

RUNNING ON EMPTY

WHEN EVERYTHING FEELS HARDER
THAN IT SHOULD — AND HOW TO
FIND YOUR WAY BACK



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This book didn't come from a place of having everything figured out. It came from trying to make sense of what burnout actually feels like when you're in it — the overthinking, the constant pressure, the sense that even small things feel harder than they should.

Like many people, I've experienced what it's like to keep pushing through while things quietly become more difficult. On the outside, everything can look fine. But internally, it can feel like you're constantly trying to catch up, second-guessing yourself, and running on empty.

Through my work supporting people experiencing burnout and ongoing stress, I've seen how common this pattern is — and how often it goes misunderstood. What people experience isn't a lack of motivation or discipline, but a system that has been under sustained pressure for too long.

Over time, I became interested in understanding what was actually happening beneath that experience — not just emotionally, but psychologically and physically. Why thoughts can feel so convincing. Why motivation drops. Why even rest doesn't always feel like it helps.

This book brings together that understanding in a way that is practical and easy to apply. It's not about fixing everything at once or forcing yourself into new routines. It's about recognising the patterns you're in, understanding why they make sense, and starting to respond to them differently.

If you see yourself in these pages, you're not alone — and more importantly, there are ways to begin shifting things, even if it doesn't feel like it yet.

Kate x

WELCOME

Burnout affects more than just energy levels. Over time, it can impact how you think, how you feel, and how you experience everyday life. Many people find themselves dealing with constant stress, mental fatigue, loss of motivation, emotional overwhelm, or a sense that they no longer recognise the person they used to be.

This book has been created to help you slow down and look at those experiences more closely. Through a series of reflections and exercises, it invites you to notice the pressures that may have built up over time and begin to consider how you might restore balance, energy, and direction.

Take your time as you move through the pages. There is no expectation to complete everything quickly, and it is perfectly acceptable to pause if something feels too heavy or emotionally demanding. Burnout recovery is rarely about rushing forward; more often, it involves allowing space to think, rest, and reassess.

If your symptoms feel extreme, or you are struggling to cope day to day, or you feel unable to move forward, it is important to seek additional support. Speaking with your GP or a qualified mental health professional can help you access the right care and guidance. This workbook is intended to support personal reflection, but it is not a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice.

By continuing to use this workbook, you are choosing to engage with it as a self-help resource and to take responsibility for how you apply the material within it to your own circumstances.

Most importantly, approach this process with patience and compassion for yourself. Burnout develops over time, and recovery does too. Small, thoughtful steps are often where real change begins.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: ACCEPTANCE	PAGE 5
CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING	PAGE 20
CHAPTER 3: CLARITY	PAGE 39
CHAPTER 4: PRIORITIZE	PAGE 54
CHAPTER 5: BOUNDARIES	PAGE 71
CHAPTER 6: STABALIZE	PAGE 94
CHAPTER 7: REBUILDING	PAGE 109
CHAPTER 8: FORWARD	PAGE 148

CHAPTER 1

AWARENESS

JULIA

Julia used to think of herself as someone who just got on with things. At 42 she had two children, a full-time job, a house to run, and a solid group of friends around her. Life was busy but manageable, and if something needed doing, she would take care of it without much hesitation. Lately though, things had started to feel harder.

Not in a dramatic, everything-falling-apart kind of way, and there wasn't a single moment she could point to as the cause. Instead, it felt as though lots of smaller pressures had all built up at the same time.

Her mum's health had been getting worse, and although she had a sibling, most of the responsibility seemed to fall to her. There were appointments to organise, phone calls to make, and decisions that didn't have easy answers. Conversations about care homes had started, bringing with them a mix of financial worry, guilt, and disagreement.

At home, her husband was away more often for work, which meant the day-to-day running of things sat more heavily with her. The dog had recently started having accidents during the night, and her 15-year-old's mock exam results had been disappointing, leaving Julia lying awake thinking about what that might mean for the future.

Work had changed too. There were rumours of redundancies, nothing confirmed, but enough to shift the atmosphere. Julia noticed herself checking things more often than usual, rereading emails and second-guessing decisions. Small mistakes began to feel more significant than they actually were, and she found herself questioning whether she was still as capable as she used to be.

Physically, she felt run down. It started as what she assumed was a cold, but it never really went away. She felt tired all the time, even after a full night in bed. Sleep had become difficult, with her mind running through lists and worries long after she had turned the lights off. On the nights she did manage to drift off, she was often woken by the dog. She kept telling herself that one proper night's sleep would sort it out, but it never quite worked.

Gradually, other things began to shift. She stopped replying to messages as quickly as she used to, then sometimes not at all. She missed a couple of PTA meetings, not because she didn't care, but because she couldn't face adding one more commitment. Saying no felt uncomfortable, so she avoided the situation altogether.

Even spending time with friends started to feel like effort. She noticed a sense of irritation creeping in, followed by guilt. They all seemed to be managing without the same level of strain, and she couldn't work out why she felt as though she was struggling more than they were.

That unsettled her, because she had always seen herself as someone who could cope. Now she felt as though she was constantly trying to catch up with everything. Work took more concentration than it used to, things at home felt heavier, and even small tasks seemed to require more energy than she had available.

She found herself snapping at the children, then feeling bad about it afterwards. At times, she would sit in the car for a few minutes before going into the house, holding onto a brief pause where no one was asking anything from her.

If someone had asked her how she was, she would probably have said she was tired, or stressed, or just busy, and that she needed a break. She would not have described it as burnout. But that is what it was.

It had not come from one major event or a single breaking point, but from too many demands over too long a period, without enough opportunity to recover. At some point, without her really noticing when it happened, everything had started to feel like more than she could handle.

IDENTIFYING BURNOUT

Burnout rarely arrives with a bang. There isn't usually a clear moment where you can point and say, that's when it started. More often, it builds gradually, blending into everyday life in a way that makes it easy to overlook. You adjust, you push through, you tell yourself it's just a busy period, or that things will settle down soon.

Because of that, burnout can be difficult to recognise, especially in yourself. By the time it becomes obvious, it often feels overwhelming, as though your capacity to cope has been gradually worn down rather than suddenly taken away.

Part of the reason burnout is so easy to overlook is that it doesn't show up in just one way. It affects both the body and the mind, and the symptoms can be varied, inconsistent, and easy to dismiss in isolation.

Physically, people often describe a constant sense of fatigue that doesn't improve with rest. Sleep can become disrupted, either through difficulty falling asleep or waking during the night. Headaches, muscle tension, and ongoing aches in the neck and shoulders are common. Some people notice changes in digestion, such as symptoms resembling IBS, while others find they are more prone to colds or feel generally run down.

Emotionally and mentally, the changes can be just as significant. You might feel more irritable than usual, or find yourself becoming tearful over things that wouldn't normally affect you. Concentration can become harder, decision-making slower, and confidence in your own abilities can start to drop. It's common to feel detached from things you used to care about, or notice a more cynical or negative way of thinking creeping in.

You might also start to withdraw, even from people or activities you usually enjoy, not because you don't care, but because you don't have the energy to engage.

When you step back and look at these symptoms together, a pattern starts to emerge. Burnout isn't just about being tired or stressed. It's a state that affects how you feel, how you think, and how you function day to day.

THE THREE FACES OF BURNOUT

Burnout is often described as having three core dimensions.

The first is exhaustion. This goes beyond feeling tired at the end of a long day. It is a deeper, more persistent depletion of energy, where rest doesn't fully restore you.

The second is a sense of detachment or distance. This can show up as withdrawing from responsibilities, feeling disconnected from people, or becoming more negative or cynical about things that once felt manageable or important.

The third is a reduced sense of effectiveness. You may start to doubt your abilities, feel less productive, or question whether you're doing a good job, even in areas where you have always been competent.

These three elements often overlap and reinforce each other. Feeling exhausted makes it harder to stay engaged, and as you pull back, your confidence can take a hit, which in turn increases the sense of strain.

If you recognised yourself in Julia's story, or in any of the symptoms described here, it doesn't mean something is wrong with you as a person. It means your system has been under pressure for too long without enough support or recovery.

I'M JUST A BIT STRESSED

Being a "bit stressed" is one of the most common ways people explain away what they're feeling, and in many cases, it's a reasonable assumption. Stress is a normal part of life. In the right amounts, it can be helpful. It sharpens focus, increases motivation, and helps you respond to challenges. Deadlines get met, problems get solved, and you push through situations that matter.

The key thing about stress is that it is usually temporary. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's a build-up, a peak, and then a release. You get through the busy period, the difficult conversation, the intense week at work, and afterwards there is some form of recovery. You might feel relief, a sense of achievement, or simply the ability to switch off again. Even when stress is uncomfortable, there is often a feeling of "I got through that."

Burnout works differently. With burnout, there isn't that same cycle of pressure followed by recovery. Instead, the pressure continues without enough space to settle. The body and mind don't get the signal that it's safe to stand down. Over time, this creates a very different experience.

Rather than short bursts of activation, your system stays switched on for extended periods. Sleep doesn't fully restore you. Time off doesn't quite reset things. Even when you try to relax, part of you still feels alert, as though there's always something else you should be doing or thinking about.

It can feel like you are constantly "on," without a clear off switch. This is where people often get stuck. Because there hasn't been a single breaking point, and because life still looks relatively normal from the outside, it is easy to assume that what you are feeling is just ongoing stress that you should be able to handle.

You might tell yourself that you just need a holiday, or a quieter week, or to be a bit more organised. Sometimes those things help. They don't tend to resolve burnout.

The difference isn't about how strong you are or how well you cope. It is about whether your system has had enough opportunity to recover. Stress passes when there's space for recovery. Burnout develops when that space is missing for too long, and the body and mind remain in a prolonged state of demand. Recognising that difference is often the first step, because it shifts the question from "Why can't I handle this?" to "Have I actually had a chance to recover?"

REFLECTION

Before going any further, it's worth pausing for a moment and reflecting on where you are. Burnout can be difficult to recognise when you're in it, partly because it becomes your "normal."

For each statement, ask yourself whether it feels true most of the time (Yes), occasionally (Sometimes), or not really (No). Try not to overthink it.

Exhaustion	Yes.	No.	Sometimes.
• I often feel tired, even after a full night's sleep	☐	☐	☐
• I feel like rest helps a little, but never fully restores me	☐	☐	☐
• I rely on caffeine, sugar, or quick fixes to get through the day	☐	☐	☐
• I find that small tasks take more effort than they used to	☐	☐	☐
• I feel physically run down, with things like headaches, muscle tension, or general aches	☐	☐	☐

Detachment and Withdrawal	Yes.	No.	Sometimes.
• I feel myself pulling back from people or activities I would normally enjoy	☐	☐	☐
• Social situations feel more draining than they used to	☐	☐	☐
• I notice I'm more irritable, negative, or cynical	☐	☐	☐
• I avoid things, not because they don't matter, but because I don't have the energy	☐	☐	☐
• I sometimes feel emotionally flat or disconnected	☐	☐	☐

Reduced Effectiveness

Yes. No. Sometimes.

- I second-guess myself more than I used to
- I worry that I'm not doing as well as I should
- I find it harder to concentrate or make decisions
- I feel busy but not particularly productive
- I feel less confident in my abilities

☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐

Physical and Emotional Symptoms

Yes. No. Sometimes.

- My sleep is disrupted, through difficulty falling asleep or waking in the night
- I find it hard to switch off, even when I have time to rest
- I feel more tearful, overwhelmed, or on edge than usual
- I've noticed changes in my digestion, appetite, or general health
- I feel like my body is "on alert" even when nothing urgent is happening

☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐

This isn't a diagnostic test; it's simply a way of helping you notice patterns in how you've been feeling.

If you answered "yes" or "sometimes" to several of these, it's worth paying attention. This isn't about labelling yourself or jumping to conclusions. It's about recognising patterns in what you're feeling, and that pattern often points to sustained pressure without enough recovery. Burnout isn't a personal failing. It's a response to too much demand, for too long, without the space to reset. Once you can see it clearly, you're in a much better position to do something about it.

THE 5 STAGES OF BURNOUT

Burnout is often described as developing in five stages. Not everyone will move through these stages in a clear, step-by-step way, but they offer a useful way of understanding how you got here.

Stage 1: Honeymoon

At the beginning, things often feel positive.

You might be in a new role, taking on new responsibilities, or simply feeling motivated and capable in your current situation. There's energy, optimism, and a sense that you're on top of things. You feel productive, engaged, and willing to go the extra mile.

The risk at this stage is taking on too much. You might say yes to everything, push yourself harder than you need to, and ignore early signs of fatigue because everything still feels manageable.



Stage 2: Onset of Stress

As time goes on, pressure starts to build.

You might notice that some days feel more difficult than others. Work or responsibilities may still feel rewarding, but the balance begins to shift. You're not quite as energised, and small signs of stress begin to appear. This can include feeling more tired, a bit more irritable, or finding it harder to focus. Sleep might be affected, and you may start to notice headaches, changes in appetite, or a general sense of being "on edge."

At this stage, how you respond matters. If you're not giving yourself space to recover, or you're relying on coping strategies that don't actually help, pressure can build.



Stage 3: Chronic Stress

Stress is no longer occasional; it becomes the baseline.

Instead of having good days and bad days, you may start to feel under pressure most of the time. Your nervous system is working harder for longer, without a proper reset.

You might feel persistently tired, more easily irritated, or emotionally drained. Small things may trigger a bigger reaction than they used to. There may be a growing sense of frustration, resentment, or even helplessness. It's also common to start withdrawing at this stage, pulling back from people or activities because you don't have the energy.



