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THE RISE OF CHRONIC STRESS AND
HOW WE CAN FIX IT



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*For my tiny island and my entire world,
Jim, Wyatt, Olivia, and Lyla*

Introduction

The Burnout Epidemic

Let's quickly try a simple reverse Rorschach test. I'll write the word. You come up with an image.

Burnout.

When you see that word, do you envision one of those gray-washed stock images of a guy resting his head in his hand as he gloomily stares at his blank computer monitor—stacks of paper piled up on either side?

Perhaps you imagine a single match with its flame recently snuffed out—smoke snarling upward, then dissipating into the black?

Do you picture a harried mom carrying three bags of jam-packed groceries while multiple kids tumble out of the van—each one sporting a different uniform?

Maybe for you, burnout looks like some Seth Rogan-type character who's parked on the couch at two in the afternoon, lighting up a bong awaiting his next zany adventure.

I assume there are others I missed.

Sadly, for over a millennium, we've turned the concept of burnout into tragically biased memes. And, in response to the stock photo way we see this serious illness, we'll lose nearly \$1 trillion in productivity globally each year, spend \$190 billion in health-care outlays, and 120,000 people will die from burnout in the United States alone.

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When Japan was forced to create a Karoshi hotline (*karoshi* can be translated literally as “overwork death”) to help stem the increase of suicide from overwork in Japan, shouldn’t that have given us a bigger sense of urgency? And, when the suicide rate is 130 percent higher for female physicians than the national suicide average in the United States, then shouldn’t we consider this a crisis?

And what about the pandemic, which made an existing problem exponentially worse? I’ve studied burnout and worked with organizations to address it for years, but nothing would inform my understanding of the topic more than living through 2020. For some time, I’d been sounding the alarm: “Burnout is getting worse. People are sick!” Then we were all suddenly thrust into unknown territory: by April, 2.6 billion people had gone into lockdown, and places of employment for 81 percent of the global workforce were fully or partially closed.¹ A huge percentage of knowledge workers began doing their jobs from home—many collaborating on Zoom, whose daily active users skyrocketed from 10 million to 200 million.² This sudden shift did what little else had been able to accomplish before: expose how thinly stretched and worn down we all were—and had been for a while. And it also made our burnout much, much worse.

Although I know I’m not the only one who considers burnout a massive and emergent threat to our mental health, our small yet mighty group is just not enough.

We need to get out ahead of this. Not only does ignoring this pervasive and rapidly evolving problem claim too many financial costs, but the human costs are simply unacceptable. Instead, we need to create the conditions in our workplaces that lead to a healthy, happy, and high-performing workforce—one that is flourishing, not just surviving.

Though it may seem that combating burnout is an overwhelming and Herculean task, it can be easier than you might think—as long as we have the right tools. And ready or not, we can’t ignore the urgency; we are in a burnout epidemic.

I say it’s time, as we witness this illness overwhelming workplaces around the globe, to rethink burnout.

Rethinking Burnout

Although the concept of occupational burnout originated in the 1970s, the medical community has long argued about how to define it. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) finally included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), describing it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”³ It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job
- Reduced professional efficacy

The WHO definition is important because it acknowledges that burnout is more than just an employee problem; it’s an *organizational* problem that requires an organizational solution.

In my experience, good leaders know that burnout is an issue, and companies do their best to offer services and perks to help employees lower their stress and improve their well-being. But let’s be honest: these attempts, however well intentioned, aren’t working. Self-care has been the prevention strategy du jour for decades. And yet burnout is on the rise. Why? Because we’re ignoring the systemic and institutional factors that are the real causes of burnout.

If you want to address the burnout problem, the first step is repeating and internalizing this mantra: burnout is about your organization, not your people. Yoga, vacation time, wellness tech, and meditation apps can help people feel optimized, healthier. But when it comes to preventing burnout, suggesting that these tools are the *cure* is dangerous. What does this mean? It means that, for starters, we can no longer suggest wellness strategies that place ownership on individuals for preventing and managing their own burnout. Instead, we need to look at ourselves as leaders, at the role our organizations play.

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According to Christina Maslach and her coauthors, Susan Jackson and Michael Leiter, the leading experts on burnout, there are six main causes to burnout. Although similar, here is the list on which most academic research has been based:⁴

1. Workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Lack of reward or recognition
4. Poor relationships
5. Lack of fairness
6. Values mismatch

The list clearly demonstrates that the root causes of burnout do not really lie with the individual and that they can be averted, if only leadership starts its prevention strategies much further upstream.

When I spoke with Maslach, she asked me to picture canaries in a coal mine. They are healthy birds, singing away as they make their way into the mine. But if the canaries come out, exposed to carbon monoxide and no longer singing, can you imagine asking why the canaries made themselves sick? No, because the answer would be obvious: the *coal mine* is making the birds sick.

