DR. FAITH'S FIVE MINUTE THERAPY

UNF#CK YOUR BURNOUT

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR OVERWHELMING LIFE

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Unfuck Your Burnout: How to Survive Your Overwhelming Life

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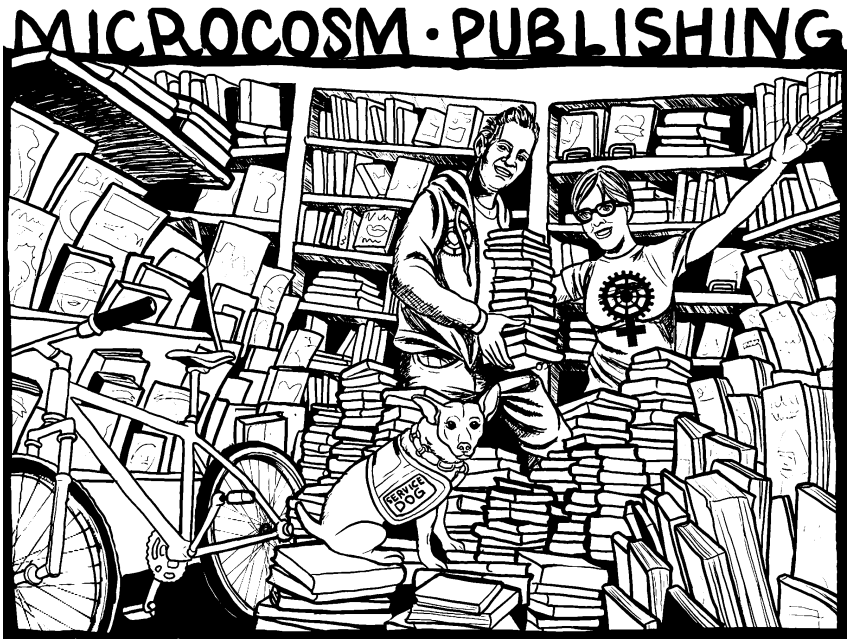

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To be human is to burn the fuck out. Burnout is by no means a new, modern ailment. The concept of burnout has existed throughout human literature (from the Old Testament to Shakespeare) and has been scientifically studied enough to be *operationalized*. Meaning, researchers took a big and vague concept and were able to measure and define and make sense of it in as science-y a way as possible.

Meaning it's not just a "Oh, you seem super tired rn, why don't you take a personal day." *Burnout is a response to stressful events.*

And because I am writing this zine in 2022, fully two years into the COVID-19 pandemic (though I live in Texas where we are pretending that it's over), burnout is especially relevant. We started off tracking burnout rates early on in the pandemic. An article in *Nature* noted that self-reported rates of burnout doubled from 2019 to 2020. I think everyone else was too busy trying to parent through zoom and gloom to answer the survey, tbh.

But what is burnout exactly? Let's start with how the World Health Organization (WHO) defines it: a syndrome "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."[1]

First off, that's vague and victim-blamey. Second, it doesn't operationalize what stress is (so we are gonna do that, too).

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1 Burnout is something that doesn't exist in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), though it is in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), not as a primary diagnosis but a factor that influences life management and health status (Z 73.0 is the specific ICD code for burnout if you're curious).

Finally, it frames burnout as a workplace-specific phenomenon. This is probably because all the research around burnout is workplace-centered, which I feel ought not be the case. Stress exists in all life domains. So if burnout is a response to stress, it doesn't take a huge leap of logic to recognize that it can exist in any part of our lives. Hopefully the COVID-19 pandemic years have made that apparent and burnout research will start to expand past workplace scenarios and reflect that.

But in the meantime? Let's do a little mini-review (a written tik-tok if you will) of what stress is.

Stress is physiological. It's how our body responds to life events with the appropriate output of resources. Stress is heavily influenced by our life events (stressors), the chronic nature of them, and even our perceptions of them. Kelly McGonigal, in her book *The Upside of Stress,* defines stress in terms of *meaning.* Things are stressful to us because they fucking matter to us.

