

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 Shelagh

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. People who are burned out often tell me they feel like a version of themselves with the colour drained out. Functional, maybe. Going through the motions, certainly. But not quite present. Not quite there.

I want to tell you that I don't know this only from the other side of the consulting room.

Before I trained as a psychologist, I was a professional orchestral violinist. It was a life I loved — and also one that taught me, very young, that you are only as good as your last performance. There was always more to practise, always a higher standard, always someone better. I learned to drive myself hard, to override tiredness, and to treat rest as something I would earn once the work was finally good enough.

It never quite was good enough. That, I would come to understand, is the trap.

That pattern didn't simply disappear when I changed careers. The work I do now is work I care about deeply — and caring deeply can carry its own risk.

There were periods where I sometimes carried on when I didn't have much capacity left, telling myself I was fine, or that I could rest later. Stopping didn't feel like an option; it felt like I would be letting something important slip — as though care and stopping couldn't really exist together. I became aware of this some years ago, and I continue to stay aware of the early signs so I don't fall back into patterns that once led me toward burnout.

So when I sit with someone who is burned out, I'm not speaking from a comfortable distance. I know this terrain from the inside.

And what I notice, again and again, is how rarely burned-out people let themselves take it seriously.

There's a particular cruelty to burnout: it tends to find the most conscientious, the most committed, the most capable — people who have spent years giving everything they have, and rather longer than that ignoring the signals that something was wrong. By the time they reach me, they've usually been running on empty far longer than they 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 people 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.

- 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 What recovery actually requires
- 06 Burnout and identity — who are you when you're not producing?
- 07 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 genuinely burned out often don't recognise it in ourselves. We assume everyone feels this way. Or we decide that what we are going through is somehow both too serious and too undramatic for such a fashionable word.

So let me be precise about what I actually mean.

The people who first mapped burnout clinically — Herbert Freudenberger back in the 1970s, and then Christina Maslach, whose framework I still find the most useful — described it as having three dimensions. I think they got it right.

Exhaustion — a depletion of energy that goes far beyond ordinary tiredness. Cynicism, or what's sometimes called depersonalisation — a growing distance from your work, your relationships, your life, often with a flatness that can look from the outside like indifference. And reduced efficacy — the sense that nothing you do makes a difference, that you're less capable than you used to be, that the effort no longer produces the result.

Put those three together — the exhaustion, the distance, the diminishment — and you get something different in kind from ordinary stress. And 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. And the caring — which was perhaps the most fundamental thing about you in relation to your work or your life — begins to erode.

That erosion of caring is frightening to people 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 most often, and it deserves a careful answer — because the two get confused all the time, and they need different things.

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 they tend to have different origins, and different ways out, which is exactly why telling them apart matters.

Depression is a condition of the whole person. It's present across all of life, not tied to any one circumstance — usually a pervasive low mood, a loss of pleasure in things that should provide it, and often a way of seeing yourself, the world, and the future that's coloured by hopelessness.

Burnout, especially earlier on, tends to be more specific to its context. Many who are burned out at work still feel flickers of life elsewhere — with their 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 actually dealing with — because the map matters for finding the way through.

Exercise 2 When did you last feel genuinely well?

A baseline

Think back to the last time you felt like yourself — genuinely 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.

Here are the phases, in the terms I find most useful when I'm sitting with someone.

The driven phase

In the early stage, burnout is almost invisible — not because nothing is happening, but because what's happening looks like success. High engagement, high output, high ambition. A willingness, often an eagerness, to take on more. The warning signs are subtle: hours that creep up, recovery that quietly shrinks, a growing inability to switch off, a sense that taking a break feels threatening rather than welcome. Most high-achieving people spend a good part of their working lives here without recognising it as the beginning of anything. I certainly did.

The straining phase

The load begins to outrun the system's ability to recover from it. Sleep becomes less restorative. Concentration is harder to hold. Small frustrations produce disproportionate responses. There may be more reliance on caffeine, alcohol, or other things to manage energy and mood. Social withdrawal begins — not by choice, but because the energy for connection just isn't there. Physical symptoms can appear: headaches, digestive trouble, the run of minor illnesses that comes when the immune system is under strain. This is the phase in which most people are most likely to reach for support — and the phase in which help works best.

