

# Burnout & The Stress Cycle

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ASHLEY LICHTLE

ADAPTED FROM *BURNOUT: THE SECRET TO UNLOCKING THE STRESS CYCLE*  
BY EMILY AND AMELIA NAGOSKI



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“To be ‘well’ is not to live in a state of perpetual safety and calm, but to move fluidly from a state of adversity, risk, adventure, or excitement, back to safety and calm, and out again. Stress is not bad for you; being stuck is bad for you.”

- Emily & Amelia Nagoski



# Key Definitions

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**Burnout** — the cumulative psychological strain of working with *many different stressors*. It often manifests as exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy.

**Vicarious Trauma** — the cumulative effect of working with survivors of trauma or the work-related exposure to trauma.

**Secondary Traumatic Stress** — this term is used to describe a professional's signs and symptoms of PTSD that mirror those experienced by the clients/survivors they support.

**Compassion Fatigue** — the emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others.



# Signs of Burnout

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**Exhaustion:** Chronically feeling physically, and emotionally drained. Eventually, chronic exhaustion leads people to **disconnect or distance themselves emotionally and cognitively** from their work or families, likely to cope with the overload.

**Cynicism:** People just bug you and rub you the wrong way, and you start to distance yourself from these people by actively ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging, and the **result is less empathy and caring.**

**Inefficacy:** Inefficacy is the “why bother, who cares” mentality that appears as you struggle to identify important resources and as it becomes more difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment and impact in your work or parenting.

[Source](#)



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# Signs of Burnout

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- Headaches
- Feeling Negative or Overly Critical
- Unexplained Exhaustion
- Irritable
- Becoming Physically Ill
- Insomnia or Change in Sleep Patterns
- Endless Anxiety
- Feeling Inadequate &/or Hopeless
- Neglect Self Care
- Feeling Numb or Apathetic About Life



# Stressors

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Stressors activate the stress response in your body.

- Senses
- Imagination
  
- External Stressors
  - Work
  - Family
  - Expectation
  - Discrimination
  
- Internal Stressors
  - Self-criticism
  - Body image
  - The Future



# Collective Stressors

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- Pandemic
  - Vaccine access and availability
- Political turmoil
  - Insurrection
  - Leadership Transition
- Racial and Civil Unrest
- Economic
- Natural Disasters



# Key Components

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- Workload
- Control
- Reward
- Community
- Fairness
- Values

# Stress

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Stress is “the neurological and physiological shift that happens in your body when you encounter one of these threats” (p 5.)

Your Body’s Neurological and Hormonal Response:

- Heartbeat quickens
- Muscle's tense
- Attention is alert and vigilant
- Senses are heightened
- Other organ systems are de-prioritized

**The entire body and mind is changed in response to a perceived threat.**



# The Stress Cycle

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Eliminating the Stressor **does not** complete the Stress Cycle.

You know you're "out of danger" but your body hasn't been given a signal yet, so your body remains on high alert.

You manage the day-to-day stressors, but your body manages the stress.

**Why are we so often unable to complete the stress cycle?**



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# Why We Get Stuck— Podcast Clip

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[Brene Brown & the authors discuss getting stuck.](#)



# Emotions as Tunnels

Difficult emotions are the tunnels, and we are the trains.

There are no exits on the sides, stopping in the middle leaves you stuck, and rushing it doesn't work.

We worry ruminate on these emotions and stay stuck in them, which burns us out.

Moving through the tunnel (emotion) gets through to the light at the end.



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# Human Giver Syndrome

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“ ‘Human Giver Syndrome’ is the contagious (but false) belief that some people (usually women) have a moral obligation to be attentive to the needs of others – these are the Human Givers – while others have a moral obligation to be competitive, acquisitive, and infallible – the Human Beings.”

Author Kate Manne suggests these terms to explain sexual violence perpetrated by men against women, but it can also explain a primary reason why so many women get stuck in their emotions; Human Givers aren't allowed to have “needs.”



# The Stress Cycle– Getting Stuck

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Common reasons for not completing the stress cycle:

- Our stressors are CHRONIC – even if we listen to our body and complete the cycle today the stressor will be there again tomorrow.
- It's not SOCIALLY APPROPRIATE– your brain tells you to respond to the stress, but you can't because it would impolite.
- It's SAFER– sometimes stress presents itself in ways that could be a danger to you if you respond, so smiling or being nice or quietly walking away are the safest response.



# How to Complete the Cycle

- Physical Activity (20-60 minutes)
  - Most effective
- Breathing (2 minutes)
  - 5-5-10 Method 3x
- Positive Social Interaction (1 minute)
- Laughter (1+ minutes)
- Affection (6+ seconds)
  - Six-second kiss
  - Warm Hug
  - Pets
- A Big Ol' Cry (5+ minutes)
- Creative Expression



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# Strategies

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**Use coping strategies that are realistic now:** the strategies you used before to complete the cycle may not be appropriate now. What are strategies that are realistic for today? Lower the bar and find what works for you **in the moment**.

**Look for good enough:** “what choices can I make that will make life satisfying enough” – rather than searching for perfection during a time of such uncertainty.

**Give yourself a break!:** Self-compassion is important. You are doing the best you can and surviving during a global pandemic is challenging.



# Signs You Need to Deal with Stress, Even If It Means Ignoring the Stressor

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- You notice yourself doing things that are repetitive or unproductive or engaging in self-destructive behaviors
- You react in an out of proportion way to what is happening presently
- You are hiding from life
- Your body feels out of whack



# How Do You Know?

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Your body tells you that the stress response cycle is complete like it does when you are eating and your body signals that you are full.

For some people it is easier to identify than for others— it can be an intuitive shift felt in the body.

Others may not have the same intuitive feeling— especially those with accumulated stress. (from incomplete stress cycles over time)

While you work to get through the “backlog” of stress, recognize that you feel incrementally better than before you started.



# Practical Advice

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- Find what works
- Have a go-to strategy and a backup strategy
- Schedule it
- Make it a priority
- Practice



# Tips for Supervisors

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Create norms that are supportive.

Be an example.

Offer sincere moments of positive interactions.

Check yourself.

“Here’s the ultimate moral of the story:

Wellness is not a state of being, but a state of action.”

- Emily & Amelia Nagoski



# Resources From This Training

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- Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle
- The Unlocking Us Podcast with Brene Brown
- Down Girl Kate Manne (Human Giver Syndrome)
  
- Training guides:
  - Book Website: <https://www.burnoutbook.net/>
  - Parent Self Care: <https://parentselfcare.com/free-downloads-to-boost-your-selfcare>
  
- Burnout Response for Supervisors:  
<https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/resources/burnout-response-for-leaders>



# Thank You!!

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