Stage 4: Burnout

This is the point where burnout becomes more obvious.

The level of exhaustion goes beyond what you can push through. It affects how you think, feel, and function day to day. Things that used to feel manageable now feel overwhelming. You might notice a strong sense of fatigue across all areas, physical, mental, and emotional. There can be increased cynicism, low mood, or a sense of detachment from work, people, or life more generally. Confidence often drops, and it can feel harder to see a way forward.



Stage 5: Habitual Burnout

If nothing changes, burnout can become more deeply embedded.

The symptoms are no longer occasional or linked to specific situations; they become part of everyday life. Ongoing exhaustion, low mood, and physical symptoms can persist, and it may feel difficult to imagine returning to how you used to feel.

At this stage, recovery often requires more structured support.

GOING BACKWARDS

These stages aren't always linear, and it's possible to move back and forth between them. Sometimes you might experience periods where things feel more manageable. Your energy may improve, your thinking feels clearer, and it can feel as though you're back to how you were before.

It's easy to assume at that point that the burnout has passed. In many cases, what's happening is that your system has had a short period of recovery rather than a full reset. If the underlying pressures remain the same, the pattern can start to build again. This can feel frustrating, particularly if you thought you had moved past it, but this is a normal part of how burnout develops and resolves, rather than a setback.

WHERE ARE YOU NOW

Take a moment before moving on. Looking back at the five stages, where do you think you are right now?

There's no need to be precise. You might recognise yourself clearly in one stage, or feel you're somewhere between two. You might even notice that different areas of your life sit in different places.

The stage I most relate to right now is...

The signs that stand out to me are...

The areas of my life this is showing up most in are...

Understanding where you are changes how you respond. If you're in the earlier stages, it may be about preventing things from escalating and creating space to recover before exhaustion takes hold. If you're further along, it may be about recognising that pushing through isn't working anymore, and that something needs to shift.

Without this awareness, it's easy to fall into unhelpful patterns. Telling yourself to try harder, be more organised, or just get on with it. Approaches that might work for short-term stress tend to make burnout worse. When you can see the pattern, you can start to respond to it more appropriately.

MOVING FORWARD

If any of this has felt familiar, it's worth pausing to acknowledge that. Burnout has a way of making people question themselves, and can leave you feeling as though you should be coping better or that other people are managing similar pressures without struggling in the same way. In reality, Burnout isn't a sign that you're failing. It's a sign that something has been too much for too long, without enough support or recovery.

Recognising that isn't giving up or an admission of weakness. It's the point where things can start to change, because you are no longer ignoring what's happening or trying to push through it in the same way. You don't need to have all the answers at this stage. You only need to notice what's going on.

From here, it becomes possible to start rebuilding your energy in a way that is more sustainable, taking things step by step, rather than expecting an immediate fix.

The next page is deliberately left free for you to write down any thoughts, feelings, or emotions that may have come up while reading this chapter. You don't have to use it, but taking a few minutes to put things into words can help you process what you're experiencing and make sense of it more clearly.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING

REWIRING YOUR BRAIN

If you recognised yourself in the last chapter, you will already know what burnout feels like. You can feel it in your body. The tiredness that doesn't go away, the heaviness when you wake up, the effort it takes to get through things that once felt straightforward. What is often less obvious though is what's happening in your mind, burnout doesn't just affect your energy, it changes the way you think, interpret situations, and speak to yourself.

This isn't happening because your brain is working against you. It happens because your brain is trying to help, but it is using a system that was never designed for the kind of stress most of us live with now.

The human stress response developed to deal with short-term, immediate threats. For most of our history, that meant something physical and time-limited. You saw a threat, your body reacted quickly, and once the danger had passed, everything settled back down again. That cycle of activation and recovery was built in.

Modern stress rarely follows that pattern. Instead of one clear threat, it tends to be ongoing. Work pressure, financial concerns, family responsibilities, health worries, constant notifications, and the general sense of having too much to do and not enough time to do it. None of these things are life-threatening in the way our biology expects, but your nervous system can still treat them as if they are urgent. When that pressure doesn't switch off, your system stays active for longer than it should.

Over time, that begins to change how your mind operates. Your brain becomes more focused on spotting problems, anticipating issues, and trying to stay one step ahead. On the surface, that might look like overthinking, but underneath it is a system that believes it is keeping you safe.

You may notice that you become more sensitive to criticism or uncertainty. Small problems can feel bigger than they are, and neutral situations can start to feel more personal. A minor mistake might stick with you for longer, or turn into a broader conclusion about yourself. This is not because you've suddenly become less capable. It's because your brain is placing more weight on potential threats, even when they are relatively small.

For some people, this shows up as constant mental activity. Thoughts looping, replaying conversations, running through to-do lists, or imagining what might go wrong next. It can feel difficult to switch off, even when you have the time to rest.

For others, the experience is different. Instead of a busy mind, there can be a sense of distance. Things that used to matter feel less important, decisions feel harder to engage with, and there may be a tendency to switch off or avoid rather than think things through. It can feel like a lack of motivation, but it is often more about running low on available energy.

These two experiences can seem very different, but they come from the same place. One is a system that is highly activated and scanning constantly, while the other is a system that has started to conserve energy where it can. Most people move between the two. You might find yourself overthinking at one point, then feeling flat or disconnected at another. You might notice periods of self-criticism alongside moments of frustration or resentment toward the demands around you. These responses are not a reflection of your personality or your ability to cope. They are signs that your system has been under sustained pressure and has adapted in the only way it knows how.

THE SCIENCE BIT

When stress continues for long periods without enough recovery, the brain starts to change how it uses its energy. Instead of prioritising clarity, creativity, and emotional balance, it shifts into a more basic mode focused on getting you through the day with the least possible effort.

One of the areas affected is the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for things like planning, decision-making, and regulating emotions. When this part of the brain is under strain, thinking clearly becomes harder. Concentration can drop, patience can wear thin, and decisions that used to feel straightforward can start to feel disproportionately difficult.

At the same time, the brain's threat detection system becomes more active. This includes areas such as the amygdala, which is constantly scanning for potential danger and preparing the body to respond. When this system is activated for too long, it doesn't switch off easily. You may find yourself feeling on edge, overthinking situations, or expecting problems even when nothing specific is happening.

Burnout can also affect the brain's reward and motivation systems, which rely heavily on dopamine signalling. These systems are what allow you to feel interested, motivated, and able to enjoy things. When they are depleted, activities that once felt engaging can start to feel flat or like more effort than they are worth.

These changes tend to happen gradually rather than all at once, which is why burnout can be difficult to spot in its earlier stages. Many people only recognise how stretched their system has become when their ability to cope drops more noticeably.

Understanding what is happening in your brain can shift how you see burnout. Rather than something you should have been able to handle, it becomes clearer that this is a physiological and psychological response to sustained pressure.

THE SUBCONSCIOUS PATTERNS BEHIND BURNOUT

Much of what happens in your mind during burnout happens automatically, without you actively choosing it. Your brain is constantly running in the background, using patterns it has built over time. These include your memories, beliefs, emotional reactions, and the assumptions you've developed about yourself, other people, and how things tend to work.

This system isn't focused on accuracy, it's focused on efficiency. Rather than carefully analysing each situation, your brain relies on what it has practised the most. If a particular way of thinking or reacting comes up often enough, it becomes the default. It's the route your mind takes without needing to think it through.

During burnout, this becomes more noticeable. When your system is already under pressure, your brain leans more heavily on these shortcuts. It looks for familiar explanations and often defaults to worst-case interpretations, because it assumes that staying alert will help you cope.

This is one reason emotions like anxiety, irritation, or discouragement can show up quickly. They're not being created from scratch in that moment. Your brain is pulling from patterns it has used many times before and applying them again.

Over time, repeated thoughts start to shape how you see yourself. A single thought like "I messed that up" doesn't carry much weight on its own. But if it shows up repeatedly, especially during stressful situations, the brain strengthens that pathway. Eventually, it can shift into something broader like "I always mess things up."

That shift doesn't happen because the thought is true. It happens because it has been repeated often enough to feel familiar. When you are burned out, your brain is not looking for balanced or measured interpretations. It is looking for the quickest explanation, particularly when your energy and attention are already low.

REFLECTION

Before we move on, take a moment to think about the thoughts that have been showing up most often for you recently. When you are burned out, it is very easy to assume that your thoughts are accurate reflections of reality. In practice, they are often a mix of stress, habit, fear, and mental shortcuts. That doesn't mean they should be ignored, but it does mean they are worth noticing more carefully.

You might find it helpful to reflect on questions like these. What thoughts do you seem to come back to again and again? Are there particular worries, assumptions, or self-critical comments that have become familiar? Do your thoughts tend to focus on what might go wrong, what you haven't done, or what you think you should be coping with better? Have you noticed yourself using absolute language, such as always, never, everyone, or no one? And when you are under pressure, do your thoughts become more anxious, more critical, or more hopeless?

You do not need to analyse every thought in detail at this stage. The aim is simply to start noticing the patterns. The more aware you become of the thoughts your mind repeats automatically, the easier it becomes to question them later rather than accepting them as facts.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

REFLECTION

[illegible]

THE BURNOUT LOOP

What we've been describing over the last few pages can be brought together into something called the burnout loop. This is the pattern that keeps burnout going once it has started. It happens quickly, often without you realising, and it links together your thoughts, your body, and your behaviour in a way that reinforces the cycle.

It usually begins with a **trigger**. This doesn't have to be anything major. It could be an email, a comment from someone, a mistake at work, a poor night's sleep, or even just looking at a long to-do list. On the surface, it might seem like a small or ordinary moment.

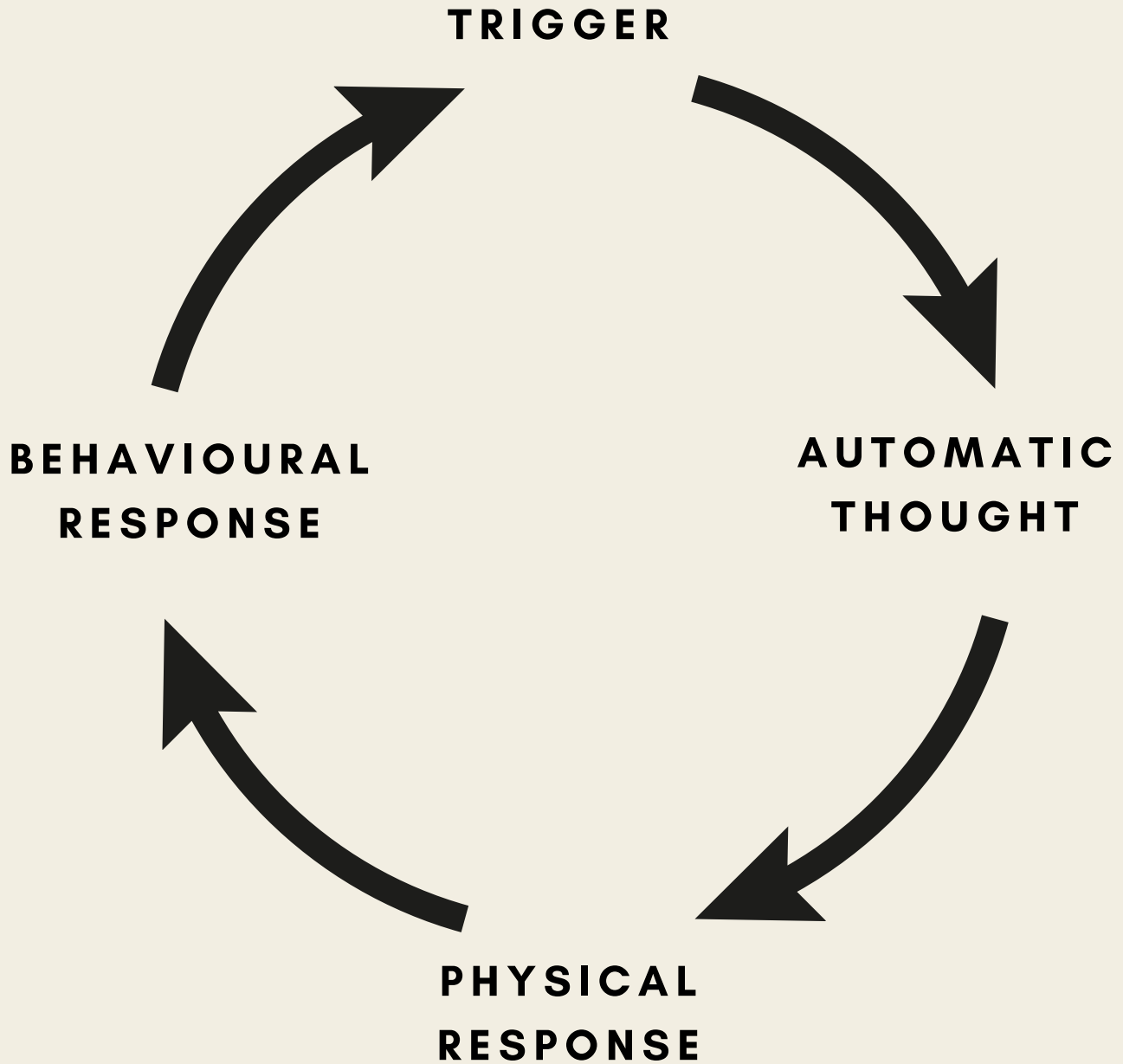
Almost immediately, an **automatic thought** follows. This is where the patterns we talked about earlier come in. Your brain fills in the gap based on what it has practised. The thought might be something like "I'm falling behind," "I can't keep up," or "I've messed this up." These thoughts can feel very convincing, especially when you are already tired.