Whether the situation is good or bad or some kind of weird chaotic neutral, we can hit a point where we run out of the resources that we need to cope with the situation. And that is what **distress** is. The point of resource depletion. The point where we need support. It isn't something you can do on your own. It isn't a term that identifies someone as tragically fucked up. It's a clinical term that we understand to mean: *this person needs some help.*

A lot of people had to quickly convert their home-lives to being their everything-lives in 2020. They didn't always lose their jobs, but had to find ways to do them from home. Their kids moved to video-based school and it wasn't great

but it was . . . manageable. At first. And then weeks became months became years. Things could have been so much worse, absolutely. And both perspective and gratitude are important.

But? We experienced losses both tangible and intangible.[2] There were moments of big, spiky grief. And then there was this more nebulous, continuous stream of grief and loss and bereavement of our former lives as we continued to try to create some level of new normal. And there is only so much of that that anyone can take.

Everyone responds to events based on how we evaluate them. How we evaluate them is based on our past histories, our past success in handling stressful situations, our available resources, our perceptions of how other people are handling things in the past and present, etc. And holy hell, this was too much for anyone to sustain for as long as we all did without some emotional damage.

But that begs an interesting question. What is the nature of that emotional damage? We were calling it burnout, but were we putting a new term on an old problem?

When a more complex model of burnout than just "really fucking tired" emerged from research, the question became: *Is burnout really just depression wearing different pants?* Burnout and depression do share some features (loss of interest, impaired concentration). Or since stress can lead to anxiety, we might ask: *Is burnout anxiety wearing a new and interesting hat?* Basically, researchers wanted to know if we are renaming a condition we already know about and therefore

2 As discussed, listicle style, in my book *Unfuck Your Grief*.

not providing people the appropriate treatment options they really need.

Singular studies comparing burnout with depression and anxiety[3] showed mixed results. So a couple researchers bundled up all these studies and ran something known as a meta analysis, which is just when someone combines the data from a multitude of scientific studies addressing the same question in order to get an overall answer to what each individual study was trying to figure out.

And short answer? Burnout, anxiety, and depression are all their own unique constructs. Burnout isn't depression or anxiety being misnamed. Which means you may also be experiencing depression or anxiety (or both, lucky you). But you may also be experiencing "just" burnout. And medications for depression or anxiety won't support you feeling better.

Burnout isn't nebulous and undefinable, it is a predictor of many physical diseases, just like many other mental health conditions, most likely related to the chronic stress component of it. It's been correlated with headaches, chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal issues, sleep issues, more frequent colds and flus, As well as increasingly serious issues including substance abuse, coronary heart disease, respiratory illness, and overall early mortality. Which means we should take it as seriously as we would any other medical condition.

3 Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory, depression was measured with the Patient Health Questionnaire, and anxiety was measured with General Anxiety Disorder.

The elements of burnout

So let's dig deeper into what burnout is. As mentioned earlier, burnout has appeared throughout human literature as a common human condition. But it usually was only referred to as the emotional exhaustion that comes with constant stress becoming continuing distress.

One of the names you will see associated most with burnout research is that of social psychologist, Christina Maslach. Social psychologists focus on how people operate within society, therefore Dr. Maslach suspected that burnout was more than just our experience of exhaustion, but the interconnected system of how our internal world affects and is affected by our social systems. That is, burnout only exists in a social context. It isn't purely individual. Her research on the construct, found that three distinct components emerged: emotional exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and reduced personal accomplishment.

Emotional Exhaustion: This is the part we all think of when we think of burnout. The feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources. It's when we feel drained all the time, with no space for replenishment. We feel overloaded and in conflict with most everyone around us. *This is considered the individual stress dimension of burnout.*

Cynicism: This is when our responses to those around us become detached, cynical, or negative. It develops as a buffer against the constant experience of emotional exhaustion. We're feeling raw and overwhelmed so we emotionally check out. We end up disconnected from

and sometimes even dehumanizing those around us. *This is considered the interpersonal dimension of burnout.*

Reduced personal accomplishment: This is our sense of not being as competent or accomplished in our tasks. Because the burnout model is specifically about work, this is what is being referenced…but I think it easily extends to other life domains, because no area of life is task-free and doesn't have people who rely on us. Whether or not our ability to do a good or adequate job has actually been impeded, our internal report card is one of failure. *Which is why this is considered the self-evaluation dimension of burnout.*

Early research presumed that the emotional exhaustion element kicked in first, in response to high demands and overload which would lead to a negative interpersonal appraisal, which then would lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. It may not be so cleanly sequential in reality (life is messy in reality), but it makes sense that a physiological exhaustion leads to emotional exhaustion which becomes the main tipping point for the other relational changes that then take place.