The depleted phase

The system has been running past its limits long enough that strain tips into shutdown. Exhaustion is now chronic, and no longer responds meaningfully to rest. Motivation is largely gone. The emotional flatness here is particularly alarming — not feeling much of anything, even where there should be feeling, is profoundly disorienting for people who have always been emotionally alive. Cynicism and detachment grow. The sense of being good at what you do erodes. People in this phase often can't imagine feeling any different — and I want to name that directly, because that inability to imagine change is the burnout speaking, not the truth.

The crisis phase

In the most severe presentations, burnout produces genuine incapacity — an inability to manage basic daily tasks, physical symptoms serious enough to need medical attention, and sometimes the emergence of depressive or anxiety symptoms that require professional care. This phase rarely arrives

without earlier warning signs that were missed, or overridden. If this is where you are, 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 people, particularly those used to being capable, is to place themselves one stage earlier than they 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 toward 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 actually has to address.

The structural drivers

Chronic overload. One of the clearest signs is simply having too much to do for too long, without enough time, support, or recovery. But the overload that leads to burnout is rarely just about poor time management. More often, it comes from something built into the system — an organisation that keeps expecting more than is realistically sustainable, a role that has grown beyond what one person can reasonably carry, or a situation where there has never been enough limit placed on what is being asked.

Absence of control. A lack of autonomy — the inability to influence the decisions that shape your work, your time, your conditions — is one of the most powerful predictors of burnout. It's why burnout isn't confined to those with the heaviest workloads. It's often found in those of us who carry a great deal and have very little say in how we meet it — a particularly corrosive combination.

Insufficient recognition. We're social creatures, and our motivation is shaped enormously by feeling that our effort is seen and valued. Chronic under-recognition — not necessarily the absence of formal reward, but the sustained sense that what you give is simply taken for granted — wears away the intrinsic motivation that makes sustained effort possible.

Absence of community. We don't work well, or sustainably, in isolation. Whether there's trust, mutual support, a sense of being in something together — this matters more than people expect, and its absence amplifies every other driver.

Unfairness. Being treated unfairly — in workload, recognition, opportunity, or basic respect — corrodes engagement out of all proportion to any single incident, because fairness is a fundamental psychological need, not a nicety.

Values conflict. Perhaps the least discussed, and in my experience the most quietly damaging: being required, over a long stretch, to act in ways that conflict with your own values. Sometimes that's explicit — being asked to do something you believe is wrong. More often it's subtle — working inside a culture whose values are fundamentally at odds with yours, and having to suppress that conflict day after day in order to function.

The personal drivers: perfectionism and the trouble with no

Alongside the structural factors there are personal ones — and I want to be careful here, because these are not character flaws. They're learned patterns, and they interact with difficult circumstances to speed everything up.

Perfectionism is one of the most common. Not the wish to do good work — that's healthy — but the inability to accept that good enough is genuinely enough; the compulsion to over-deliver, over-prepare, over-check, and over-invest in every task regardless of what's actually at stake. Perfectionists burn out not simply because they work hard, but because they can't regulate their output to match the real demands of a situation. Every task gets maximum effort, which means the system never gets to recover. I know this one from the inside, so I say it with some tenderness: the standard is the problem, not your failure to meet it.

The trouble with no is the other. The difficulty of containing work within sustainable limits — of saying no, of protecting time and energy, of refusing what can't reasonably be absorbed — means that whatever the demands are, they expand to fill everything available. And this is rarely just a professional habit. It usually runs deeper — into beliefs about worth, about what makes a person acceptable, about what might happen if you stopped giving everything. Which is 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.

When I sit with someone in burnout, I rarely meet a person who simply took on too much. I meet a person with parts of them that could not 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

It helps me — and often the clients I work with — 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 I stop asking what is wrong with me that I can't stop, and start asking 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 genuinely 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

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 people recover just enough to return to exactly the conditions that burned them 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 people 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 people 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: people 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

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 8 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 9 What is making this harder than it needs to be?

The extra layer

Burnout is painful, and your circumstances may be genuinely 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 10 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 6

Burnout and identity

Who are you when you're not producing?

This is, for many people, 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 — begin 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 11 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 people, 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 toward that, gently, without needing it to resolve.

Exercise 12 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 7

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 genuinely 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 genuinely useful for reconnecting with your values and

rebuilding a life oriented toward what actually 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.

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 — no obligation, no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and understand what working together might look like. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. All enquiries are handled personally by Shelagh and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

WhatsApp +60 17-358 2563

Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

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

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

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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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