That thought then creates a **physical response**. Your body reacts as if something important is happening. You might notice tension building, your heart rate increasing, a feeling of tightness in your chest, or a general sense of being on edge. Even if the situation itself isn't urgent, your body prepares as though it is.

From there, a **behavioural response** follows. This might look like overworking, avoiding a task, withdrawing from people, checking things repeatedly, or struggling to make a decision. In the moment, these responses often feel like the best way to cope.

The difficulty is that these behaviours then feed back into the loop. Avoiding a task can increase the sense of pressure later. Overworking can deepen exhaustion. Withdrawing can lead to feeling more isolated. Checking things repeatedly can reinforce the idea that something is wrong. Each response, while understandable, ends up strengthening the original thought and so the cycle continues.

THE BURNOUT LOOP



Understanding this loop matters because it shows that burnout is not just about what is happening around you. It is also about how your system is responding and reinforcing itself under pressure.

WHY IT ALL FEELS SO REAL

One of the reasons these thoughts feel so difficult to challenge is because they don't feel like "thoughts" at all. They feel like facts. When your brain has repeated the same interpretation enough times, it becomes familiar, and familiarity creates a sense of certainty. Add in the physical response that comes with it, the tension, the alertness, the sense that something is wrong, and it becomes even more convincing. Your mind and body are both telling you the same story, so it feels true, even when it isn't the most accurate or helpful way of seeing the situation.

It's also worth remembering that your brain is not trying to be balanced, it's trying to be efficient. When your energy is low, it will default to the quickest explanation rather than the most considered one. That is why these thoughts can feel so automatic and so hard to shift, particularly when you are already tired or under pressure.

Another important point is that the trigger for this loop doesn't have to be something that is actually happening in the moment. Your brain responds not just to real situations, but to imagined ones as well. Thinking about an upcoming conversation, worrying about how something might go, or replaying a past interaction can all activate the same cycle. Your body reacts in a similar way whether the threat is real, remembered, or anticipated.

This is why burnout can feel constant. Even when nothing is actively going wrong, your mind can generate enough "what ifs" and future scenarios to keep the system running. The loop doesn't need a real event to keep going. It just needs a thought that your brain treats as important.

REFLECTION

Before moving on, take a moment to apply this to your own experience. Think about a situation that is currently causing you stress. It doesn't need to be something major. In fact, it's often more helpful to choose something recent and specific, as these patterns tend to show up more clearly in everyday moments.

Once you have something in mind, break it down using the loop:

1. The Trigger

Start by identifying one thing that is currently causing stress or pressure in your life. Try to choose something specific rather than something broad or general.

2. Automatic thought

What goes through your mind in the moment? Try to capture the first, immediate thought rather than a more considered one.

3. Physical response

What do you notice in your body? This might be tension, a change in breathing, a feeling in your chest or stomach, or a general sense of being on edge.

4. Behavioural response

What do you want to do next? This could be something you do outwardly, like avoiding, overworking, or withdrawing, or something more internal, like overthinking or replaying the situation.

5. The loop

Consider how the behavioural response might cause the loop to continue i.e. you avoid the meeting, leading you to worry that you've missed out on important information.

There is no right or wrong answer here. The aim is simply to see the pattern more clearly. Once you can identify how the loop is playing out for you, it becomes much easier to understand why things feel the way they do, and where you might begin to interrupt the cycle.

JULIA

To make this clearer, here is what this might look like in practice. Let's go back to Julia from the previous chapter and take a recent situation from her day. She receives an email at work asking for an update on a project she hasn't had time to finish.

1. The Trigger

Start by identifying one thing that is currently causing stress or pressure in your life. Try to choose something specific rather than something broad or general.

"I got an email from my manager asking for an update on a project I know I'm behind on."

2. Automatic thought

What goes through your mind in the moment? Try to capture the first, immediate thought rather than a more considered one.

"I've left this too long. They're going to think I'm not on top of things. I'm going to get into trouble."

3. Physical response

What do you notice in your body? This might be tension, a change in breathing, a feeling in your chest or stomach, or a general sense of being on edge.

"I felt a tightness in my chest and shoulders straight away. My heart was racing a bit and I just felt on edge. It was harder to think clearly."

4. Behavioural response

What do you want to do next? This could be something you do outwardly, like avoiding, overworking, or withdrawing, or something more internal, like overthinking or replaying the situation.

"I didn't reply straight away because I felt a bit panicked about it, but I kept going back to the email and thinking about it. I couldn't concentrate properly on anything else and ended up staying late to try and catch up."

5. The loop

Consider how the behavioural response might cause the loop to continue i.e. you avoid the meeting, leading you to worry that you've missed out on important information.

"If I look at it properly, the way I responded has made it worse. By not replying straight away, I gave myself more time to worry about it and built it up in my head. I kept thinking about what they might be thinking of me, which made me feel even more on edge."

Staying late to catch up meant I was more tired the next day, so when the next email came in, I was already starting from a place of feeling behind. It's like I'm constantly trying to catch up but never quite getting there."

At this stage, the aim is not to change these thoughts or challenge them. We will come back to that later, and there are practical ways to work with them that can make a real difference. For now, the focus is simply on understanding what is happening and starting to recognise the patterns as they occur.

The more familiar you become with your own version of this loop, the easier it is to spot it in real time. That awareness is important, because you cannot change something you haven't first noticed. For now, it is enough to observe it, to recognise it when it shows up, and to understand that these responses are part of a system under pressure, not a reflection of who you are.

THE SIDE EFFECTS OF BURNOUT

Burnout isn't just about what's happening in your thoughts or in the moment. It often starts to affect the way you live day to day, and these changes can quietly reinforce the cycle you're already in.

As your energy drops, your behaviour often shifts in ways that make recovery harder, even though they make sense at the time.

Exhaustion, for example, doesn't just feel unpleasant; it changes what you do. When you're constantly tired, you're less likely to move your body, even if you know it would help. Exercise starts to feel like another demand rather than something supportive. Over time, this can affect mood, increase physical discomfort, and reduce some of the natural "feel good" chemicals that help regulate stress.

Fatigue also influences how you fuel yourself. When you're low on energy, quick and easy options tend to take priority. Cooking can feel like too much effort, so it's common to rely more on convenience foods, sugar, or caffeine to get through the day. These can give short bursts of energy, but they often lead to dips later on, which can leave you feeling even more tired afterwards. Hydration can slip as well, and all of this can have a knock-on effect on sleep, making it harder for your body to properly recover.

Another common change is a drop in **motivation** to look after yourself in more general ways. You might stop following routines that used to feel normal, whether that's how you dress, your personal care, or the small habits that helped you feel more put together. This isn't about laziness or not caring. It's often a reflection of having limited energy and prioritising what feels essential. Over time though, this can start to affect confidence and how you feel about yourself.

Withdrawal is also a key part of burnout. When you're already feeling stretched, social interaction can feel like effort rather than support. You might cancel plans, stop reaching out, or avoid situations that feel draining. While this can provide short-term relief, it often reduces the level of connection and support around you, which can make burnout feel even more isolating.

There can be other knock-on effects too. You might find yourself procrastinating more, which increases pressure later on. Sleep can become more disrupted, either through difficulty switching off or waking during the night. Small tasks can build up, creating a sense of being constantly behind. Over time, these patterns can feed back into the burnout loop, reinforcing the same thoughts, physical responses, and behaviours. None of these changes are random. They are the result of a system trying to cope with limited energy and ongoing pressure. The difficulty is that, while they help in the short term, they often make it harder to break out of burnout in the longer term.

Recognising these side effects is not about adding more pressure or expecting yourself to suddenly do everything differently. It's about understanding how burnout extends beyond how you feel, and how it can shape your habits, your health, and your day-to-day life in ways that keep the cycle going.

REFLECTION

Before moving on, it can be helpful to take a step back and look at how burnout may be affecting your day-to-day habits.

Using the scale below, rate how each area feels for you at the moment:

1 = I've completely let this slide

10 = This feels consistent and working well

Try to go with your first instinct rather than overthinking it.

Diet 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Exercise 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Sleep 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Hydration 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Personal care 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Social relationships 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Once you've given each one a number, take a moment to look at the overall picture. Are there any areas that stand out as particularly low? Are there areas that feel more stable?

This isn't about judging yourself or trying to score highly across everything. It's about noticing where your energy is currently going, and where things may have slipped as a result of burnout.

REVIEW

By this point, you may be starting to see how burnout is not just one thing, but a combination of physical, mental, and behavioural changes that all link together. It affects how your brain processes information, how your body responds to pressure, and how you move through your day. None of these responses are random, and none of them mean there is something wrong with you. They are the result of a system that has been under sustained strain and has adapted in order to cope.

Understanding the science behind burnout doesn't solve it on its own, but it does change how you see it. Instead of something you should be able to push through, it becomes something that makes sense. That shift matters, because it moves you away from self-criticism and towards understanding what your system actually needs.

As we move into the next section, we'll start to look at how you can begin to work with these patterns in a more practical way. For now, it is enough to recognise what is happening, to notice the loops, and to understand how burnout has been affecting you.

The next page is deliberately left free for you to write down any thoughts, feelings, or observations that have come up while reading this section. You don't have to use it, but taking a few minutes to reflect can help you process what you've read and begin to make sense of your own experience.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 3

CLARITY

WHAT'S DRIVING YOUR BURNOUT

Everyone's burnout looks different. Two people can have similar lives on the surface and experience very different levels of strain. What feels manageable for one person can feel overwhelming for another, and that isn't about strength or resilience. It's about the combination of pressures you're dealing with, how long they've been there, and the expectations you place on yourself within those situations.

To start getting a clearer picture of your own burnout, it's important to look at what is actually contributing to it. Not in a vague sense of "life is busy," but in a more specific, honest way.

This includes the obvious pressures, such as work demands, family responsibilities, financial concerns, or health issues. But it also includes the less obvious ones, the things you carry mentally, the responsibilities you take on without question, and the expectations you hold yourself to.

Often, it's not just one thing. It's the accumulation of multiple demands, some practical, some emotional, all sitting in the background at the same time.

REFLECTION

Before we go any further, take a few minutes to make this more concrete.

Write down everything that is currently causing you stress. Try to be as specific as you can. This might include:

- Work-related pressures
- Family responsibilities
- Health concerns
- Financial worries
- Ongoing decisions or uncertainties
- Things you feel responsible for
- Things you feel you “should” be doing but aren’t

There is no need to organise or prioritise the list at this stage. Just get it out of your head and onto paper. If it feels like a long list, that in itself is useful information. The aim here is not to solve anything yet. It's simply to see, clearly and honestly, what you are currently carrying.

"I am worried about..."

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with ten horizontal dashed lines spaced evenly apart, resembling notebook paper. The lines are light gray and extend across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

REFLECTION

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

JULIA

To make this more real, here's what this might look like for Julia, written as if she had completed it herself.

"I'm behind on a couple of projects at work and I feel like I'm constantly trying to catch up"

"There are rumours about redundancies and I'm worried I might not be performing well enough."

"My husband is away quite a bit at the moment so most things at home fall to me. The kids both need different things and I feel like I'm constantly juggling."

"Mum's health is getting worse and I seem to be the one organising everything. Appointments, calls, decisions. We've started talking about care homes which is stressful, and my sibling doesn't really agree but also isn't helping."

"If we do need to put Mum into a home, it's going to be expensive and I don't know how we'll manage that long term."

"My 15-year-old didn't do well in their mock exams and I'm worried about what that means for their future. I feel like I should be doing more to help."

"Olly has started having accidents at night which is affecting my sleep, and I'm worried about his health."

"The car needs sorting but I don't know when I'm going to have time to deal with it with everything else going on."

"I'm on the PTA and they're organising the school fete. I know I should be helping but I just don't have the energy, so I've started avoiding it."

"I feel like everything is stacking up at once and I don't really have space to deal with any of it properly."

"I'm worried my younger daughter isn't getting enough attention from me. I feel like I'm constantly focused on everything else."

"I've been neglecting my friends. I don't reply to messages properly and I've cancelled plans."

"I've put on some weight and I don't feel comfortable in my clothes at the moment."

"The house needs a proper deep clean and it's starting to bother me every time I look around."

"I need to book a dentist appointment but I just haven't found the time to do it."

"I'm worried about the cost of everything going up. Food, fuel, bills. It feels like it's all increasing at once."

"I bought a gym pass thinking I'd start going again, but I haven't used it. It just feels like a waste of money and I'm still not exercising."

"I'm not sure the meals I'm cooking for the kids are that good at the moment. I'm just throwing things together and I feel a bit guilty about it."

"I can't remember the last time me and my husband spent any proper time together or were even intimate. It feels like we're just getting through the days."

"Spring is coming and the garden needs sorting, but I have no idea when I'm going to get round to it."

"My husband's parents are coming to stay over Easter and it feels like I'm on a deadline to get everything sorted before they arrive."

Looking at a list like this can feel a bit confronting. It's often longer than expected, and seeing everything written down in one place makes it clear why things feel heavy. This isn't about being overwhelmed for no reason; it's about carrying a lot, all at the same time. Before moving on, just take a moment to acknowledge that. You don't need to fix anything yet or start prioritising. The value here is simply in seeing it clearly.