Well that all fucking sucks, what's the solution?

Once the components of burnout had been operationalized, the next task of social psychologists was to figure out what the opposite of burnout was. Researchers ended up settling on a construct they termed **engagement**. Engagement (in this case) refers not to tasting wedding cake flavors and putting a

deposit on a venue, but a state of being where you consider the time you spend as being productive and fulfilling in the domain you are in. Again, they are studying work. And, again, I'd say this fits in any life domain.

If we are comparing the three components of engagement to the three components of burnout, we would see:

- High energy
- Strong involvement
- A sense of efficacy

These all sound great, right? So how do you get there?

If you Google "managing burnout" you are going to get a lot of hits. I got a return of 36,100,000 results. And they were all in the vein of "roll your body in coconut oil and do yoga." No shade to either—I happen to be a yoga teacher, and while I don't roll around in coconut oil (no kinksharming if that's your bag), I do cook with it regularly.

In terms of managing burnout, those are *individual strategies.* Sometimes the only power we have in a situation is the power of our own response. And I appreciate that's sometimes what we have to roll with.

Since I can't hand you a jar of coconut oil and a slip and slide, I'm going to share a therapeutic training technique that has been consistently the most helpful for my clients during the pandemic. It's not an in-the-moment distress tolerance skill, but a learning-to-ride-the-bike skill that takes some practice.

The idea is that when the overwhelm arises, we typically respond in one of two ways. We let it pull us under (understandably so). Or we try to overpower it so we can struggle through (also very understandable).

However, powering through is just as untenable in the long run as giving up. The metaphor I share with my clients is that it's like trying to hold a beach ball underwater. You can use all your time and attention and focus on doing so, but eventually our focus gets distracted for just a second or our arms get a bit tired and the ball pops up and smacks us in the face.

And that brings us back to the reality we were all living in. Researchers have found that **metacognitive therapy techniques** are effective at keeping the prefrontal cortex online because they focus on *how* we are thinking.

This is different from cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on *what* we are thinking, with the assumption that our thoughts are wrong. But I am writing this when we are more than two years into having very little autonomy and control into a very fucked up situation, suffused with grief and rage and burnout and pretty much every other negative emotion we could pull off the emotion wheel. Which means what we are thinking is both accurate and realistic and traditional CBT skills are less helpful.

Just like the term meta implies, we are going one step up to look at the bigger picture. The idea is that when we are burned out, *how we think* about a fucked up situation becomes sticky, making persistent issues with anxiety almost inevitable. That is, we focus on the anxiety because it pops up and our brains start yelling "this is super important…drop everything!"

This technique is designed to be something you practice until it becomes your new cognitive habit, just like going to the gym and working out until you have strength and lung capacity to go hiking without exhausting or injuring yourself. It's adapted from an exercise used by the Metacognitive Therapy Institute, which suggests practicing the technique twice a day for four weeks to build a solid neural pathway for this process. I know this seems like a big time hog of a project, but in reality, you are really only looking at spending 10-15 minutes each practice session.

To do the exercise, take a seat wherever you like, and:

- Identify two sounds in your area that are different in loudness and not close to each other. This can be the clock on the wall ticking while you listen to music on your phone or tap on a table.
- Spend a few minutes changing your focus of attention between the two, both the sound and the placement of the sound.
- Once you feel comfortable shifting your focus slowly, spend some time shifting back and forth rapidly, again on both the sounds and the placement of the sound.
- Once you have the shifting down, spend a few minutes practicing noticing both at the same time.
- If there are other sounds going on in your environment and you're feeling sassy, go ahead and add them to the mix.

