

A Non- Exhaustive Tool Kit for Burn Out

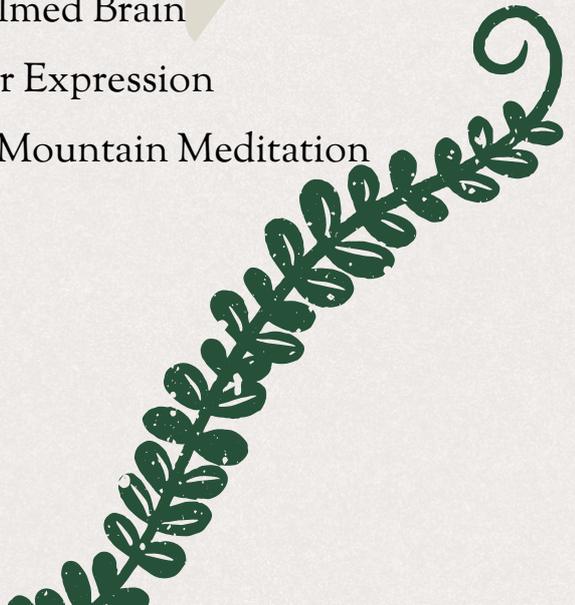
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What is Burn Out?

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and overwork.

Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter, two prominent psychologists in the field of burnout, highlight how systemic stressors, such as workplace conditions and societal expectations, significantly contribute to this experience.

These stressors are often rooted in exploitative or unjust systems like capitalism and colonialism, which prioritize profit and productivity over human well-being. As people who live within these unfair systems, we are constantly being exposed to these stressors as our baseline. When you add in other factors on top of these baseline stressors, it's no wonder so many of us struggle with feelings of burnout! The more we are subjected to baseline systematic stress, the more likely we are to feel the effects of burnout and be more sensitive to other stressors.

*Maslach developed the [*Maslach Burnout Inventory, a widely used tool for assessing burnout*](#)*



While there is a spectrum to these experiences that is important to understand, it is also important to understand that we are all living under these systems and so are all affected in some way. The effects of colonialism and capitalism together affect our sense of security and belonging and create scarcity we can all relate to in some way. For example, housing issues, labour exploitation, and access to health resources as a few avenues where these larger systems affect our sense of self and add to our stress levels by putting profit over people, productivity over well being.

Consider:

- **Housing Issues:** High rents and limited affordable housing options force many to work multiple jobs to survive.
- **Labour Exploitation:** Gig economy jobs and precarious work conditions leave workers without benefits or stability.
- **Health Disparities:** Marginalized groups face systemic barriers to accessing quality healthcare.



In relationship with the work done by Maslach and Leiter, there is also the work of Herbert Freudenberger and Gail North who developed the '12 stages of Burnout' in accordance with Freudenberger's work in 1974. I think its important to note that all of these psychologists noted the extra vulnerability people who work in care giving professions have to the experience of burnout. People who help, need help too.

The 12 stages:

- Compulsive Ambition: "I must prove myself"
- Working Harder: "I must do more"
- Neglecting Needs: "I don't have time for that"
- Avoiding Conflict: "Nothing is wrong"
- Revising Values: "This is more important"
- Denying Problems: "The problem is others"
- Withdrawal: "I need time alone"
- Concerning Others: "I'm fine, stop worrying"
- Depersonalization: "I just need to make it through today"
- Sense of Emptiness: "I don't feel much anymore"
- Depression: "Nothing really matters"
- Final Stage of Burnout: "I can't go on"

[Read more about the stages in this article, also linked in the resources page at the end.](#)

Helpful Definitions

- Colonialism: The domination and exploitation of peoples, lands, and cultures, historically and in the present.
- Capitalism: An economic system prioritizing profit over collective well-being and sustainability.
- Anti-Oppressive: Practices and perspectives that challenge systems of inequality and strive for equity.
- Commodified: Treating something as a product for sale, often reducing its intrinsic value.
- Marginalized: Communities or individuals pushed to the edges of society, denied access to resources and power.



How Can We Recognize Burnout?