ESTABLISHING WHAT MATTERS

Now that you have your list, the next step is to start making sense of it. When everything is written down together, it can feel like every item carries the same weight. In reality, some of these things are placing a much greater demand on your energy than others. Some are immediate and pressing, while others sit more in the background, contributing to the overall load but not needing your attention right now.

Take a moment to look back over your list and ask yourself: what feels most pressing at the moment? Which of these are taking up the most mental space? Which ones are you thinking about most often, or feeling most affected by day to day?

You might find it helpful to go through your list and mark each item as either “pressing” or “background.” There is no right or wrong way to do this. It’s based on your experience, not how important something “should” be.

This isn’t about dismissing anything on your list. The background items still matter, but they may not need your focus in the same way right now.

The aim here is to start separating what needs your attention from what is simply adding to the noise, so that everything doesn’t continue to feel equally overwhelming.

REFLECTION

Before moving on, take a few minutes to work with your list again. This time, rewrite it in order from the most stressful to the least stressful.

Try not to overthink the order or get it “perfect.” This is based on how things feel to you right now, not how important they might seem on paper.

Once you’ve done this, pause and look at the top few items. These are likely the areas that are placing the greatest demand on your energy at the moment.

Again, this isn’t about solving them yet. It’s about gaining a clearer sense of where your attention is most needed.

1	.....
2	.....
3	.....
4	.....
5	.....
6	.....
7	.....
8	.....
9	.....
10	.....
11	.....
12	.....
13	.....
14	.....
15	.....
16	.....
17	.....
18	.....

REFLECTION

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF

Up to this point, we've focused on what is happening around you. The demands, the pressures, the day-to-day realities that are contributing to burnout. There is another layer to this, and it often has just as much influence. It's how you see yourself.

Most people carry a set of internal roles or identities that guide how they behave. These aren't always conscious, but they shape decisions in a very consistent way. You might think of yourself as “the organised one,” “the reliable one,” “the strong one,” or “the one people can depend on.”

On the surface, these sound like positive traits, and in many ways they are. They often reflect strengths that have helped you in different areas of your life. The difficulty is that they can also create pressure, particularly when they start to feel like expectations you have to live up to.

If you see yourself as the organised one, it can feel uncomfortable to let things slip, even when you are exhausted. If you see yourself as the strong one, it can feel difficult to ask for help or admit that you are struggling. If you are the reliable one, saying no can feel like letting people down.

Over time, these identities can lead you to take on more than is sustainable, not because you consciously choose to, but because it feels like the “right” thing to do. This is where burnout can deepen. The external pressures are one part of the picture, but the internal expectations you place on yourself can keep you in the cycle. You may continue to push, continue to take responsibility, and continue to meet other people's needs, even when your own energy is already depleted.

Often, these roles developed for a reason. They may have been shaped by your upbringing, your work environment, or experiences where being that version of yourself was necessary or rewarded. Because of that, they can feel fixed, as though stepping outside of them would mean losing something important about who you are.

But when you are burned out, holding tightly to these identities can make it harder to step back, set limits, or do things differently. Recognising this isn't about changing who you are. It's about noticing the expectations you're carrying and how they might be adding to the pressure you're already under.

REFLECTION

Before moving on, take a moment to think about how you see yourself in your day-to-day life. We all carry certain roles or identities, and they often show up in the way we describe ourselves or the expectations we place on our behaviour.

You might recognise yourself in statements like:

‘I’m the organised one.’

“I’m the one people rely on.”

“I’m the strong one.”

“I’m the one who keeps everything together.”

“I’m the one who doesn’t make a fuss.”

Or you may have your own version of this.

Write down the roles or descriptions that feel most true for you.

[illegible]

Once you have them, take a second look and ask yourself a few questions. Do these feel like choices, or expectations? What happens when you don't meet them? Do they make it easier or harder for you to step back, ask for help, or say no?

The aim here isn't to judge or change anything yet. It's simply to notice how you define your role, and how that might be influencing what you take on and what you allow yourself to step away from.

REVIEW

We've covered a lot in this book so far. You've looked at what burnout is and how it develops, how it shows up in your body and mind, the patterns that keep it going, and the specific pressures in your own life that are contributing to it. You've also started to look a bit deeper at the expectations you place on yourself and how they may be adding to the overall load.

At this point, you should have a clearer picture of your own version of burnout. Not just that you feel exhausted or overwhelmed, but why. What's driving it, what's reinforcing it, and where it's showing up most. That clarity matters, because it gives us something to work with.

The next part of this book will focus on what you can start to do about it. Not in a rushed or overwhelming way, but in a way that is realistic and sustainable.

Before moving on, the next page has been left free for you to write down anything that stands out from this section. This might be patterns you've noticed, things that surprised you, or simply how you're feeling after working through it.

You don't have to use it, but taking a few minutes to put your thoughts into words can help you process what you've just uncovered and make the next steps feel clearer.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 4

PRIORITIZE

IN THE BEGINNING

Before we look at changing patterns or rebuilding your energy, we need to create some space.

Up to this point, you've built a clear picture of what your burnout looks like. You've seen what's contributing to it, how it's showing up, and the patterns that are keeping it going. The next step isn't to overhaul everything or try to fix it all at once. If anything, that approach tends to add more pressure. Instead, this chapter is about stabilising things.

If everything stays exactly as it is, with the same demands, the same expectations, and the same level of pressure, then nothing else you try will stick for long. You can't layer recovery on top of overload and expect it to work. Something has to give, even if only slightly to begin with.

Stabilising isn't about solving every problem. It's about reducing the load enough that your system has a chance to settle and regain some capacity. Once that happens, everything else becomes more manageable. We're not aiming for perfect here. We're aiming for manageable.

LOOKING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Earlier, you created a list of the things that are actively causing you stress. That's a really important starting point, but it's only part of the picture.

There is often another layer that sits underneath it. The ongoing responsibilities that don't always feel urgent or stressful on their own, but are always there in the background. The things you carry without really questioning them, because they've become part of your role or your routine. These are the things that keep life moving:

- Managing the household
- Organising appointments
- Remembering birthdays, school events, deadlines
- Paying bills
- Doing the weekly shop
- Transporting children
- Keeping things running day to day

Individually, most of these don't feel overwhelming. In fact, many of them barely register. But they still require time, attention, and mental energy. They sit in your awareness, often as a constant low-level "to-do" list that never fully disappears.

This is sometimes referred to as the mental load. Not just what you physically do, but what you are responsible for remembering, planning, anticipating, and keeping track of. When you combine this with the more obvious stressors from your earlier list, it starts to make sense why things feel as heavy as they do.

You're not just dealing with a few difficult situations. You're managing a continuous stream of responsibility, much of which goes unnoticed because it's become normal.

REFLECTION

Take a few minutes to reflect on this more fully.

- What are you responsible for on a daily basis?
- What are you responsible for weekly or monthly?
- What do you take care of automatically, without really thinking about it?
- What are you the one who notices, remembers, or sorts out before anyone else does?
- What would stop or fall apart if you didn't do it?

Be honest here. This is not the time to minimise or brush things off.

Use the space below to write your list:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

What you're doing here is building a complete picture of what you are carrying. Not just what feels stressful in the moment, but everything that requires your time, attention, and energy on an ongoing basis. For many people, this is the point where things start to click. It's not just that life feels hard. It's that you are holding a lot more than you've been consciously acknowledging.

PRIORITISING WHAT MATTERS

Now that you have both lists, your stressors and your wider responsibilities, it's time to start being more selective about where your time and energy actually go.

At the moment, everything is sitting together in one place. When that happens, it's very easy for everything to feel equally urgent. Your brain doesn't naturally prioritise well when you're overwhelmed, it defaults to "everything matters" and "everything needs to be dealt with now." That's part of what keeps the pressure high. In reality, that isn't true.

Some things genuinely do need your attention quickly. Some things matter but can wait. Some things don't need to be done by you at all. And some things, if you're honest, don't need to be done right now, or possibly at all.

This is the point where things start to shift, but it does require you to be more direct with yourself than you might be used to.

As you go through your list, try to separate what feels urgent from what actually is. Try to separate what you've always done from what truly needs to be your responsibility. This can feel uncomfortable, particularly if you are used to being the one who keeps things together, but it is an important step.

On the next few pages you'll find a grid with four headings:

- Urgent and can only be done by you
- Urgent but could be done by someone else
- Not urgent but still important
- Not urgent and not essential

Look closely at both your lists and begin dividing each item into the different boxes.

This part needs honesty. When you're burned out, it's very easy to label everything as important, but that keeps the pressure exactly where it is. Not everything carries the same weight, and not everything needs your time right now. Be prepared to challenge your own assumptions.

Something can be important without needing to be done by you. Cleaning your home is a good example. It matters, but it doesn't have to sit on your shoulders. Could you free up money from somewhere else, like an unused gym membership, regular takeaways, or something similar, and redirect it into getting help, even occasionally? Removing one task like that can lift a surprising amount of pressure.

You might also notice that some tasks could be shared or handed over. For now, don't worry about how that would work in practice. We'll come back to delegation and boundaries in more detail. At this stage, the focus is simply on recognising that not everything has to stay with you.

It's also worth being realistic about what doesn't need to be there at all. Some of the things on your list are there because they've always been there, not because they still need to be. You may be putting energy into tasks that offer very little return, out of habit rather than necessity.

If you find this difficult, that's normal. You're challenging patterns that have likely been in place for a long time. If you need a starting point, take a look at Julia's example on the following pages.

REFLECTION

URGENT & CAN ONLY BE DONE BY YOU	URGENT BUT COULD BE DONE BY SOMEONE ELSE
NOT URGENT BUT STILL IMPORTANT	NOT URGENT NOT IMPORTANT

JULIA

URGENT & CAN ONLY BE DONE BY YOU	URGENT BUT COULD BE DONE BY SOMEONE ELSE
<i>"I need to deal with Mum's medical appointments and make decisions about her care."</i> <i>"I have work deadlines and projects that I'm responsible for."</i> <i>"I need to support my 15-year-old with school and help them get back on track."</i> <i>"I'm dealing with the dog being unwell and waking in the night."</i>	<i>"I'm organising everything for Mum, but realistically some of this could be shared with my sibling."</i> <i>"I'm doing all the school runs and after-school logistics, but some of this could be shared or adjusted. Look at lift shares/ buses"</i> <i>"I'm handling most of the household tasks like cleaning, laundry, and general running of the house but I could outsource some of this"</i> <i>"I'm doing all the food shopping and cooking, but this could be simplified or shared."</i>
NOT URGENT BUT STILL IMPORTANT	NOT URGENT NOT IMPORTANT
<i>"I haven't spent proper time with my husband in ages and I'd like to change that."</i> <i>"I feel like my younger daughter isn't getting enough attention from me."</i> <i>"I've been neglecting my friends and I do miss that connection."</i> <i>"I'm not really looking after myself in terms of exercise and diet."</i> <i>"I need to book things like the dentist but keep putting it off."</i> <i>"The garden needs sorting, but it's not urgent."</i> <i>"I need to think about the long-term plan for Mum's care and finances."</i>	<i>"I'm on the PTA and feel like I should be helping with the school fete, but I don't actually have the capacity. Give this up?"</i> <i>"I feel like the house needs a deep clean, but realistically it doesn't need to be perfect."</i> <i>"I feel guilty about not going to the gym, but the membership itself is just adding pressure. Cancel this?"</i> <i>"I put pressure on myself about cooking 'proper' meals all the time, when actually something simple would be fine."</i>

NEXT STEPS

Now you have your lists divided up, it's time to start taking action and moving things around.

The first step is to put to one side anything in the last two boxes: not urgent but still important and not urgent and not important. This doesn't mean they'll never be looked at again. It simply means that, for now, they are not your priority.

At the moment, your energy is limited. Keeping these things active on your list, even mentally, continues to add pressure without giving you much in return. They sit there as "things you should be doing," which quietly increases the sense that you're behind.

For Julia, this might mean stepping back from the PTA rather than feeling guilty about not showing up. It might mean cancelling her gym membership instead of carrying the ongoing pressure of not using it. Holding onto these things when she doesn't have the capacity to engage with them properly is only adding weight, not value.

If you find it difficult to let go of these items, give yourself a clear point to return to them. Put a note in your diary for two weeks, a month, or even six weeks' time to revisit them properly. This way, you're not ignoring them or abandoning them. You're making a conscious decision to deal with them later, when you have more capacity. For now, they are not relevant.

Now move to your urgent but could be done by someone else box. These are the tasks that still matter, but don't necessarily need to sit entirely with you. This is where you start to actively reduce your load, not by removing responsibility altogether, but by sharing it. Use the next page to go through each item and decide where it could go instead.

Who could realistically take this on?

How could it be shared or simplified?

What would need to happen for that to change?

This might look like arranging a cleaner, even occasionally. It might mean asking your partner to take full responsibility for a specific task rather than “helping.” It could be something as simple as organising a lift share with another parent for the school run, or asking a sibling to take on part of a situation you’ve been managing alone.

This part can feel uncomfortable. If you’re used to being the one who keeps things running, asking for help or letting go of control can be difficult. You might worry about how it will be received, whether it will be done properly, or whether you’re somehow failing by not doing it all yourself.

We will come back to this in more detail when we look at delegation and boundaries. For now, don’t worry about getting it perfect or having all the conversations straight away. The aim at this stage is simply to decide where each task could go, and to start shifting it off your plate, even if it’s only on paper for now.

Delegated Tasks

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

REFLECTION

[illegible]

WHAT'S LEFT

You should now be left with your list of things that can only be done by you.