The point of this process is to help you notice what's going on in your mind and body, without trying to suppress it or become

consumed by it. Thinking is just something brains do that you can recognize, focus more attention on if it's a legitimate worry, or let it hum in the background if your brain is just spinning. Metacognitive therapist and author Pia Callesen uses the analogy of holding gum in your mouth without chewing it. You aren't getting consumed by the emotional overwhelm and you aren't trying to suppress it. You're recognizing it and tucking it away to deal with when you have better time and space and capacity to do so. The more you are able to keep your PFC online, the better you will be able to be effective in managing the fuckery being slung your way.

This isn't to say that doing yoga and the like isn't also incredibly effective for burnout, if that is something that really nourishes you. Anything that is supportive of healing your emotional exhaustion is something you should do more of.

Though sometimes doing more actually means doing less. Meaning, doing more nothing. We tend to think we need to add more self-care and sometimes self-care means saying "no" not just to stuff we don't want to do but also to stuff we really want to do. If hitting the gym or the sangha or the dojo or the studio or any of those places is incredibly healing for you, put that in your calendar and treat it like you would any other vital appointment. If you feel like you "ought" to be doing those things because you saw it on a burnout prevention listicle somewhere? Fuck it. Have a nice meal and a hot bath and go to bed at a reasonable hour instead. That's also excellent medicine.

The six relational domains of preventing burnout

Individual strategies can be helpful in a moment of overwhelm, but the research on burnout has found that social-organizational strategies are ultimately the most effective in combating burnout. Burnout is a relational problem that needs a relational solution.

All of these workers organizing and unionizing make my activist heart explody with joy. Whether you stage a revolution or not,[4] there are many things one can do formally or informally in any environment to combat burnout at a relational (social-organizational) level.

Six key domains have been identified as means of empowering people and preventing and/or treating burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values.

Workload: When a workload is consistently pushed into overload it is not sustainable and manageable. There isn't time to rest, recover, and restore balance. Instead, our capacity to meet demand becomes depleted and we have no time to refine and enhance existing skills or learn and become effective in new ones. Even in fast paced environments and busy time periods, expectations can be set that we're human and we are doing the best we can and we are all helping each other out. And that takes off the pressure of going 100 mph until collapse. You can value healthy meals, but use a meal delivery service or pre-prepped ingredients for cooking if you can afford to. You can

4 This is where the FBI agent currently assigned to me pops an Imitrex. Sorry again, Agent 626.

use the hell out of your crock pot and freeze leftovers for the next week rather than doing fancy gourmet shit every day. You can use compostable plates and cutlery to knock down the time you spend on dishes after. Look at where you are spending a ton of time and see where you save time without losing out on things that are important to you.

Control: When we lack autonomy and do not have the capacity to influence decision making processes, we are far more likely to experience burnout. When a task needs to be done, but people are given the flexibility to create a system around how they work rather than be expected to adapt to a system? Game changer. (Like… why can't people sit down to be comfortable? Or stand? Or bounce on a bouncy ball? Or write a paper by talk-to-text? Or what the fuck ever gets the job done?)

Recognition/Reward: When our efforts are devalued (either financially, institutionally, or socially) we are far more likely to experience burnout. The fight over a minimum wage increase astonishes me. I don't know why anyone thinks $15 an hour is a lot of money and fast food work is unskilled. That's a rant for another day, maybe? I suspect the system won't collapse any more than it did with two years of no student loan payments being made, bless. Valuing people's labor financially is huge. But people need to be recognized in other non-financial ways as well. And that's somewhere we can start immediately. And I don't mean just the "yaaay, pizza party for the crew" kind of way (not turning down pizza, tho…dairy free cheese on mine plz). But

things like consistently thanking people for how they show the fuck up for us. For being the people we can rely on. The people who have our backs in literal and figurative ways. But also pay us what we're worth, yakoke.

Community: When we feel like we don't belong, we experience burnout. We don't quit jobs, we quit bosses. We quit coworkers. We leave clubs and groups and schools and relationships when we don't belong in them or perceive ourselves as not belonging in them. But when we have social support and we have effective means of working out disagreements, we feel engaged. One of the things I suggest to clients who are going back to school is to organize their cohort for success. Share contact information. Create google docs for group note taking for study materials. Share resources. Build a team to help everyone who wants to work together be successful together.