This visual struck me. Although developing emotional intelligence skills—like optimism, gratitude, and hope—can give people the rocket fuel they need to be successful, if an employee is dealing with burnout, we have to stop and ask ourselves why. We should never suggest that if they'd just practiced more grit or joined another yoga class or taken a mindfulness course, they would have avoided burnout. I have long been a proponent of empathy and optimism in leadership. I believe in practicing gratitude skills for a happier, higher-performing work and life experience. I endorse the idea of building resilience to better handle stress when it arises. But these skills are not the cure for burnout, nor are they the vaccine.

Let's imagine that good culture is like a well-executed recipe. You should have the right ingredients (people), the right directives (policy), and someone who can work with these ingredients to create the right outcome (leadership). It's also a template for others to draw from so we keep enjoying the fruits of our labor.

When you have bad culture, it's a result of these components not combining properly. I use this analogy to drive home the point that when it comes to burnout, culture plays a massive role. It's why burnout has become an epidemic and why we must rethink the way we prevent it.

Yes, we need to help our people develop the skills that support their mental health and happiness. But, to battle burnout, we're talking a different game. Though employees are ultimately responsible for their own happiness, it is our responsibility to provide the conditions that support, and not detract, from their happiness. Burnout occurs when those conditions fail.

Clearly burnout is not quarantined to just one field. Millions of employees in thousands of industries and sectors globally also experience extreme burnout. I've heard so many of their stories over the years. They never cease to surprise, enrage, and break my heart. I would say the most interesting learning, and why I wanted to write this book, was the consistency of burnout's origin story. It almost always ties back to preventable causes. And despite nearly every book on burnout suggesting that self-care is the cure, it surprises most people to know that self-care can't actually solve burnout.

To produce better outcomes, we need to do a better job of identifying the upstream impacts that lead to happiness and conversely, well-being detractors.

How Burnout Happens

Gallup data claims that only 15 percent of the global workforce is engaged at work. That data is roughly 30 percent in the United States, markedly better but still a depressing stat since we spend so much time

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at work.⁵ Actually, it's 90,000 hours or 50 percent of our waking hours, according to some who've done the math.⁶

Work, when it feels great and we're engaged and energized, can bring us significant joy. It is part of what increases our satisfaction by giving our lives meaning and a sense of accomplishment. But, with so many people claiming to be disengaged and unhappy in their jobs, work has taken on a reductionist reputation, much to the benefit of TV sitcoms and humorists.

If you were an alien watching the television show *The Office*, you'd wonder if you were watching a tragedy or a comedy. At least you'd learn from the wisest of wise men, Michael Scott: "Nobody should have to go to work thinking, 'Oh, this is the place that I might die today.' That's what a hospital is for . . . [A]n office is a place where dreams come true."⁷ At least work has that going for it, right?

The workplace clichés won't go away because as clichés go, they tend to mirror real life, like the meetings that go consistently overtime. Their time theft is as frustrating as someone stealing your lunch from the communal fridge despite your name on it. It shows up in the broken copiers, the rainbow wheels, and the loading ellipses. We find it in the passive-aggressive notes stuck above the sink and the sloppy dishes lazily left in the sink—the reason why someone felt compelled to write a passive-aggressive note in the first place.

These are the tiny pebbles. If work is still satisfying and we feel valued and engaged in our work, these annoyances are manageable. We trust they will be remedied, and in good cultures they are. If our organizations consistently emphasize a human-centered approach to leadership, we let these tiny problems live in the background and give them nothing more than an eye roll.

But, if our systems are failing and we feel overworked, undervalued, and micromanaged, we've lost faith in leadership; these tiny pebbles turn into boulders, impossible to ignore.

Burnout tends to start with exhaustion, but soon comes to shame or doubt, or both, about our capabilities. Our self-efficacy deteriorates; we start to feel cynical and then helpless. And the stories of burnout are vast. Most originate from the simple wear and tear resulting from chronic stress.

For organizational psychologist and executive coach and trainer Eyal Ronen, the day he noticed the company where he was working in sales had changed his laptop screen saver, he realized he was burning out. The screen saver rotated pictures of vacations employees could “win” if they’d reached certain sales targets. This isn’t atypical for sales-focused teams, but for Ronen, it was a values mismatch: “I felt like they were trying to motivate me like a monkey in a very primitive way. I loved the company and the products they were selling, but this isn’t how I am motivated. I wanted to feel connected to a purpose.”

Ronen shared that he’d seen the signs for a while, the long hours and the misalignment with his values and the organization’s goals; it was already in progress when he walked in and saw that screen saver. That was just the push he needed to leave the company.