Ideally, this list will feel smaller and more manageable than what you started with. You may have removed some things completely, and you may have identified others that can be shared or delegated. Even seeing that on paper can start to shift how things feel.

If this has significantly reduced your physical and mental workload, that's a strong step forward. If you've only managed to move a few things, that still matters. This isn't about getting it perfect in one go.

For some people, letting go of tasks or responsibility can feel difficult. You might notice resistance, hesitation, or a sense that you "should" still be doing certain things. That's normal. These patterns often take time to change.

The aim isn't to force it or add more pressure. It's to start adjusting things gradually. As your confidence builds, you can come back to this exercise and challenge it again, moving a little more each time. Even small shifts can make a meaningful difference.

REFRAMING

One of the reasons the previous exercise can feel difficult is that it can seem like you are being asked to give things up. There can be a strong internal reaction to that. A sense that you should be able to manage everything on your list. That asking for help or delegating means you're not coping. That certain things, like going to the gym, are still important to you, so why should you have to let them go? This is where the language you use with yourself matters.

When something feels like "I have to," it often creates resistance. It can feel forced, unfair, or like something is being taken away from you. That tension makes it harder to follow through and can add to the overall pressure.

A simple but effective shift is to reframe that internal dialogue. Instead of "I have to do this," try "I am choosing to do this."

For example:

"I have to give up my gym membership even though I want to go back one day" becomes, "I'm choosing to give up my gym membership for now to reduce the pressure on myself, which actually makes it more likely that I'll return to it when I have the capacity."

Nothing external has changed, but the position you are taking has. You are no longer being forced into something. You are making a decision based on what you need right now.

It's also worth acknowledging that you always have a choice. You can continue exactly as you are. But by working through this book, you've already recognised that something isn't sustainable. This is about choosing a different approach, not having one imposed on you.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to look back over your grid. Notice where thoughts like “I have to,” “I should,” or “I can’t stop doing this” come up.

Below, write these down and reframe them. For each one, clearly state what you are choosing to do, and why. This isn’t about convincing yourself of something untrue. It’s about recognising that these changes are decisions you are making to support yourself, not things being taken away.

"Have To —————> Choose To"

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

REVIEW

Over the last few pages, you've done some heavy work. You've identified what you're carrying, started to prioritise it, and begun to question what actually needs your time and energy. That process alone is key to creating space. Without it, everything stays tangled together and continues to feel overwhelming.

Even if, on the surface, very little has changed yet, you may already notice a slight shift. When things become clearer and more organised in your own mind, the pressure often starts to ease. You are no longer dealing with one large, undefined weight. You are starting to see what it is made up of, and where changes can be made.

In the next chapter, we will look at how to begin moving some of those tasks you've identified as belonging to others off your list, by putting boundaries in place that actually hold.

Before you move on, take a few minutes to use the space at the back of this book, the "Action Plan," to note down any actions you've identified from this exercise, particularly from the last two boxes in your grid: not urgent but still important, and not urgent and not essential.

This might include things like diarising a time to revisit certain tasks, cancelling that gym membership, or stepping back from a commitment that is no longer serving you. Where possible, set a date to complete these actions. Sooner is usually better. Once they are done, they can be taken off your list completely, rather than continuing to take up space in the background.

The next page has been left free for you to write down any thoughts, feelings, or reactions that have come up while working through this chapter. You don't have to use it, but taking a moment to reflect can help you process what you've identified and make the next steps feel more grounded.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 5

BOUNDARIES

THINGS GET HARDER BEFORE THEY GET EASIER

In this section, we're going to focus on your "urgent but could be done by someone else" box.

For many people, this is the hardest part of the process. It involves letting go, setting boundaries, and asking for help, all of which can feel uncomfortable, especially if you're used to being the one who manages everything.

Alongside moving these tasks off your list, we'll also look at how to stop new ones from being added. There is little benefit in clearing space if it fills up again straight away. Boundaries are not just about what you hand over, they are about what you allow in going forward.

It's important to remind yourself why you're doing this. Burnout is not just about feeling tired or overwhelmed. Left unaddressed, it can have a significant impact on your physical health, your mental wellbeing, your relationships, and your ability to function day to day. Both the short-term and long-term effects can be serious.

By working through this book, you've already made a decision to take action. That matters. We can guide you through the process, but the changes themselves have to come from you. And those changes involve letting go of some of the things that contributed to burnout in the first place. It is not possible to recover from burnout while continuing to carry the same load in the same way.

REFLECTION

Before we move on to delegation and boundary setting, take a moment to think about what you are working towards.

Write down what your life might look like if you were no longer burned out. If your to-do list felt manageable. If your energy was more stable. If your thoughts felt clearer. If you had time and space for things that you enjoy, rather than just getting through the day.

Keeping that in mind as you go through this chapter will help anchor your decisions. It brings you back to why you are choosing to make these changes, even when they feel difficult.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DELEGATION

Delegation is often talked about as if it's simple - just ask someone else to do it.

In reality, it rarely works like that. Simply telling someone to take something on, especially if it's something you've always done, usually leads to frustration on both sides. The task either doesn't get done, doesn't get done the way you expected, or ends up coming back to you. For delegation to work, it needs to be done properly.

It starts with a **conversation**, not an instruction. Wherever possible, aim for agreement. Even a simple “can we agree that you'll take this on?” creates a different dynamic to telling someone what they should do. It makes the responsibility shared and acknowledged, rather than imposed.

Next, explain why the **task matters**. Not in a heavy way, but enough to give context. People are far more likely to take ownership of something if they understand why it needs to happen.

Be clear about what you **expect**. What does “done” actually look like? How often does it need to happen? What needs to be included? Vague expectations usually lead to disappointment.

If it's a task the other person hasn't done before, **show them** how. This can feel like extra effort in the moment, but it prevents the task coming back to you later. It's an investment rather than an inconvenience.

It can also help to highlight what they **gain**. This isn't about persuading, but about recognising that shared responsibility benefits everyone. That might be independence, fairness, or simply a smoother-running household.

Be clear about **ownership**. Is this a one-off, or is it now theirs going forward? If that isn't defined, tasks often drift back without anyone really noticing.

Once you hand something over, **step back**. Allow it to be done in a different way. If you continue to check, correct, or redo it, it isn't really delegated; it's still yours, just with added frustration.

That doesn't mean no **support**. Make it clear that help is available if they need it, but avoid taking over.

You may also need to manage your **own expectations**. It may not be done perfectly the first time, or even the first few times. That doesn't mean it isn't working. It means the person is learning.

If something **slips**, resist the urge to immediately take it back. That reinforces the idea that the responsibility still sits with you. Instead, bring it back to the agreement and reset expectations.

Delegation is not about things being done exactly as you would do them. It's about reducing your load and creating a more balanced distribution of responsibility.

It takes a bit more effort at the beginning, but if done properly, it creates long-term change rather than short-term relief.

JULIA

Here's how this might look in practice for Julia.

She has been managing most of her mum's care on her own, including keeping track of and ordering repeat prescriptions. It's become another ongoing responsibility sitting on her list.

"I wanted to talk to you about Mum's prescriptions. At the moment I'm keeping track of everything and ordering them each time, and it's just one of quite a few things I'm managing. I need to start sharing some of this out. Would you be able to take this on going forward?"

(Pause and allow a response — it may not be an immediate yes, more on this later)

"It would basically mean checking when her medication is running low and ordering the repeats through the GP. It's usually once a month, sometimes a bit sooner depending on what she's taking.

It's actually quite a straightforward job once you've done it once, and it would give you a bit more involvement in what's going on with her day to day as well."

(Selling the benefits)

"I can show you exactly how I've been doing it if that helps."

(If needed)

"I'll send you the details and the login for the GP system so you've got everything you need. Once you've got it set up, it would just be yours to keep on top of each month."

(Reassurance without taking it back)

"If anything comes up or you're unsure, just ask, but I need to step back from managing this one."

(Offering support but without taking the task back)

REFLECTION

Look back at your “urgent but someone else could do it” list. Choose one task that feels straightforward. Ideally, pick something you are unlikely to get much pushback on. The aim here is not to tackle the hardest conversation first, but to build confidence by starting with something manageable.

Take a few minutes to think about how you will approach it.

Who are you going to ask?

What exactly does the task involve?

How will you explain why you need to share it?

What does “done” look like?

Is this a one-off or something they will take on going forward?

If needed, think about how you might show them what to do, and what support you're willing to offer without taking the task back.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DEALING WITH PUSHBACK

At some point, you are likely to get pushback. Even when you approach delegation clearly and reasonably, people may resist. They might say they're too busy, that they don't know how to do it, or that it makes more sense for you to keep doing it.

Sometimes the pushback is direct, sometimes it's more subtle, like agreeing in the moment and then not following through. This is where many people give up and take the task back because it feels easier in the short term, but it puts you straight back where you started, carrying the responsibility and the frustration.

Pushback doesn't mean the request was unreasonable. It often means something is changing, and people tend to resist change, especially if the current setup has been working for them. The key here is to stay consistent without becoming confrontational.

If someone says they're too busy, acknowledge it, but don't immediately take the task back. Instead, bring the conversation back to a solution.

"I understand you've got a lot on, but I can't continue to manage this on my own. If you're not able to take it on, we need to look at another option."

That might mean sharing the task differently, simplifying it, or deciding together that it needs to be outsourced, either way your not taking the task back, but making it clear that finding a solution is shared responsibility.

If they say they don't know how to do it, keep the responsibility where it belongs.

"That's fine, I can show you, but I need you to take it on after that."

If they agree but don't follow through, return to the agreement.

"We said you'd take this on, so I need you to keep on top of it."

You don't need to over-explain or justify yourself repeatedly. Keep it clear, calm, and consistent. It's also important to expect some discomfort, both from them and from you. You may feel guilty, or like you're being difficult. They may be frustrated or reluctant. That doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. You are changing a pattern that has likely been in place for a long time.

Boundaries are not about forcing people to behave in a certain way. They are about being clear on what you will and won't continue to take responsibility for. Holding that line is what allows the change to stick.

REFLECTION

Look back at your “urgent but someone else could do it” list again. This time, choose a task that feels slightly more challenging. Something that you suspect might lead to resistance, hesitation, or pushback.

Take a few minutes to think through how you will approach it.

Who are you speaking to?

What exactly are you asking them to take on?

How will you explain why this needs to change?

What does “done” look like?

Is this a one-off or an ongoing responsibility?

Try to keep your message clear and direct. You are not asking for a favour; you are redistributing responsibility in a way that is more sustainable.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

Now think ahead. How might this person respond?

They might say they're too busy.

They might say they don't know how.

They might agree in the moment but not follow through.

They might question whether it really needs to change.

For each likely response, write down how you will reply. Keep your responses simple, calm, and consistent. You don't need long explanations. The aim is to hold your position without escalating the situation.

Being prepared for these moments makes a significant difference. It reduces the chance of being caught off guard and defaulting back to taking the task on yourself.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Once you've planned both the conversation and your responses, go ahead and have it. It may not go perfectly, and that's fine. These are skills that improve with practice. What matters is that you are starting to approach these situations differently, with more clarity and more intention.

WHY SETTING BOUNDARIES HURTS

In the last exercise, you started moving into setting and holding boundaries. For many people, especially those who see themselves as the “helper,” the “organiser,” or the one who keeps everything running, this can feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It goes against patterns that may have been in place for years so before going further, it's worth coming back to your “why”.

Look back at the exercise where you imagined what life might feel like without burnout. A manageable to-do list. More stable energy. Space to think clearly and spend time on things that actually matter to you. That is what you are working towards. When boundaries feel difficult, that reminder matters. It helps anchor your decisions in something bigger than the discomfort of the moment.

There are also clear reasons why setting boundaries can feel so challenging. For some people, there is a strong pull to keep others happy or to avoid conflict. This isn't about being “too nice.” It's often a learned response. If being reliable, helpful, or agreeable has been linked to approval or connection in the past, your brain will continue to default to that pattern. Saying “yes” can feel safer than risking disappointment or tension.

There is also a biological element. Social rejection activates similar areas of the brain as physical pain. That means the idea of disappointing someone can feel far more intense than it logically should. Your brain treats it as something to avoid, even when setting a boundary would be the healthier option.

At the same time, it's common to misunderstand what a boundary actually is. A boundary is not about controlling someone else's behaviour. It is about being clear on what you will and won't continue to do. For example, asking someone not to contact you late at night is a request. Deciding that you won't respond to messages after a certain time is a boundary. The difference matters, because it puts control back with you.

Even when you set a boundary clearly, the difficult part often comes straight after. You may feel guilty, uneasy, or like you've done something wrong. That reaction is normal. It's often the result of breaking a long-standing pattern, where your role has been to absorb pressure rather than redirect it. When you stop doing that, the discomfort can feel sharp at first.

But that discomfort doesn't mean the boundary is wrong. It means something is changing. You are not letting people down. You are adjusting what you are able to carry, so that you can function in a way that is sustainable.

EXCUSES, EXCUSES, EXCUSES

One of the most common responses when setting a boundary is to over-explain. You say no, but then you feel the need to soften it. You add context, reasons, justifications. You try to make the decision easier for the other person to accept.

This often comes from a good place. You're trying to reduce the impact, avoid conflict, or show that you're still being reasonable. Underneath that, there can also be a hope that the other person will understand, agree, or give you permission to hold the boundary. The problem is that over-explaining rarely has that effect. Instead, it creates space for negotiation.

The more detail you give, the more there is to question, challenge, or work around. What starts as a clear boundary can quickly turn into a discussion about whether your reasons are valid, whether the situation is really that difficult, or whether there might be another solution.

