

What to do when you feel 'just done'

Even though it may be the last thing you want to do: burnout can be an impetus for important personal reflection and action.

BY ALEXANDER CLARK & BAILEY SOUSA | MAR 21 2022

Feeling totally done?

In the course of a normal academic year, March is the start of that tough final bend. Exhaustion dominates – but the end beckons.

However, two years into the global pandemic, normal just isn't normal anymore. There are chronic disruptions to teaching, reduced research capacity, missed travel and missed vacations, as well as increased caring responsibilities. Since early 2020, the work efforts required of academics have increased, as our capacity to meet demands has decreased. Add to this the despicable invasion of Ukraine – traumatic and tragic scenes of innocent lives lost, of mass displacement, or of combat. And the starkest prospect of global warfare many of us have ever seen. Feeling like you're "just done" is less eminently understandable than entirely probable.

Indeed, academics and staff at universities worldwide identify with or share about being burnt out. But how can you truly know if you are in this state and, if you are, what should you do? In "[The Burnout Epidemic](#)," Jennifer Moss concludes from research that it's characterized by:

- Energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from and heightened negativity about your job
- Reduced professional efficacy

But as with many challenges to our mental health and wellness: burnout does not readily self-identify. It can be difficult to discern when we're personally at high risk of or even experiencing burnout because there's no simple way of stepping out of ourselves and our situation. The experience of burnout is often more like fog than crystal clarity: feelings of loss, liminality, listlessness, or paralyzed confusion.

An easy and quick way to sense your own state of burnout is to assess your emotions as you face your working week. Experiencing perilous or hollow "[Sunday scares](#)," when previously you felt only a Sunday spark? If so, it may be worth asking yourself three key questions suggested by Ms. Moss to assess your burnout:

"Do I deserve more?" Many of us expect to feel valued in our workplace and by colleagues – red flags for burnout extend from this to high disengagement and strong and enduring emotional depletion, cynicism, or pessimism.

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workaholic does not predict or indicate burnout. What's more telling is if your overwork is actually a means to avoid reflection on your own difficult emotions about your work or life.

What to do if you are experiencing burnout

We encourage *anyone* who thinks they may have burnout to do something about it, even if they may not feel so inclined. This could be to:

Seek help from experts. Burnout is never a sign weakness. Health professionals, occupational supports, or evidence-based resources, such as from the [Mayo Clinic](#), can help you explore your challenges – and identify what to do next.

Start small, see it through. Changing broken systems is extremely difficult. Small acts may seem trivial in response to something that is as insurmountable and systemic as burnout, but small acts can make a difference and bridge to bigger changes. In her book, "[Drop the Ball](#)," Tiffany Dufu explains how she recognized that she was juggling too many responsibilities, so chose to drop some. Candidly, she shares that she didn't respond to an invite her child received to a birthday party because it was one of the balls she *chose* to drop. She owned her choice, even though it was a tough one and she knew she would be judged on it.

Remember: good enough is good enough sometimes. Harsh self-judgement can also kick-in during burnout to tell us we're the problem. We are weak or lazy. Try harder. Work harder. Work longer. Things will get better: I *will* feel better. Ms. Dufu's account (see her video [here](#)) reminds all of us, including high achievers: sometimes good enough, is enough. When everything feels *too much*, she challenges us to identify which of our balls we will choose to drop.

Expect more. John Kotter, in his new book "[Change](#)," attributes the challenges people have in adapting to challenging situations and expectations to a dominant focus on seeking to just *survive*. But the understandable objective of just getting through, Mr. Kotter argues, leads to fear, threat radars, high anxiety and, ultimately, inertia.

The most common causes of burnout, Jennifer Moss concludes, lie in toxic work systems of high ongoing workload, low perceived control, poor reward or recognition, weak relationships, lack of fairness, and values mismatches. It's tempting to rely on our natural personal optimism to reassure us that the workplace will improve soon. But academic workplaces which foster burnout are, by this nature, actually also more resistant to changing the very cultural and organizational factors that give rise to burnout. Change is likely to be slow to non-existent.

Viewing burnout as an impetus to explore new and unexpected questions requires, as Mr. Kotter challenges, a focus on thriving. Is burnout the very signal you need to radically refresh your research into a whole new field? To rip up your old approaches to teaching, and push on to a new pedagogy? To seek a new role or even a new workplace altogether? Sometimes, waiting for your workplace to change is not the right path – but changing your workplace is. You should expect more.

When it comes to your own wellness, it's not naive to prioritize this – it's actually naive not to.

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