This is how burnout happens. We see similar examples of pebbles becoming boulders in thousands of instances across our workforces. Perhaps it’s months of perpetual arguing with coworkers, or maybe someone has been thrust into a new role where they had little to no training and are struggling to keep up. It pops up in the innocuous and the seemingly boring stuff, but the final straws are what breaks us.

Marie Åsberg, psychiatrist and professor at Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, refers to it as “hitting the wall.” This is when some additional burden is placed on the employee and they experience a mental break. She described this lack of ability to take on anything else as “living without margins.” Because we are so stretched and have experienced chronic stress for so long, we have zero margin for error. Unfortunately, that isn’t how life works. There are always stressors coming at us, so it would be unrealistic to expect that our margins won’t be tested.

For Ronen, this was the screen saver. It was the final blow. It symbolized a transactional relationship between him and his work. He’d wanted purpose and to feel valued; instead, he felt disconnected and disengaged. Ronen had hit the wall.

In our interview, Åsberg shared that in Sweden, burnout is defined differently. In the ICD-10, burnout contains a medical condition category that is in the same group as adjustment disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, other conditions caused by excessive stress that continue

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once the stressors have been removed. Swedish sufferers of severe burnout are treated as having this medical condition.

Åsberg says the conditions start at work and then spill over across all areas of life. It is chronic stress-induced exhaustion disorder. She developed the concept of an “exhaustion funnel” to illustrate how work can take over our lives and our space for other interests disappears, leading us to total exhaustion.

According to Åsberg, most people will take months to recover. Some, she said, can take upward of two years and still experience the lasting effects of their trauma for years afterward. She said, “In my experience, time is the only real tool that works for a patient to recover from severe exhaustion disorder. This is why it is so critical that we prevent this catastrophic event from happening in the first place.”

Ronen left the company and the industry. After his recovery, he kicked off his startup, now a successful multinational company. This was a loss of talent for the organization he left but a win for the new company he’s leading. This good news offers hope. Despite the trauma of burning out, many can get back what they lost, but that may require leaving behind some things they once cared about.

Despite suffering from burnout, Ronen has been able to reframe his time at the company in a healthy way. He said the perks didn’t really stop his burnout. This has been a giant “aha!” for me in recent years and has massively influenced my research and writing. Ronen said that he thinks it was a “good company” to work for, but in the same discussion, he showed how out of tune the leadership was in preventing burnout.

Well-Being in a Crisis

I started writing this book in early 2020. For years, as a journalist and consultant helping leaders combat burnout, I’d witnessed the pernicious effects of burnout, but the pandemic took the problem to epidemic levels. We’re beyond burned out.

In late 2020 and into early 2021, I teamed up with Leiter, Maslach, and David Whiteside, director of insights and research at YMCA Work-Well, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on well-being and burnout. Our survey combined several evidence-based scales, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-GS), a psychological assessment of occupational burnout; and the Areas of Worklife Survey, which assesses employees' perceptions of work-setting qualities that affect whether they experience engagement or burnout.

With support from *Harvard Business Review*, we gathered feedback from more than 1,500 respondents in 46 countries, in various sectors, roles, and seniority levels, in the fall of 2020. Sixty-seven percent of respondents worked at or above a supervisor level.

What did we learn, in a nutshell? Burnout is a global problem. Some stats:

- Eighty-nine percent of respondents said their work life was getting worse.
- Eighty-five percent said their well-being had declined.
- Fifty-six percent said their job demands had increased.
- Sixty-two percent of the people who were struggling to manage their workloads had experienced burnout “often” or “extremely often” in the previous three months.
- Fifty-seven percent of employees felt that the pandemic had a “large effect on” or “completely dominated” their work.
- Fifty-five percent of all respondents didn't feel that they had been able to balance their home and work life—with 53 percent specifically citing homeschooling as the reason.
- Twenty-five percent felt unable to maintain a strong connection with family, thirty-nine percent with colleagues, and fifty percent with friends.
- Only twenty-one percent rated their well-being as “good,” and a mere two percent rated it as “excellent.”

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Not only did the 1,500 people in our survey much more squarely fit the burnout profile than did the nearly 50,000 respondents who had taken the MBI-GS before the pandemic, but they also scored very high on exhaustion and cynicism—two predictors of burnout, according to the MBI-GS.

“These survey responses make it clear that a lot of people are having serious disruptions in their relationship with work,” Leiter noted. “It’s not surprising that people are more exhausted—people are working hard to keep their work and personal lives afloat. But the rise in cynicism is even more troubling. Cynicism reflects a lack of trust in the world. So many people feel let down by their government’s poor preparation for the pandemic, as well as by the injustices in work and well-being that the pandemic has highlighted.”

