PROTECT YOURSELF FROM BURNOUT

If “stress” doesn’t even begin to describe your nonstop life, read this. You could be heading toward burnout. Take a deep breath: There are simple, everyday solutions to feeling calmer and more in control. And you don’t even have to chuck it all and start fresh on another, quieter planet.

BY PAULA DERROW
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE VOORHES

It’s Monday morning. You’ve had a weekend to (ostensibly) unwind, yet when the alarm goes off, you don’t want to hit snooze. You want to throw your freaking phone across the room and barricade the door. The exhaustion is more than a lack of sleep—it feels mental, too, born from your never-ending to-do list. You’re not just stressed. You’re burnt out.

That term, burnout, has usually been associated with health-care professionals and others who toil in difficult, emotionally draining conditions. But in our overachieving era, with emails from the boss at 10 p.m., professional-level kids’ sports, and lack of wireless dead zones, that feeling of barely hanging on is rampant for other people, across all professions, too. “It’s clearly a cultural phenomenon,” says Christina Maslach, coauthor of one of the subject’s most widely respected books, *The Truth About Burnout*, and a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Why now? “Technology makes it much more likely that we’ll experience burnout,” says Alessandra Wall, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and life coach in San Diego. “Burnout is complex,” adds Paula Davis-Laack, author of *Addicted to Busy*: *Your Blueprint for Burnout Prevention*. “There isn’t one event that causes it: Work can spill over..."
to home and vice versa.” The economy factors in too, says Maslach. “There’s a real crunch in the workplace—fewer people being asked to do more work for less pay.”

Women are no strangers to excessive stress. “Women tend to be pulled in more directions than men are,” says Ron Epstein, M.D., a professor of family medicine, psychiatry, oncology, and nursing at the University of Rochester Medical Center and a leading expert in how to prevent burnout in health-care professionals. “And anyone who is giving, giving, giving and not getting much back is likely to reach a breaking point,” he says. A meta-analysis in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* found that in any group of 1,000 workers, 80 more women than men will experience emotional exhaustion—a small number, statistically speaking, but indicative of women’s willingness to go the extra mile. “As a clinical psychologist, I see so many women, mostly mothers, who come in feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and isolated from the demands of caring for their children, working, and taking on other roles and responsibilities,” says Claire Nicogossian, a clinical psychologist and the founder of momswellbeing.com.

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**ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM IT?**

There are solutions to burnout—and they don’t involve quitting your job or giving away your kids. First, though, it’s key to understand what it is: “Burnout develops when someone is dealing with a high level of stress but doesn’t have access to adequate resources, such as social support, helpful advice, feedback from friends or colleagues, or control over how they spend their time,” explains Arnold B. Bakker, Ph.D., a professor of work and organizational psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam who is one of the most prolific burnout researchers in the field. So what does that look like in your world?

People who are burnt out tend to experience three major symptoms. First, there’s the soul-crushing fatigue that goes on and on, however much you sleep. It’s a feeling Kelly Gurnett, 33, of Buffalo, NY, describes as hitting a wall—and not bouncing back. “I’m a writer, and the sole earner in my family. My husband has a chronic illness, and last year I was working from home, taking care of the house, being everything to everyone. I was going on fumes for months. Then suddenly, the fumes ran out. Any curveball in my day, like a client switching a deadline, would overwhelm me.” It’s no wonder: “When you’re exhausted and sleep-deprived, it’s harder to access good coping skills,” Nicogossian explains. “That’s when you find yourself snapping at your mate or kids, overeating, feeling too tired to do daily chores, or taking shortcuts at work.”

Gurnett also describes a kind of cynicism about life, another classic element of burnout. “It got to the point where I wasn’t excited at all about the things I once cared about, like posting on my blog, which had always been my passion project,” she says. You may start to notice that you feel disengaged from activities you loved, like hobbies or plans with friends, says Davis-Laack. “You unplug from things that used to give you joy.”