At that point, the focus shifts. It is no longer about what you have decided. It becomes about whether your decision is acceptable. This is how people end up being persuaded out of boundaries they were initially clear on. A boundary does not need to be argued or defended in detail. It needs to be stated. That doesn't mean being abrupt or dismissive. It means being clear and proportionate.

For example, "I can no longer manage this on my own" is often enough.

Compare that to explaining everything that is already on your plate, how stressed you've been, and why this week in particular is difficult, which may feel more polite, but it opens the door to "it'll only take you five minutes though" or "but you're so good at this."

When you keep it simple, you reduce the opportunity for the conversation to move away from the boundary itself and if it's challenged, you simply repeat your boundary.

It's also worth noticing that the urge to over-explain is often about managing the other person's reaction. Trying to make sure they aren't disappointed, frustrated, or uncomfortable. But those reactions are not something you can fully control.

Your responsibility is to communicate your boundary clearly. How it is received is, ultimately, up to them. Keeping your message simple helps you hold that line.

JULIA

Here's how Julia's conversation from earlier might go if Julia's sibling doesn't agree straight away.

"I wanted to talk to you about Mum's prescriptions. At the moment I'm keeping track of everything and ordering them each time, and it's just one of quite a few things I'm managing. I need to start sharing some of this out. Would you be able to take this on going forward?"

Sibling: *"I can't really, I've got too much on already."*

"I understand you've got a lot on, but I can't keep managing all of Mum's care on my own anymore. This is one of the things that needs to be shared."

"It's a fairly straightforward task once it's set up, and it would mean you're a bit more involved in what's going on with her as well."

Sibling: *"I just don't think I'll keep on top of it."*

"That's fine, I can show you how it works and what to look out for, but I still need you to take responsibility for it once you've got the hang of it."

Sibling: *"I really don't think I can do it."*

"Okay, but I'm not able to keep doing everything myself either. So if you're not able to take this on, we need to look at another option. That might be splitting things differently, or arranging some extra support, but it can't just stay as it is."

At this point, Julia is not arguing or over-explaining. She's staying calm, clear, and consistent. She's also not taking the task back. This is the key difference.

The conversation isn't about forcing agreement. It's about making it clear that the current situation is no longer sustainable, and that something needs to change.

HOLDING THE LINE

Learning about boundaries isn't just important for getting things off your list. It's also what stops new things quietly taking their place. There is very little point in doing this work if your list fills back up again within a few weeks. Without boundaries, that tends to happen automatically. New requests come in, expectations build, and before long you are back where you started.

At this stage, you already have a clear boundary, whether you say it out loud or not:

You cannot take on more. That may feel too strong to say directly. It might feel uncomfortable, or like you're making a bigger statement than necessary. You don't need to use those exact words. What matters is that the message stays the same.

Below are some examples of how you might express that boundary in a way that feels more natural, while still being clear:

"I can't take anything else on at the moment."

"I don't have the capacity to do that right now."

"I won't be able to help with that."

"I need to keep my workload where it is for now."

"I'm not able to commit to anything additional."

"That's not something I can take on at the moment."

"I can't add anything else to my plate right now."

You don't need to explain this in detail. You don't need to justify it. And you don't need to leave the door open unless you genuinely want to. Keeping your response clear and consistent is what stops new responsibilities from building up again.

And remember, a boundary is something you hold, not something you make other people agree with. You can control what you say yes or no to. You can control what you take on and what you step back from. You cannot control how someone else responds to that. They may be understanding, they may be frustrated, they may try to persuade you to change your mind. None of that changes the boundary itself.

ASKING FOR HELP ISN'T WEAKNESS

For many people, asking for help feels harder than doing the task themselves. Even when you know you're overwhelmed, even when you can see that something needs to change, there can still be a strong resistance to saying it out loud.

Part of this is practical. It can feel quicker and easier to just get on with something than to explain it, ask someone else, and deal with the uncertainty of how it will be done. But often, it goes deeper than that. You may be used to being the reliable one, the person who manages things, steps in, and keeps everything running. Asking for help can feel like stepping out of that role. It can bring up thoughts about being a burden, letting people down, or not coping as well as you feel you should.

There can also be a concern about how it will be received. Will they say no? Will they think less of you? Will it create tension? Because of this, many people wait until they are already overwhelmed before they ask, or avoid asking altogether and continue carrying more than is manageable.

It's worth challenging the idea that asking for help is a sign of weakness. In reality, it's a recognition of limits. Everyone has them. The difference is whether they are acknowledged and managed, or ignored until they become a problem.

It can also help to reframe what you are asking for. You are not asking someone to take something from you because you can't cope. You are sharing responsibility in a way that is more balanced and sustainable.

If asking still feels difficult, start small. Choose something straightforward, be clear about what you need, and keep the request simple. You don't need to justify it in detail or build a strong case for why it's reasonable. A simple "I need some help with this" is enough.

You may also find that people are more willing to help than you expect. Often, others don't realise the extent of what you are managing until you say it.

Like delegation and boundaries, this is something that becomes easier with practice. The first time may feel uncomfortable. That doesn't mean it's wrong. It means you're doing something differently.

REVIEW

You've covered a lot in this section. You've started to shift responsibility, practised having more direct conversations, and begun setting boundaries that protect your time and energy. None of this is easy, especially if it goes against how you're used to operating, but these changes are what allow the earlier work you've done to actually hold.

It may feel like a lot. It may feel uncomfortable, and at times it may feel harder than simply carrying on as you were. That's often the point where people are tempted to stop. But real change does take effort.

It took time and sustained pressure to reach burnout. It will take some work to move out of it. That doesn't mean it's out of reach. It means you are in the process of learning something new.

These are not quick fixes. They are skills. The ability to set boundaries, to delegate, to manage your time and energy more realistically, these are things that will continue to support you long after this period has passed. They don't just help you recover, they help protect you from ending up back here again.

Before you move on, use the "Action Plan" page at the back of this book to record the steps you need to take to delegate or share responsibility for the tasks in your "urgent but someone else can do it" box. Set clear dates for completing these actions. Sooner is usually better, as once they are done, these tasks can be removed from your orbit rather than continuing to sit in the background.

The next page has been left free for you to write down any thoughts, reactions, or experiences that have come up while working through this section. You don't have to use it, but taking a moment to reflect can help you process what you've tried and identify what you want to carry forward.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 6

STABALISE

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

We've now reached your "urgent and only you can do them" box. These are the things that sit firmly with you. They can't be removed, they can't be paused, and they can't be handed over. These are your responsibilities, and at this point it can feel like this is where the options run out. But that isn't the case.

Even when tasks can't be taken away, there is still a lot that can be done to make them feel more manageable. The aim of this chapter is not to reduce the number of tasks, but to reduce the pressure they create.

Up until now, you've been creating space by removing, pausing, and redistributing what you can. What's left is the core of your current reality. Instead of asking "how do I get rid of this?", the focus now shifts to "how do I make this easier to carry?"

This might involve changing how you approach tasks, reducing the mental load around them, managing your energy more effectively, or adjusting your expectations of what "done well" looks like right now.

You are not trying to optimise your performance. You are trying to stabilise your system. That means making practical, realistic changes that allow you to keep going without pushing yourself further into burnout. Over the next section, we'll look at ways to do exactly that.

GOOD ENOUGH

When you're burned out, one of the biggest sources of pressure often comes from your own expectations. There can be an internal standard for how things should be done, how the house should look, how well you should perform at work, what meals you should cook, and how present, organised, or productive you should be.

The problem is that these standards are often based on a version of you that had more time, more energy, and more capacity than you do right now. Trying to maintain that level while burned out creates constant friction. Even when you complete a task, it can feel like it wasn't done well enough, and that sense of never quite catching up adds to the overall strain.

This is where the idea of "good enough" becomes important. Good enough is not about lowering your standards permanently or not caring. It's about adjusting your expectations to match your current capacity.

Right now, the goal is not perfection. It is completion without excessive strain. A good enough meal might be something simple rather than something cooked from scratch. A good enough clean might mean the essentials are done rather than everything being spotless. Good enough at work might mean focusing on what actually needs to be delivered, rather than going above and beyond on every task.

This shift can feel uncomfortable at first. You may notice thoughts like "this isn't how I normally do things" or "this isn't my best." That may be true, but this is not about your best. It is about what is realistic and sustainable in your current situation.

Holding on to high standards during burnout doesn't protect your performance. It increases the pressure and makes it harder to function. Allowing things to be good enough reduces that pressure and creates space for recovery. Over time, as your capacity improves, your standards can rise again if you want them to. For now, good enough is not a compromise. It is a strategy.

JULIA

Julia usually does the weekly shop after work on a Thursday. By the time she gets there, she's already tired from the day, and she knows that once she gets home she still has to unpack everything and cook dinner. It's something she has always done, but recently she has started to dread it.

Part of the reason she has stuck with it is because she believes it's the "better" way to shop. She can choose the best products, check expiry dates, and make sure everything is exactly right. That has always felt important to her. In reality, though, things have changed.

When she goes to the supermarket now, she often feels overwhelmed and exhausted. Instead of making considered choices, she finds herself reaching for quick, high-calorie, high-sugar options because she's too drained to think it through. She often spends more than she intended, and the whole experience leaves her feeling worse rather than better. Julia decides to try something different.

She switches to ordering her food online and having it delivered. It doesn't feel ideal at first. She notices the part of her that thinks she should still be doing it properly, that she's losing control over what she buys. But when she looks at it more realistically, the trade-off is clear.

The risk of a few slightly overripe tomatoes is small compared to the time, energy, and mental load she saves by not having to go to the supermarket after a long day. She is also more likely to stick to what she actually needs, rather than making decisions when she is already exhausted.

For Julia, this is what "good enough" looks like. It's not perfect, but it works better for where she is right now.

REFLECTION

Look back at your “urgent and only you can do it” list. These are the tasks that still sit with you, but that doesn’t mean they have to be done to the same standard as before.

For each one, take a moment to consider what “good enough” looks like right now.

What is the simplest version of this task that still meets the need?

What can be reduced, simplified, or done differently?

Where might you be adding pressure that isn't actually necessary?

Use the space below to write down each task and your adjusted version of “good enough.” This is about making these responsibilities more manageable, not perfect.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

“Good enough” is about the choices you can make to reduce pressure, but not everything is within your control.

There will be situations where, despite your best efforts, things don’t go to plan. When that happens, it’s very easy for your mind to focus on what went wrong. You might replay it, criticise yourself, or feel like you should have handled it differently.

For example, imagine you have an important meeting at work. You’ve prepared properly, you feel ready, but on the day an accident on the motorway means you arrive late. Almost immediately, your thoughts turn against you. You feel stressed, frustrated, and you start questioning yourself. None of that changes the situation. It only adds to it.

In these moments, it can help to deliberately shift your focus. Instead of concentrating on what didn’t go well, look at what did.

You still prepared.

You still showed up.

You handled an unexpected situation.

You got there safely.

This is not about ignoring problems or pretending everything is fine. It’s about recognising that even in difficult situations, there are elements that have gone right.

Burnout tends to narrow your focus towards the negative. Reframing helps to widen that view again. It allows you to acknowledge effort, resilience, and progress, rather than defaulting to criticism.

Over time, this shift reduces the emotional impact of setbacks and makes it easier to move on from them, rather than carrying them with you for the rest of the day.

REFLECTION

Think about something recent that you feel didn't go well. Take a moment to write it out below. What happened? What were your initial thoughts or reactions?

Now pause and look at the same situation from a different angle.

What went right?

What did you handle well?

What effort did you put in?

What did you manage, despite the situation?

Write these down alongside the original situation.

This isn't about forcing a positive spin. It's about recognising that even when something doesn't go to plan, there are still elements of success within it.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

THE MENTAL NOISE

Not all tasks feel difficult because of what they involve. Often, they feel difficult because of how much mental space they take up beforehand. You might notice this with certain things on your list, such as a phone call you've been putting off, an email you don't want to send, or a conversation you're avoiding.

On paper, these tasks are usually straightforward and don't take much time. In your head, however, they can grow into something much bigger. You think about them repeatedly, imagine how they might go, and anticipate problems or awkwardness. Each time they come to mind, they bring a sense of dread, irritation, or resistance.

Over time, the emotional build-up becomes far greater than the task itself. This is what turns something relatively simple into something that feels overwhelming. The longer it sits there, the heavier it feels.

One way to shift this is to stop focusing on the task itself and start focusing on the outcome. Instead of thinking about the discomfort of making the phone call, think about what happens once it's done. The task is off your list, the background pressure disappears, and you don't have to keep thinking about it.

Instead of focusing on the awkwardness of a conversation, focus on the clarity that comes afterwards. The situation is addressed and you know where you stand. This doesn't remove the discomfort entirely, but it changes what your mind is working towards. You are no longer focused on the short-term resistance, but on the longer-term relief.

It can also help to reduce the task to its simplest form. Often, getting started is the hardest part, and once you begin, the task tends to feel more manageable than you expected. Breaking it down into a small first step can make it easier to move forward.

Burnout increases the volume of this mental noise. It makes everything feel heavier, more complicated, and more draining than it actually is. Learning to recognise that pattern and redirect your focus towards the outcome rather than the build-up helps reduce that weight.

You are not removing the task. You are removing the unnecessary load around it.

MANAGING TIME

Another way to reduce the weight of these tasks is to limit how long they are allowed to take up your time.

