding them

Whether I allow myself to be human rather than performing endlessly

Noticing

What do you notice as you complete this?

Exercise 11 What is making this harder than it needs to be?

The extra layer

Burnout is painful, and your circumstances may be difficult. But sometimes an extra layer of suffering gets created from the inside. A few questions to sit with.

What am I demanding of myself that I would never demand of someone I love?

What expectations have quietly become unrealistic?

What am I trying to prove, and to whom?

What am I afraid would happen if I did less?

What would 'good enough' actually look like here?

What part of me believes rest has to be earned?

What am I still doing because I feel I should, rather than because it's genuinely necessary?

Exercise 12 What can support you while you are here?

Carrying it differently

If your circumstances can't change immediately, what might help you carry them differently?

What restores even a small amount of energy?

Who helps me feel seen, or supported?

What have I stopped doing that once gave me meaning or relief?

What small boundaries could I begin practising?

What would treating myself as someone who matters look like this week?

What would I say to someone I loved in this same situation?

A reminder

Recovery isn't always linear or dramatic. Sometimes it begins with a major change. Sometimes with a single conversation. Sometimes with ten minutes of rest that is neither justified nor earned. And sometimes it begins with the quiet recognition that even if everything cannot change, something still can.

SECTION 7

Burnout and identity

Who are you when you're not producing?

This is, for many of us, the most confronting question of all.

For a long time, many of us don't notice that something subtle has happened. That what we do has slowly become who we are. Not only in how others see us, but in how we come to experience ourselves on the inside. Achievement, responsibility, usefulness, holding everything together, these begin, quietly, to organise our whole sense of identity.

And then burnout arrives, and something shifts.

What once felt like identity starts to feel fragile. The capacity to do, to cope, to keep going, the very things that gave you a sense of solidity, begins to slip.

And with that, a more unsettling question can surface.

If I am not doing... what am I?

This is why stopping can feel so disorienting. It doesn't only feel like rest. It can feel like falling out of existence for a while, as though the structure that held the sense of "me" has loosened, and nothing has yet taken its place.

There's often a quiet panic underneath this. A pull to get back to functioning quickly, to restore what was lost, to become "useful" again, because usefulness has been so closely tied to safety for so long.

And yet this is exactly where something important is so often missed. Because if the only goal is to return to performance, then nothing fundamental changes. The system gets rebuilt exactly as it was, often more fragile than before, not less.

The deeper question isn't simply how to function again. It's how to stay in contact with yourself when functioning isn't available in the same way.

That can feel unfamiliar at first. Even uncomfortable. Not because there's nothing there, but because there has been so little space to notice what is there, without immediately needing it to be useful.

And slowly, sometimes almost imperceptibly, identity begins to loosen its grip on performance. Not all at once. Not cleanly. More like something that has been held too tightly, for too long, beginning, gradually, to soften.

Exercise 13 When you are not measured by what you produce

The question

If you were no longer measured by what you produce, what feelings arise in you, discomfort, relief, fear, emptiness, grief, something else entirely?

What may be there

For many of us, what begins to emerge in that space isn't nothingness, but something unpractised, a quieter sense of self that hasn't had to compete for attention with doing, achieving, or coping. Write towards that, gently, without needing it to resolve.

Exercise 14 The parts of you to strengthen

While you are still here

What parts of you could you begin to gently strengthen and support, so they can carry you through your current situation, while you are still in it, and before bigger changes become possible?

For example

This might be the part of you that can pause before saying yes. The part that notices when you're reaching your limit. The part that can soften the self-criticism when things feel overwhelming. Or the part that remembers you're allowed to be human, even in difficult conditions.

SECTION 8

Finding the right level of support

From self-directed work to specialist care

One of the most important things to understand about burnout recovery is that where you are in the trajectory really does change the level of support you need. What's right for early-stage strain is meaningfully different from what severe depletion requires, and mismatching the two is one of the reasons recovery so often stalls.