Signs and Symptoms*:

- Physical: Fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances.
- Emotional: Irritability, apathy, feeling overwhelmed.
- Behavioural: Procrastination, withdrawal, increased substance use.

**Burnout can manifest differently for everyone, making it hard to track and understand. These are just some common things to look for.*

Ask Yourself:

- What physical, emotional, or behavioural signs have I noticed in myself recently?
- How does my body signal that it needs rest or care?
- What do I notice in myself when I'm overwhelmed?
- What happens when I am not resting?
- What emotions arise when I think about the changes I need to make?
- What support systems or practices can help me navigate these changes?

Grief and Burnout



When we reflect on burn out, we are bound to run into spaces that make us uncomfortable for a myriad of reasons.

Burn out comes when we are doing too much, when we recognize that we recognize a need for change and with all change comes at least some grief. In the case of burn out, it can look like recognizing limitations we didn't understand before. It can look like recognizing a change in our physical or emotional capacity, or maybe a desperate need for a professional or academic shift we weren't previously expecting.

It's important to leave space for grief. Make space for the disappointments and challenges that come with a necessary change. Make space for feelings of discomfort or let down, for feelings that come up when we are confronted with limitations and needs we didn't know we had because we weren't given an option before.

Ask yourself:

- How can I honour the grief that comes with recognizing burnout and the need for change?

**Sorry I didn't finish my to-do list,
the world feels cold and I need
to rest and warm my weary heart**

**Sorry I didn't finish my to-do list,
I am no longer letting my capitalist
conditioning trap me in the delusion
of my inadequacy**



**Sorry I didn't finish my to-do list,
I realized going slow was better
for my nervous system, health and
happiness**



Micro-Practices for Daily Life

Micro-practices can offer immediate relief and help you build a foundation for long-term well-being. While essential and very useful, they don't counteract systemic oppressions, which is why community care and collective action for cultural shifts are essential for lasting change!

- Say “no” to non-essential tasks or obligations that don't align with your values. It's uncomfortable to say no, but discomfort is not being unsafe and is an important feeling to grow tolerance for.
- Keep Reasonable Expectations in Mind
- Digital Hygiene: Schedule tech-free times, or limit notifications.
- Joyful Movement: Move feelings through our bodies for better processing and integration.
- Intentional Rest: Schedule regular breaks to breathe, meditate, or nap. Remember rest is essential to our growth!

Reflection Questions for Micro-Practices:

- What small actions or rituals bring me joy or a sense of calm during my day?
- Are there specific times when I feel most depleted? What could help restore my energy in those moments?
- What boundaries can I set to protect my time and energy? How can I practice saying “no” when needed?
- How does technology affect my sense of well-being? What changes can I make to improve my digital habits?
- How do I feel when I connect with others? What types of connections (e.g., social, supportive, creative) nourish me most?
- What forms of movement feel good for my body, and how can I incorporate them in small ways?
- What activities or rest practices help me feel more grounded and present?