Millennials have the highest levels of burnout, we found. Much of this is due to having less autonomy at work, lower seniority, and greater financial stressors and feelings of loneliness. The last was the biggest factor leading to burnout, according to our research. As one millennial put it: “The pandemic has had a tremendous impact on my well-being—I’ve had mental health challenges, and I’ve hit major roadblocks with that. My physical health has changed because I can’t exercise like I used to. It’s affected me economically. I feel as though my career has been set back yet again.”

As our team read through the 3,300 qualitative responses, we were heartsick. There were so many stories of stress and anxiety seeping in through any available crack and coming up through their psychological floorboards. I could feel their fear in my bones. Worse, their degrading mental health was left unchecked. Many respondents didn’t feel they could speak about mental health in the workplace, and as a result, 67 percent in that group were at risk of burnout.

The data demonstrates that the pandemic weighed heavily on workers. Yet, during this time, employers still asked their people to engage in well-being practices that felt like “just one more thing” for many.

One executive at a global accounting firm shared with me that her company recently offered everyone access to a meditation app. After a

series of emails from corporate, reminding her about all the cool features and benefits the app could offer, she still couldn't find the time to log on. The executive says that if she has time left in the day, it goes to jamming a granola bar in her mouth and getting to the bathroom. She laughs, "It's just so ironic. Shouldn't they make this place less stressful, so I don't need an app to calm down? It all feels a bit tone-deaf."

Yet, there's good news: some people I spoke to were grateful for their employers' interest in helping them work through their stress. Despite the cornucopia of wellness offerings, it was "the thought that counts" that reminded me why some companies do alright in these moments of crisis and some don't.

From our research, I learned that a big predictor for well-being at work during times of stress was trust and communication. If you trust that your employer is doing the best it can despite the circumstances, it gets a ton of latitude. So, what if your boss asked you to do Zoom yoga and you hated it—at least they tried. Who cares if the pet parades and the "family happy hour" didn't stick? The company was just figuring it out.

I learned that this trust would have been built up long before the crisis hit. But it could be developed with frequent and humble communication. Some companies made it less about what they knew and more about how the leaders as a team were going to try and figure it out. And, it was how everyone worked together as unified team that would define success.

When something is as new as a global pandemic, humility and empathy in leadership go a long way, which is why it's important to build up those capabilities in advance.

Toward Empathic Leadership

In my communication with leaders, I encourage them to rethink the definition of empathetic leadership, particularly as it pertains to preventing burnout. We tend to connect empathy to the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But I don't believe

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that goes far enough. If you authentically want to demonstrate empathy, you have to “do unto others as they would have done unto themselves.” That requires stepping outside of our own needs, assessing and removing bias and privilege, actively listening to our people, and then taking action.

We also need to take care of ourselves, too. We need to acknowledge that our work can be an essential and healthy part of our lives, particularly when it fulfills and uplifts us. Research by the Mayo Clinic suggests that doctors who take a more integrated approach to their work and life are significantly less likely to experience burnout.⁸

Still, purpose-driven people—and leaders like you—are not immune to burnout. Actually, they can be at risk. We go deeper later in the book where we highlight how the old saying, “Love what you do and you’ll never work a day in your life,” is a nice idea but a total myth.

Cool fact: in 1599, William Shakespeare wrote the seventh poem of *The Passionate Pilgrim*. Here the phrase ‘burn’d out’ appeared for the first time. It would form the context for passion as a process of energy exhaustion in relation to love.⁹ Needless to say, plenty of people love their jobs. Lots of them burn out. We can be fueled by purpose-driven work, but for people like me, who are driven by a mission, it’s tough to follow our own advice. And, in truth, my own burnout took me from expert to casualty.

We can have all the knowledge and all the tools, but we have blind spots. Yet, it’s all preventable with simple solutions. Therefore, it shouldn’t take hitting a wall to make these changes in our lives. It shouldn’t take people hitting the wall before we react. We hold accountability to others and to ourselves on every level.

. . .

One last note: This is not just a leadership book so I can give you tips on how to prevent burnout in your organization. This is also a book about how to rethink burnout entirely. We are at epic levels of burnout across the entire global industry, and you could easily be one of those people who has

burned out. You are probably acting as I did, telling people to take time off and ensuring they're well and not taking care of yourselves at all.

We can't have that. We need to go through the process of understanding what burnout really is, what it truly means to live in a world with a burnout epidemic happening around us and reeducate ourselves about what role we can play to stop the spread.

Throughout this book, I'm going to ask you to question everything you currently know about the topic of burnout and then rebuild new skills to take it on. Through real-world storytelling that takes us into the best and the worst of our workplaces, combined with fascinating case studies, research, and rare insights, we can develop a shared approach to solving a completely solvable problem.