When something feels difficult, it's easy to assume it will take far longer than it actually will. This is where time boxing can help. Instead of committing to completing the task, you commit to a short, defined period of time. For example, you might decide to spend ten minutes on it and then stop. This makes starting feel more manageable because you are not facing an open-ended task. More often than not, once you begin, you will either complete it within that time or feel able to continue.

It can also help to let go of the idea that you need the right moment to do something. Burnout often creates the sense that you need to feel motivated, focused, or have a clear stretch of time before you begin. In reality, that moment rarely arrives. Waiting for it tends to increase the mental weight of the task. Starting when your energy is average, rather than ideal, is usually enough.

Another useful shift is to focus on closing loops quickly. Tasks that are left partially done tend to stay active in your mind. Even small, incomplete actions can create ongoing background pressure. Completing something, even if it's done simply or quickly, removes that mental load.

Avoiding a task doesn't just delay it. It increases the amount of time and energy it takes up in your mind. Taking action, even in a small way, reduces that.

REFLECTION

Choose one task from your list that you have been avoiding or putting off. Decide on a fixed amount of time to spend on it. This might be ten minutes, fifteen minutes, or slightly longer, but keep it realistic and contained.

Set a timer and begin the task. The aim is not to feel ready or motivated. The aim is to do the task regardless of how you feel, and to continue until the timer goes off. When the time is up, stop.

If you complete the task within that time, you have removed it from your list. If you don't, schedule another time block to continue it as soon as possible, but do not return to it again today. This prevents the task from taking over more of your time and energy than planned.

If you don't have a diary, use the "Action Plan" page at the back of this book to record when you will come back to it. This is about reducing the mental weight of the task, not forcing yourself to complete everything in one go.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

REVIEW

You've now taken the tasks that couldn't be removed and made them more manageable. Instead of trying to do everything to the same standard, in the same way, with the same expectations, you've started to adjust how you approach them. You've reduced the pressure around them, broken them down, and found ways to make them feel less overwhelming. This is an important shift.

At this stage, you are no longer just reacting to what's on your list. You are actively shaping how you deal with it. That creates stability, and stability is what allows recovery to begin.

In the next section, we'll start to widen the focus. We'll look at the bigger picture, including how your environment affects your stress levels, how to challenge patterns of negative self-talk, how to manage anxiety more effectively, and how to begin reintroducing things that bring a sense of enjoyment and balance back into your life.

The next page has been left free for you to write down any thoughts, reflections, or observations from this section. You don't have to use it, but taking a moment to pause can help you recognise what has shifted and what you want to carry forward.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 7

REBUILDING

NEXT STEPS

Up until now, the focus has been on reducing the load. You've worked through what is contributing to your burnout, started to remove or redistribute what you can, and found ways to make the tasks that remain more manageable. That process creates space. It reduces pressure and begins to stabilise things.

But reducing the load is only part of recovery. What you do with the space that's been created matters just as much.

This next stage is about rebuilding. Not by adding everything back in at once, but by introducing the right things, in a way that supports your energy rather than draining it.

This includes looking after your body through rest, movement, nutrition, and hydration, as well as addressing the mental side of burnout. We'll look at how to manage decision fatigue, challenge patterns of negative self-talk and automatic thinking, and reduce the background noise that keeps your system overloaded without you always noticing it.

We'll also look at how to reintroduce things that bring a sense of enjoyment and balance back into your life. Burnout often strips these away first, and rebuilding them takes intention.

The aim here is not to create a perfect routine or a long list of things you feel you should be doing. It's to build a more supportive environment, both physically and mentally, that allows your energy to recover and your capacity to grow again. This is where things start to shift from simply getting through, to feeling more like yourself again.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

At some point, if you mention feeling burned out, stressed, or overwhelmed, someone will suggest the same things....Drink more water. Get some fresh air. Try yoga. Try meditation. Maybe download an app.

It's usually said with good intentions, but it can land badly. When you feel like you're barely holding things together, being told to go for a walk can feel completely disconnected from the reality of what you're dealing with. And yet, underneath the delivery, there is some truth in it. Not because these things are a fix, but because they support the system that is currently under strain.

When you're in burnout, a lot can feel out of your control. There are pressures, responsibilities, and situations that you can't easily change. But there are also areas where you do have influence, and your physical health is one of the most important. The difficulty is that this is often the first thing to go.

Before burnout, you may have been more consistent with your routines. You might have eaten better, slept more regularly, moved your body, and generally looked after yourself. When burnout takes hold, those things tend to drop away. Partly because you're exhausted, and partly because you stop seeing yourself as the priority. It can feel easier to let those things slide because the immediate impact seems to fall on you alone. But that comes at a cost.

When your diet slips, your energy becomes more unstable. When you're not drinking enough water, fatigue and headaches become more likely. When movement drops off, your body holds more tension, your sleep can worsen, and your mood is affected. Poor sleep then feeds back into all of it, making everything feel harder to manage.

None of these things exist in isolation. They build on each other. Over time, they create an environment that makes burnout feel heavier and more difficult to move through. You are trying to deal with a demanding situation while your system is already under strain.

This is why these simple suggestions come up so often. Not because they solve burnout on their own, but because they support your ability to cope with everything else.

This is one of the areas where small, consistent changes can make a noticeable difference. It won't remove the pressures in your life, but it can change how those pressures feel. And importantly, it is one of the areas where you have the most control.

REFLECTION

Before making any changes, it's useful to get a clear picture of where you are right now. Read through each statement below and answer Yes, No, or Sometimes, based on what is true for you most of the time. This isn't about judging yourself or getting a perfect score. It's about awareness.

	YES.	NO.	SOMETIMES
• I eat breakfast most days.	☐	☐	☐
• I make sure most meals include fruit and/or vegetables.	☐	☐	☐
• I include a source of protein in my meals.	☐	☐	☐
• I avoid highly processed foods where possible.	☐	☐	☐
• I keep my sugar intake relatively low.	☐	☐	☐
• I limit my caffeine intake to a moderate level (around 3 cups of tea or coffee per day or less).	☐	☐	☐
• I drink enough water throughout the day (around 6–8 glasses).	☐	☐	☐
• I limit soft drinks or sugary drinks.	☐	☐	☐
• My weight remains generally stable over time.	☐	☐	☐
• I exercise regularly (around 150 minutes per week, or an amount appropriate for me).	☐	☐	☐
• I go to bed at a reasonably consistent time.	☐	☐	☐
• I get enough sleep to feel rested most days.	☐	☐	☐
• I wake up feeling reasonably refreshed.	☐	☐	☐
• I have time in my day where I am not “on” or dealing with tasks.	☐	☐	☐
• I take breaks during the day rather than pushing through constantly.	☐	☐	☐
• I spend some time outside or in natural light most days.	☐	☐	☐
• I allow myself time to rest without feeling guilty.	☐	☐	☐
• I limit my alcohol intake to a moderate level.	☐	☐	☐
• I avoid using alcohol as a way to cope with stress or switch off.	☐	☐	☐
• I avoid or limit recreational drug use.	☐	☐	☐

Once you've answered, take a moment to look over your responses.

Notice where you answered "No" or "Sometimes." These are not failures. They are simply areas where your current routine may not be supporting you as well as it could.

REFLECTION

Looking back at your answers from the previous page, you may have identified several areas that could be improved. It can be tempting to try to change everything at once. In reality, that usually leads to overwhelm and very little change.

Instead, choose two or three areas that feel the most important right now. These should be things that will have a noticeable impact on how you feel day to day, but that also feel realistic to maintain. This might be something like drinking more water, going to bed slightly earlier, getting outside for a short walk each day, or eating more regular meals.

Write your chosen areas below.

Now make each one specific. What exactly will you do? When will you do it? What does “good enough” look like for this?

REFLECTION

These are your non-negotiables for now. Not in a rigid or punishing way, but in the sense that they are the things you are choosing to prioritise because they support your recovery. The aim is not perfection. It is consistency.

This is where your earlier work on boundaries becomes important. In order to protect these non-negotiables, you may need to say no to other things. You may need to leave tasks unfinished, delay something, or not take something on in the first place. Without that, these habits are often the first things to be pushed aside when life gets busy. You are not adding more to your list. You are choosing what stays on it.

Now take a moment to write down what will be different when you follow through with these. If you prioritise drinking more water, how will you feel? If you improve your sleep, what will that change day to day? If you move your body more, what impact might that have?

Be specific. Think about energy, mood, focus, and how you move through your day. Connecting these actions to a clear outcome makes them easier to follow through on, especially on the days when motivation is low.

Now you've decided the areas you are going to focus on, take a moment to add these to your Action Plan at the back of the book. Setting them down clearly helps turn intention into action and gives you something concrete to come back to as you begin to build these habits into your routine.

NEGATIVE SELF TALK

By the time burnout has been around for a while, negative self-talk often starts to sound normal. It can become such a familiar part of your internal world that you barely notice it. The commentary just runs in the background. You should be coping better. You're behind. You've messed this up. Other people manage more than this. You're letting people down.

These thoughts can feel factual, especially when you are already tired, overwhelmed, and under pressure. But as we touched on earlier in the book, automatic thoughts are not always accurate. They are fast, learned mental responses that are shaped by stress, habit, past experiences, and the meaning your brain has learned to attach to certain situations.

When you are burned out, your mind is less likely to offer you balanced, measured interpretations. It tends to default to the quickest, harshest, and most threat-focused explanation. A delayed reply becomes "they're annoyed with me." A mistake becomes "I'm useless." Feeling tired becomes "I'm not coping properly." These thoughts often arrive so quickly that they feel like truth rather than interpretation.

Negative self-talk matters because it doesn't just affect how you feel emotionally. It changes how you behave. If you tell yourself you are failing, you are more likely to avoid things, second-guess yourself, withdraw, or push even harder in an attempt to make up for it. That then feeds back into exhaustion and keeps the cycle going.

A useful starting point is to separate the situation from the story you are telling yourself about it. For example, the situation might be: "I forgot to reply to an email." The story might be: "I'm disorganised, I'm bad at my job, and people are probably noticing." Those are not the same thing. One is an event. The other is an interpretation layered on top of it.

Learning to notice that difference is an important part of reducing the emotional impact of automatic thoughts. You do not need to force yourself to think positively, and this is not about pretending everything is fine. It is about becoming more accurate, more balanced, and less brutal in the way you speak to yourself.

One of the most helpful questions you can ask is: *What is the evidence for this thought, and what is the evidence against it?*

If the thought is, “I’m failing at everything,” what is the actual evidence? Is that objectively true, or are you focusing only on the things that feel difficult right now? What evidence might point in a different direction? Are there things you are still doing well, responsibilities you are still managing, or signs that this is strain rather than failure?

Another useful question is: *If someone I cared about said this about themselves, what would I say to them?*

People are often far harsher with themselves than they would ever be with anyone else. That doesn’t mean you need to be endlessly kind or soft with yourself if that language doesn’t feel natural. It just means aiming for fairness. A more balanced thought might not be “I’m amazing and everything is fine.” It might be “I’m under a lot of pressure, and that’s affecting how I’m functioning right now.”

That is a very different internal message, and it tends to produce a very different emotional response.

It can also help to watch for common thinking traps. Burnout often pushes people into all-or-nothing thinking, where things are either a complete success or a complete failure. It can lead to catastrophising, where the mind jumps straight to the worst-case outcome. It can create mind-reading, where you assume you know what other people think of you, usually negatively. It can also lead to “should” thinking, where you constantly measure yourself against unrealistic expectations. I should be coping better. I should be able to manage this. I shouldn’t find this so hard. These patterns are common, but they are not helpful. They make pressure feel heavier and your options feel narrower.

The goal is not to stop every negative thought from appearing. That isn’t realistic. The goal is to catch them earlier, question them more effectively, and reduce the power they have over you.

A SPRINKLING OF CBT

One practical CBT-based approach is to use a simple thought record. When you notice a spike in stress, low mood, guilt, or self-criticism, write down the situation, the automatic thought, the emotion it triggered, and then a more balanced alternative thought.

For example, the situation might be: “I forgot my child’s school letter.” The automatic thought might be: “I can’t keep on top of anything.” The emotion might be guilt or panic. A more balanced thought could be: “I forgot something because I’m overloaded, not because I’m incapable. I can sort it out.”

That doesn’t remove the problem, but it changes the emotional intensity around it and makes it easier to respond constructively.

Another useful CBT technique is to rate how strongly you believe a thought before and after you challenge it. At first, you might believe “I’m failing” at 90%. After looking at the evidence, you may still believe it to some extent, but perhaps it drops to 50% or 40%. That matters. Even a small reduction can make a thought feel less overwhelming and less controlling.

It is also worth paying attention to the tone of your self-talk. Some people have an internal voice that is sharp, impatient, and demanding. It may sound like pressure, criticism, or contempt. If you notice that, ask yourself whether that voice is actually helping you function better, or whether it is simply increasing the strain.

For most people, harsh self-talk does not improve performance in burnout. It increases anxiety, shame, and exhaustion. It may create short bursts of pressure, but it rarely creates steady, sustainable action.

A more useful tone is one that is clear, grounded, and honest. Not indulgent. Not unrealistic. Just less hostile. Instead of “for God’s sake, get a grip,” that might sound like, “I’m overloaded and I need to slow this down.” Instead of “you always mess things up,” it might sound like, “this went wrong, but that doesn’t mean everything is going wrong.”

The way you speak to yourself shapes the environment you are trying to recover in. If your internal world is full of criticism, pressure, and threat, your system never really gets a chance to settle. Changing that takes practice, but it is absolutely possible.

REFLECTION

Think about a recent situation that triggered stress, guilt, irritation, or self-criticism.