Even getting through your to-do list can, ironically, lead to the third major component of burnout, which is a sense of inefficacy. “You feel like, ‘Man, I’m putting in all this effort, but I’m not seeing any results or getting any recognition,’” says Davis-Laack. Jocelyn Negron-Rios feels that way daily. Since she had her second child, the 37-year-old executive assistant’s responsibilities at work have increased, and her husband puts in lots of late nights and travels for business. “With my 11-year-old and the preteen drama, plus a 3-year-old who never stops moving, there are times I’m overwhelmed to the point of wanting to curl up in a closet and cry,” she says. “In fact, I’ve done exactly that, just to get some quiet time.” Even though she knows she’s accomplishing a lot, Negron-Rios often feels as if she doesn’t measure up. “I can’t truly be present with anyone because my mind is going in 50 million directions at once,” she frets. “I’m constantly thinking of what I have to do so all the balls I’m juggling don’t drop.”

Unlike garden-variety stress, burnout typically can’t be
What’s amazing is that even if the vast majority of your day—the two. In contrast, you can pin burnout on external forces— what you do is antithetical to flourishing.

If you identify too closely with what you do for a living, you may be ‘burnout prone.’ “What you do isn’t the totality of who you are,” says media mogul Arianna Huffington, author of Thrive. Make time for what you love outside the grind, whether that’s doing yoga, blogging, or making your friends laugh. “Confusing what you do with who you are,” says Huffington, “eventually leads you to choices that are antithetical to flourishing.”

If you take steps to change a bad situation, you may be... BURNOUT-PROTECTED /// Engaged people change a situation at work or home when they don’t like it,” says Bakker. “That’s how they stay engaged.” That might mean asking to take on new tasks when a job gets boring, or asking friends for help when you’re feeling down.

If you’re extroverted, you may be... BURNOUT-PROTECTED /// Outgoing types are better able to resist the downward spiral of burnout, possibly because they get more support from friends, according to Arnold Bakker, Ph.D., a leading expert on burnout. Still, you might need alone time, too. Research also suggests that a dose of quiet can make you feel less spent. For instance, if you’re frazzled, take a 30-second walk down the hall, slip into an empty conference room, and do some work there.

If you’re a perfectionist, you may be... BURNOUT-PROTECTED /// You might kick butt at a job but also find yourself hustling toward the fryer. “If you’re always wanting to take on more, you’re likely to end up mentally exhausted,” says Ron Epstein, M.D. To recognize when your perfectionism isn’t helping (do you really need to triple-check a work email or fold your kid’s laundry), you might try asking friends for help when you’re feeling down.

WHAT’S YOUR BURNOUT RISK? HERE’S HOW WE SEE IT:

M A K I N G T I M Y C H A N G E S I N Y O U R T H I N K I N G A N D Y O U R D A I L Y H A B I T S C A N A L S O M A K E A H U G E D I F F E R E N C E I N H O W Y O U F E E L W H E N Y O U A R E A R R I V I N G O F F W O R K . "L e a r n i n g h o w t o n o t i c e s m a l l s i g n s — a k n o t h i n g in y o u r s t a m a c h , t e n s i o n in y o u r n e c k — t h e n c o n t r a c t i n g t h e m w i t h i n f o r m a l , m i n d f u l m o m e n t s , c a n g o a l o n g w a y , " s a y s E p s t e i n . I n a 2 0 1 2 s t u d y h e c o a u n t h e r e d , h e f o u n d t h a t d o c t o r s w h o l e a r n e d t o d o m i n d f u l t h i n g s l i k e s h a r i n g p o s i t i v e p e r s o n a l e x p e r i e n c e s f r o m t h e i r d a y w i t h s o m e o n e o r t u n i n g i n t o t h e i r e m o t i o n s a n d p h y s i c a l s e n s a t i o n s f e l t m o r e e n g a g e d a s t h e y w o r k e d . W h a t t h a t m e a n s f o r f o r s o m e o f u s w h o a r e n ’ t M . D .’ s : W h e n y o u f i n d y o u r s e l f g e t t i n g i r r a t e d a t y o u r k i d f o r n o r m a l r e a s o n , i n s e a t h o w p o i n t t o t h e n t a s k , f o r c e y o u r s e l f t o p a u s e . T a k e a d e e p b r e a t h . A c k n o w l e d g e t h a t y o u ’ r e f e e l i n g s t r e s s e d . E v e n t u a l l y , t h a t m e n d u s s w i l l b e c o m e m o r e a u t o m a t i c , a n d w i l l k e e p y o u f r o m f e e l i n g o v e r w h e l m e d i n t h e f i r s t p l a c e . G r a n k e d , e n t i r e o u t t i m e t o r e l a x i s h a r d w h e n y o u r h e a d i s a b o u t t o e x p l o d e . T a k e b a d e s t a p l e s : I n s t e a d o f r o l l i n g o u t o f b e d , m a k i n g c o f f e e , c h e c k i n g e m a i l a n d t h r u m m i n g i n a l o a d o f l a u n d r y b e f o r e h u s t l i n g t h e k i d s o f f t o s c h o o l , k e e p y o u r d o o r c l o s e d f o r f i v e m i n u t e s a n d w r i t e i n a j o u r n a l o r d o a f e w y o g a p o s e s . “ S t a r t i n g y o u r d a y t h i s w a y h e l p s y o u g e t c e n t e r e d , w h i c h i s w h e n y o u ’ l l u p o u t d o i n g y o u r b e s t w o r k , ” s a y s J o a n B u r y s e n s k o , P h . D . , a u t h o r o f F r i e d : W h y Y o u F e e l U p w i t h o u t R e v i v e . M a n y w o m e n s a y , a 3 7 - y e a r - o l d s o c i a l w o r k e r a n d m o t h e r o f t w o ( w h o d o e s n ’ t w a n t t o u s e h e r l a s t n a m e ) , t h o u g h s h e f o u n d h e r w o r k — c o n s e r v e r y s i c k p e o p l e a n d t h e i r f a m i l i e s — m e a n i n g f u l , “ t h e s a d n e s s o f t h e j o b s p l e d g e d i n t o t h e r e s t o f y o u r l i f e , ” s h e s a y s . “ I t ’ s o u t t h a t i t ’ s t i m e f o r a c h a n g e . ” W o m e n a r e r u n n i n g a r o u n d s o m u c h t h a t w e d o n ’ t t a k e t h e t i m e t o r e a l l y b a c k o f f a n d l o o k a t o u r l i v e s , ” s a y s B u r y s e n s k o . T o a v o i d t h o s e c l o s e d t e m p o r a r y s e s , N e g r o - R o s s s a y s t h a t e v e r y s o o f t e n , s h e t a k e s s t e p s b a c k . “ I l e t t h e b a l l s d r o p f o r m a g i o n a n d g e t i n t o a g o o d b o o k . O r I l e a v e w o r k a t t h e o f f i c e a n d w o v e n o t t o l o g i n a f t e r s o r o r s o c a n r e a l l y b e a t h e r e . ” T h a t ’ s s m a r t , s a y s E p s t e i n : “ M a k i n g s m a l l c o m m i t m e n t s t o d o t h i n g s f o r y o u r s e l f t h a t a r e m i n d f u l , l i k e f o c u s i n g o n y o u r l u n c h i n s t e a d o f l o o k i n g a t a c o m p u t e r s c r e e n w h i l e e a t i n g , c a n b e m o r e i m p o r t a n t f o r y o u r s t a t e o f m i n d t h a n m a k i n g w e e k l o n d a v a c a t i o n . E n j o y y o u r l u n c h . B e i n g i n t h e p r e s e n t . ” I t c a n a l s o h e l p t o m a k e a c o n sc i o u s e f f o r t t o t a l k a b o u t e x p e r i e n c e s t h a t h a v e g o n e w e l l i n y o u r d a y . “ I t ’ s t h e o p p o s i t e o f s e n t i n g , ” s a y s E p s t e i n . I f y o u w o r k , y o u c o u l d t e l l c o w o r k e r s a b o u t p o s i t i v e i n t e r a c t i o n s y o u h a d w i t h a c l i e n t i n s t e a d o f p i l i n g o n t h e c o m p l a i n t s . F o r a f r a z z l e d m o m , t h a t m i g h t m e a n t e l e g i n g h e r m i t t e r o n s e t c a s e u p a t t h e p l a y g r o u n d .