Fairness: This is the perception of equity in situations. Meaning the quality of the procedures in place that impact you and how you are treated in the decision making process. While nothing can be perfectly fair all the time, the more we can give voice that we are striving for that and attending to equity and respect the better. This means paying people what they are worth. But it also refers to things that don't cost a dime. Like making sure the people without kids get just as many holidays off as the people with kids. And respecting how people want to be addressed (names and pronouns).

Values: These are the ideals and motivation for our engagement to begin with. What is the utilitarian exchange in the relationship? In work it is our time and labor for money and satisfaction and advancement and pride. In volunteer work it's time and labor in order to feel a sense of accomplishment and commitment to change. When the values we are committed to are lacking, the sense of burnout increases. I am lucky to have a job now where what I do I highly value. In the past I had shit jobs where the job itself was . . . fine . . . but it was food service and I didn't value it in and of itself. But I did value my relationships within it. I valued my relationships with my co-workers and individuals I supervised. I valued my relationships with my customers, especially my regulars. Like the pregnant lady who had a specific tuna and pickle sandwich concoction that I fixed for her several times a week and we chatted each time and became friends. There are many different ways of connecting to our value systems in different situations, and it makes all the difference in the world when we can.

Questions For Consideration:

1)If these six domains add up to engagement, which are most lacking in your life at the moment? If more than one, which is the most pressing issue/most emotionally distressing?

2)Which aspects of this domain are out of your control?

3) Which aspects are in your control?

4) Who are your definite allies in creating change?

5) Who are your maybe allies in creating change?

6) What other advantages do you and your allies have on your side?

7) Idea dump time: What are all the possible ways you (and your allies) could address strengthening this domain?

8) Which seems the most doable?

9) Second idea dump time: What are all the possible strategies you (and your allies) can think of to approach a structural domain change?

10) Which seems the most doable?

There you go…you have a possible action plan for shoring up a really important area of engagement to ward off (or repair) some burnout in your life in a strategically relational way. That hopefully won't send Agent 626 to the hospital again. Because sometimes changing ourselves and our responses isn't enough . . . sometimes the world needs changing, too.

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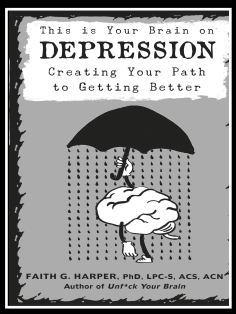

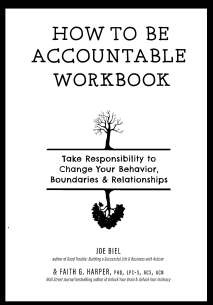

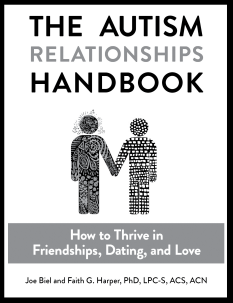

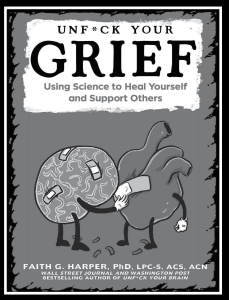

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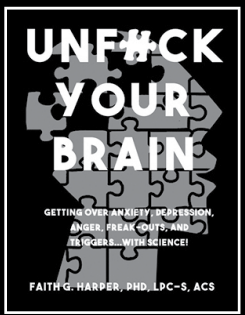

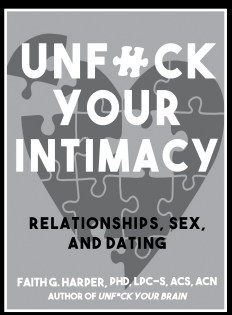

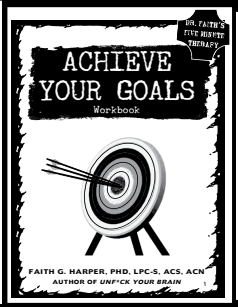

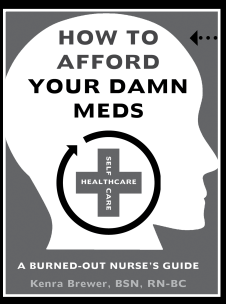

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