Spectrum of Consent

By Kai Cheng Thom, inspired by the work of Betty Martin

Enduring



This is hurting me but I don't feel able to say no

Tolerating



This is something I am putting up with

Willing



This is something I am "okay" or neutral about

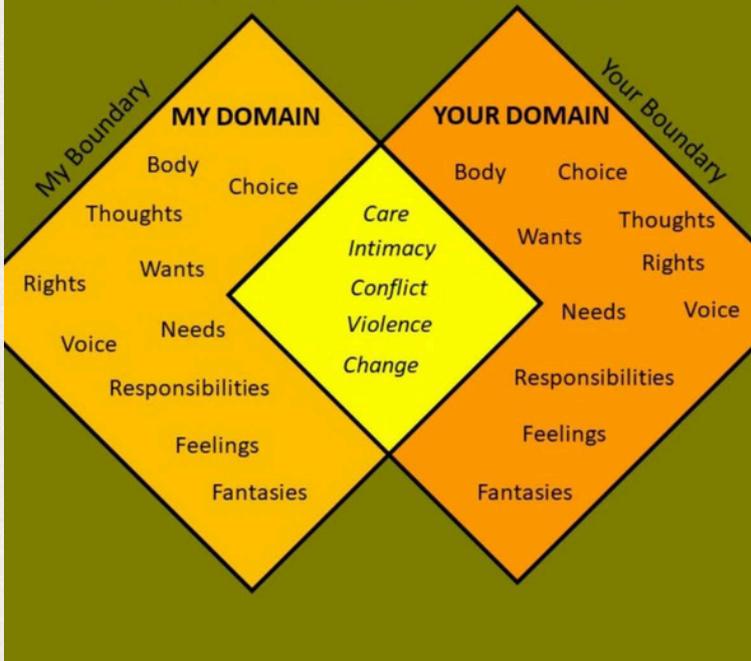
Wanting



This makes me feel good

Understanding Boundaries

by Kai Cheng Thom, adapted from the work of Betty Martin



These tools are by Kai Cheng Thom, a writer and activist deeply committed to fostering understanding and collective healing.



Collective Action for Recovery

Let's talk about mutual aid in relationship to burnout.

Mutual aid involves communities coming together to share resources and support one another without the hierarchies of charity or government systems. As Dean Spade, a professor at Seattle University for Law and author, outlines in his book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* mutual aid fosters interdependence, empowers communities, and resists oppressive systems that often fail to meet people's needs. Spade highlights the transformative potential of mutual aid in creating equitable and sustainable support structures. It destigmatizes asking for help by recognizing interdependence as a strength.

It can look like a lot of things! Some examples include:

- Financial Support: Crowdfunding, shared community funds, or informal loans.
- Acts of Service: Cooking meals, childcare, or offering transportation.
- Emotional Support: Active listening, peer counseling, or hosting check-in circles.
- Skill-Sharing: Teaching others skills like budgeting, gardening, or self-care practices.

Accessibility and Inclusion

We are all different and live at different levels on the spectrum of accessibility needs and different levels for how impacted we are by the systems we live under. Burn out is a nuanced issue that requires care and subjectivity. It also requires a lot of work around accepting our capacities and recognizing that they shift day to day, season to season, year to year.

Part of the preventative work in managing burnout, is working to undo any shame we feel around our changing needs and energy levels.

Embracing Low Days Without Judgement

It's okay to have low-energy days. Acknowledge your needs without shame and remind yourself that rest is essential. Reflect on the following:

- What judgments arise when I'm not feeling productive?
- How can I challenge the belief that my worth is tied to productivity?
- What small acts of care can I offer myself today?
- What expectations of others can I put down to release judgement towards them and myself?



List for an Overwhelmed Brain

1. Name your feeling

2. Locate the feeling in your body. Describe its sensations.

3. Identify the thought pattern/trigger.

4. What is in your control? What is out of your control? Where can you give yourself space?

5. what are your needs?

6. what are your wants?

7. where can you compromise?

8. What resources are available to me? A friend? A colleague? A breathing exercise? A toolkit? A list?

9. What is a small step I can take to feeling secure right now? Take a drink of water? Make a list? Ask for help? Change scenery?

10. Repeat an affirmation to offer yourself kindness and reassurance: This feeling will pass. I am doing my best. I can only focus on one thing at a time.

Use these steps to build compassion for yourself and practice creating space between you and your emotions.

Bonus: answer questions 8 and 9 when you're feeling secure to alleviate guesswork when you're overwhelmed.

Creative Prompts for Processing



Burnout



Creative projects can be powerful tools for processing emotions and connecting to yourself. We can only intellectualize something so much before we get stuck in negative thought patterns. Processing feelings involves doing things to express and move through them. Try these:

Visual Art Prompts:

- Draw your current mood as a weather system.
- Create a visual map of things that bring you security.
- Create a collage (or whatever you want; a meal, a painting, a poem, etc.) that represents pleasure.

Movement Practices:

- Touch grass.
- Gentle body rocking
- Self Hugs
- Box breathing
- Joyful Movement
- EFT tapping
- Somatic Work

Writing Prompts:

- Write a letter to a future that excites you.
- Describe your ideal day in vivid detail.
- Build the character that represents your grief and write a narrative for it.
- Explore the question: "What do I need to let go of, and what will that open up?"