What you can do on your own

For mild to moderate burnout, where you're still functioning, where the depletion hasn't progressed to genuine incapacity, and where the drivers are reasonably clear and addressable, self-directed work is a meaningful starting point.

Genuine rest is the non-negotiable foundation. Not rest as a reward for finishing things, but rest built into the structure of each day as a requirement, like sleep. The nervous system can't begin to settle if it never gets the signal that the threat has passed.

Reducing the load matters more than improving your coping. The instinct when you're burned out is to find better strategies for managing the existing demand. Sharper systems, smarter approaches. Sometimes that helps. More often, the demand itself needs to come down. If you can't influence the external load, focus on what you can control within it.

Restoring genuinely restorative activities, the things that actually replenish, rather than simply distract, is essential, and consistently undervalued. This isn't entertainment. It's the specific activities that produce a felt sense of restoration. Time in nature, creative engagement, movement that isn't punishing, real social connection, unstructured time. Working out which activities actually restore you, as distinct from the ones you habitually reach for, is worth some careful attention.

And examining the internal drivers, the perfectionism, the trouble with limits, the link between worth and output, matters even in self-directed work, because without it, the structural changes tend not to hold. The previous two sections were an invitation into exactly that.

When a therapist can help

Therapy is particularly valuable when the internal drivers are significant. When perfectionism or difficulty with limits runs deep and doesn't shift with insight alone. When the identity question is producing real distress. When burnout has been recurrent, which suggests the pattern, rather than just the circumstances, needs addressing. Or when depletion has progressed to the point where self-directed work isn't producing meaningful change.

The approaches I find most useful for burnout are the ones that work with both the patterns and the beliefs underneath them. Internal Family Systems is especially helpful for getting to know the parts of you that can't stop, can't rest, and can't accept being enough without achieving. Understanding those parts, rather than fighting them, tends to produce far more lasting change than strategies alone. And Acceptance

and Commitment Therapy is useful for reconnecting with your values and rebuilding a life oriented towards what matters, rather than what is merely urgent. This is the work I do with people, and it is, more often than not, where the real turning happens.

When a psychiatrist may be needed

When burnout has progressed into significant depression or anxiety, persistent low mood, an inability to manage basic daily tasks, panic attacks, or a complete inability to sleep, psychiatric assessment is appropriate. Medication is not a solution to burnout, but for someone who has also developed a depressive episode, it can provide enough relief to make the psychological work of recovery possible. A good psychiatrist will understand burnout in context, and won't simply medicate the surface symptoms without attention to the situation underneath them.

A simple way to orient yourself

Begin with genuine rest and structural reduction if your burnout is mild to moderate and the drivers are identifiable and addressable. Give this real commitment, weeks, not days, before concluding it isn't working.

Consider therapy if the internal drivers are significant, if the burnout has been recurrent, if the identity questions are producing real distress, or if self-directed work isn't producing meaningful change after genuine effort.

Seek psychiatric assessment if significant depression or anxiety has developed alongside the burnout, or if you're struggling to manage basic daily tasks.

The most important thing is not to wait until you are completely unable to function before you decide you deserve support. Burnout caught earlier is burnout recovered from more fully. The signals your system has been sending are worth listening to, now, before they have to get any louder. You have already been strong for a very long time. Letting yourself be supported is not the opposite of that strength. It may be the truest expression of it.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

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Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

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*There is a tiredness that sleep doesn't touch.
It is not weakness. It is depletion.
And there is a way back.*



Burnout is not a failure of character or a lack of resilience — it is a physiological and psychological state with specific causes, a recognisable trajectory, and a genuine recovery path. This workbook offers a clinically grounded, compassionate guide to understanding what has happened, why rest alone is rarely enough, and what real recovery actually requires.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  What burnout actually is — and how it differs from stress and depression
-  The stages of burnout, and where you are now
-  What specifically drove you here
-  What recovery actually requires — beyond rest
-  Recovering when you can't yet change your circumstances
-  How to find the right level of support

*You are not broken. You have been running
a system past its sustainable limits for too long —
and the system has done what any system does.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate anxiety, burnout, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.



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