Stop and Ground Techniques

Here are a few stop and ground techniques, there are lots to explore though! Try googling other quick grounding methods to find the one that works for you.

1. Five Senses Grounding (5-4-3-2-1 Method)

Prompt: Name what you experience through your senses.

Action:

5 things you can see

4 things you can touch

3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste or imagine
tasting

Affirmation: "I am present here
and now."

2. Name What You Know Is True

Prompt: Reaffirm certainty to ground yourself in reality.

Action:

Silently or aloud, state simple truths:

"I am in [this place]."

"I am [age or name]."

"Today is [date]."

"I am breathing."

Affirmation: "I am grounded
and here in this moment."

3. Take a Pause

Prompt: Notice the urge to act or react immediately. Can you pause for a moment before doing anything?

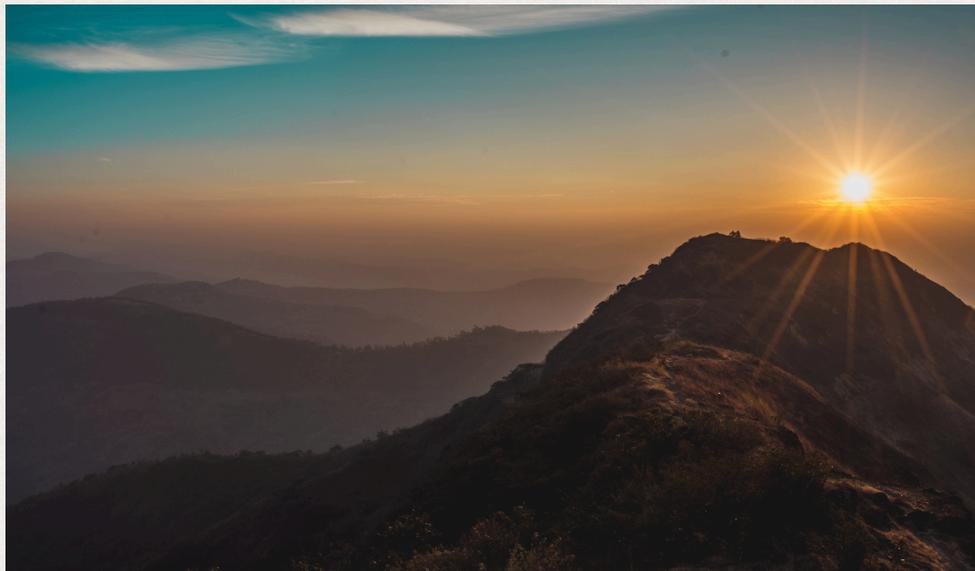
Action: Close your eyes (if comfortable).

Place one hand on your heart and the other on your belly.

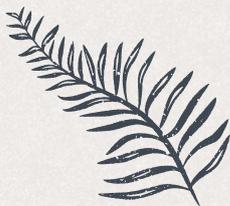
Take 3 deep breaths: Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, exhale for 6 seconds.

Affirmation: "I can take a moment before responding."

Mountain Meditation: A Micro-Practice For Grounding



Find a comfortable place to sit, somewhere you can find a moment of quiet. Make yourself comfortable, allow yourself to settle into space. Release the tension in your forehead, your jaw, your shoulders, your fingers, your toes....and enter into this 8 minute grounding meditation by clicking the image of a mountain or this piece of text here, both will redirect you to a video.





Further Resources to Explore:

Digital Tools:

- Calm or Insight Timer for meditation.
- Forest or Focus Keeper for time management.
- Finch App

Podcasts/Videos:

- [Tricia Hersey: Rest & Collective Care for Collective Liberation](#)
- [The Art of Science and Thriving Podcast](#)

Social Media Pages:

- @thenapministry
- @rachel.cargle
- @sonyareneetaylor
- @bunnymichael
- @kaichengthom
- @theslowfactory

Community Support:

- Mutual aid networks
- Peer support groups
- Third Spaces
- Social groups/clubs

Further Reading:

- Rest as Resistance by Tricia Hersey.
- [Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter's research on burnout](#)
- Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the next) by Dean Spade
- [History of Burnout and its 12 stages](#)

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