Write down the situation as simply and factually as you can. Try to describe only what happened, without interpretation.

Now write down the automatic thought that came into your mind.

Next, identify the emotion that followed. You may want to name more than one. For example: anxiety, guilt, shame, frustration, sadness, or anger.

REFLECTION

Now ask yourself the following questions.

- What is the evidence that this thought is true? What facts actually support it?
- What is the evidence that it may not be completely true? What facts point in another direction?
- Am I falling into a thinking trap here, such as catastrophising, mind-reading, all-or-nothing thinking, or “should” thinking?
- What would be a more balanced and accurate way of looking at this situation?

Write your new thought underneath.

Finally, rate how strongly you believed the original thought before and after doing this exercise.

Original thought belief before:

Original thought belief after:

Look back over the last week and notice whether there is a particular type of negative self-talk that comes up repeatedly. Do you often tell yourself that you are behind? That you are failing? That you are letting people down? That you should be coping better? That you are not doing enough? Write down the thought that shows up most often.

Now ask yourself where this pattern tends to appear. Is it linked to work, parenting, relationships, your health, or your to-do list? Does it show up most when you are tired, under time pressure, or feeling judged?

This exercise is not about fixing the thought immediately. It is about recognising the pattern more clearly. The more familiar you become with your common thoughts, the easier they are to catch.

This is not something you do once and move on from. Negative self-talk and automatic thoughts are patterns that have often been in place for a long time. It takes repetition to start to shift them. The more often you notice them, question them, and respond differently, the easier it becomes to catch them earlier and reduce their impact.

It can help to come back to these exercises regularly, not just when things feel difficult, but also during quieter moments when you have a bit more space to reflect. If you can, try to use parts of these exercises in the moment. Even pausing to ask yourself, “what is the evidence for this?” or “is there another way of looking at this?” can be enough to interrupt the pattern. It makes it easier to apply them in real time when negative thoughts show up.

Make a note in your Action Plan to revisit these exercises. Treat this as something you return to, rather than something you complete once.

OVERCOMING ANXIETY

Even after burnout starts to improve, some of the symptoms can take longer to settle. Anxiety is a good example of this. That does not mean you are not making progress. It often means that your system has spent a long time operating in a state of alert, and some of those patterns have become learned responses.

During burnout, anxiety can become woven into daily life. Your mind gets used to scanning for problems, your body gets used to tension and activation, and certain behaviours begin to feel automatic. You may find yourself overchecking, avoiding things, needing reassurance, overthinking decisions, or feeling on edge for no obvious reason. These patterns can continue even when the original level of pressure has started to reduce.

This is one of the reasons anxiety can feel confusing in recovery. You may be doing less, looking after yourself better, and starting to regain some space, but your body and mind can still react as though danger is close by. That is not failure. It is a nervous system that has become well practised at anticipating threat.

A lot of the work you have already done in this book will help with this. Reducing the load, setting boundaries, improving self-care, and addressing negative self-talk all help to lower the overall level of strain on your system. But there are also some more direct approaches that can help you work with anxiety when it shows up. One of these is something called somatic tracking.

Somatic tracking is often used in work around chronic pain, but it can also be very helpful for anxiety. The idea is simple. Instead of reacting to a sensation in your body as though it is a problem or a warning sign, you learn to notice it with less fear and less urgency.

For example, if you notice tightness in your chest, a racing heart, a knot in your stomach, or shaky hands, the usual response is often immediate alarm. Something is wrong. I need this to stop. Why am I feeling like this? That fear then adds another layer of stress, which usually makes the sensation stronger. Somatic tracking interrupts that pattern.

Instead of treating the sensation as dangerous, you observe it. You notice where it is, what it feels like, whether it shifts, changes, or moves. The aim is not to force it away. It is to reduce the fear attached to it.

You might say to yourself, “This is anxiety. My body is activated, but I am safe.” Or, “This feels uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous.” You are teaching your system that the sensation can be felt without needing an emergency response.

That may sound simple, but it can be powerful. Anxiety often grows because of the meaning we attach to it. The sensation itself is only one part of the experience. The interpretation, the fear, and the resistance are what often turn it into something bigger.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to think about how anxiety tends to show up for you at the moment.

What does it feel like in your body? You might notice things like a racing heart, tightness in your chest, nausea, restlessness, a lump in your throat, tension, dizziness, or shaky hands. What thoughts tend to come with it? Are you worrying that something will go wrong, that you've forgotten something, that someone is unhappy with you, or that you won't cope? What behaviours tend to follow? Do you avoid things, seek reassurance, check repeatedly, overprepare, procrastinate, or withdraw?

Write these down as clearly as you can. The aim is to start identifying your particular anxiety pattern, rather than thinking about anxiety in a vague way.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

REFLECTION

The next time you notice anxiety in your body, pause if you can.

Instead of immediately reacting to it, take a moment to observe it. Notice where you feel it most strongly. Describe it to yourself. Is it tight, heavy, fluttering, hot, prickly, tense, or restless? Does it stay in one place, or does it shift?

Now try to add a more neutral thought alongside it. You might say, “This is anxiety, and I am safe,” or “This feels uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous.” Stay with the sensation for a short time without trying to force it away. The aim is not to relax perfectly. The aim is to notice the feeling without adding another layer of fear on top of it.

Afterwards, write down what you noticed. Did the sensation change at all? Did your fear about it increase or decrease? What happened when you observed it instead of fighting it?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

REFLECTION

This is not a quick fix. You are retraining your brain, and that takes time and repetition, but over time you may notice that the sensations feel less threatening, pass more quickly, and have less control over how you respond.

AVOIDANCE

Another useful approach is to watch for the behaviours that keep anxiety going. Avoidance is one of the most common. If something makes you anxious, it makes sense to avoid it. In the short term, that usually brings relief. But over time, avoidance teaches your brain that the thing really was dangerous, because you never stay with it long enough to learn otherwise.

This is how anxiety can start to spread. What begins as one avoided situation can gradually become several. You avoid the phone call, then emails feel harder, then appointments feel harder, then leaving things in your diary starts to feel stressful before they have even happened.

Part of reducing anxiety is therefore learning to do more of the opposite. Not in a reckless or overwhelming way, but in a steady one. Staying with things a little longer. Letting some discomfort be there without immediately trying to escape it. Proving to yourself, through experience, that you can tolerate more than your anxious mind suggests.

It can also help to separate anxiety from danger. Anxiety is a feeling. It can be intense, unpleasant, and convincing, but it is not always an accurate measure of risk. Many people in burnout start to trust the feeling of anxiety as evidence that something must be wrong. In reality, anxiety often means your system has become sensitised, not that the situation itself is unsafe.

REFLECTION

Think about the things you do to try to prevent anxiety, reduce it, or protect yourself from it. These might include checking things multiple times, rehearsing conversations in your head, arriving excessively early, avoiding certain tasks, constantly looking for reassurance, or putting things off until you feel more ready. Write down the behaviours you notice most often.

Then ask yourself what effect they are having. Do they reduce anxiety long term, or do they bring short-term relief while keeping the overall pattern going?

Choose one small safety behaviour you would like to reduce. Keep it realistic. The aim is not to stop everything at once, but to begin loosening the pattern. Make a note below.

[illegible]

REFLECTION

Think of a recent situation where you felt anxious. Write down what happened, what your mind told you it meant, and what the actual outcome was.

Then ask yourself these questions. Did the level of anxiety match the level of real danger? Was your body reacting to threat, or to uncertainty? Did the outcome support your anxious prediction, or was the situation more manageable than your mind suggested? Make notes below.

This exercise can help you start noticing the difference between feeling unsafe and actually being unsafe.

BREATHING & GROUNDING

Breathing techniques can help here too, although it is worth being realistic about what they do. They are not magic, and they do not remove the cause of anxiety. What they can do is help send a signal of safety to the body. Slowing the exhale, in particular, can help reduce the level of activation in your nervous system. The benefit is not that you suddenly feel wonderful. It is that you give your body a better chance of settling.

The same is true of grounding techniques. These are not about distraction for the sake of it. They are about helping your mind reconnect with the present moment instead of staying caught in threat, prediction, or overanalysis. Noticing what you can see, hear, feel, or touch can help bring your attention back to what is actually happening, rather than what your mind is predicting.

It is also worth recognising that anxiety often rises when there is too much uncertainty. Burnout makes it harder to hold uncertainty calmly. The mind wants answers, reassurance, and control. It wants to know how something will go, whether people are upset, whether you've done enough, and whether things will be okay. Part of recovery is learning to tolerate not knowing, rather than trying to solve every uncertainty before it happens.

That does not mean you have to like uncertainty. It means learning that you can survive it without spiralling into constant checking, overthinking, or reassurance-seeking. The goal in this section is not to eliminate anxiety completely. That is not realistic, and it is not necessary. The goal is to reduce the fear around it, recognise the patterns that maintain it, and build your confidence in your ability to handle it when it appears.

A FEW EXERCISES TO TRY

Breathing Exercise 1: Extended Exhale Breathing

Sit or stand comfortably and begin by noticing your natural breath. Then gently shift your breathing so that your exhale is longer than your inhale. For example, breathe in through your nose for a count of four, and out through your mouth for a count of six. There is no need to force a deep breath. Keep it steady and controlled. Continue for a few minutes. A longer exhale helps signal to your nervous system that it is safe to start calming down.

Breathing Exercise 2: Box Breathing

This is a structured pattern that can help bring a sense of control when your thoughts feel scattered. Breathe in for a count of four, hold for four, breathe out for four, and hold again for four before your next inhale. Repeat this cycle several times. If four feels too long, you can shorten the count. The aim is consistency rather than perfection.

Grounding Exercise 1: 5–4–3–2–1 Method

Look around and name five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. This helps shift your focus away from internal thoughts and back to your surroundings.

Grounding Exercise 2: Physical Anchoring

Place both feet flat on the floor and press them down gently. Notice the contact between your feet and the ground. You can also press your hands together or hold onto something solid, like the arms of a chair or a table. Focus on the physical sensation and remind yourself where you are. This can help bring you out of your head and back into your body when anxiety starts to take over.

REFLECTION

Write down three things that help bring you back into the present moment when anxiety rises. This might include slowing your breathing, stepping outside for a moment, naming five things you can see, placing your feet firmly on the floor, or reminding yourself of a grounding phrase such as, “I am safe, this will pass.”

Keep these simple and practical. You are creating a small plan you can come back to when anxiety starts to build, rather than having to think of something in the moment. You may want to add this plan to your Action Plan at the back of the book so it is easy to find when you need it.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DECISION FATIGUE

When your system is already under strain, even small decisions can start to feel disproportionately difficult.

Decision fatigue is what happens when your brain becomes overwhelmed by the number of choices it has to make. Every decision, no matter how small, requires mental energy. What to eat, what to wear, when to reply to a message, what to prioritise first, whether something is good enough, whether you've forgotten something. Individually, these decisions seem minor. Collectively, they add up quickly.

When you are already burned out, your capacity to make decisions is reduced. Things that would normally feel straightforward can start to feel disproportionately difficult. You may find yourself procrastinating, avoiding decisions altogether, second guessing yourself, or feeling mentally exhausted by choices that used to feel automatic.

This often leads to a cycle. The more decisions you delay, the more they build up. The more they build up, the heavier everything feels. Even simple tasks can start to feel overwhelming because they come with multiple layers of decision-making attached to them.

One of the most effective ways to reduce this strain is to remove unnecessary decisions altogether. This is where routine becomes useful. Not in a rigid or restrictive way, but as a way of simplifying everyday life. When something becomes routine, it no longer requires the same level of thought or energy.

You might choose to have a small number of go-to meals that you rotate through the week rather than deciding from scratch each day. You might plan your food shop in advance and repeat a similar list each week. You might set a consistent time for certain tasks, such as doing laundry on a specific day or responding to emails in set windows. The aim is not to create a perfect system. It is to reduce the number of decisions your brain has to make on a daily basis.

You can also look at areas where you tend to overthink. If you regularly spend time debating small choices, it can help to set simple rules for yourself. For example, deciding in advance what counts as “good enough,” limiting the time you spend making a decision, or choosing the first reasonable option rather than searching for the perfect one.

Another helpful approach is to batch decisions together. Instead of making multiple small decisions throughout the day, you group them into one period of time. For example, planning your meals for the week in one go, rather than deciding each day what to eat. This can reduce the constant mental switching that contributes to fatigue.

It is also worth recognising that not all decisions carry equal weight. Burnout can make everything feel equally important, which increases pressure and slows you down. Part of reducing decision fatigue is learning to distinguish between what truly matters and what can be decided quickly or even ignored.

Reducing decision fatigue is not about becoming overly structured or removing all flexibility from your life. It is about conserving your mental energy so that you have more capacity for the things that actually need your attention..

REFLECTION

Take a moment to think about your day-to-day life and identify where you are making repeated decisions. These might include what to eat, what to wear, when to do certain tasks, how to structure your day, or how you respond to messages and requests. Write down the areas where you feel you are making the same decisions over and over again.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

Now look at that list and ask yourself which of these could be simplified or turned into a routine. Is there a decision you could make once and then repeat? Is there something you could plan in advance? Is there an area where “good enough” would be more helpful than trying to get it exactly right?

Choose one or two areas to focus on and make a simple plan for how you could reduce the number of decisions involved. If it helps, add this to your Action Plan at the back of the book so you can begin putting it into practice.

ENERGY MANAGEMENT

Alongside reducing decision fatigue, it is also important to start paying attention to how your energy is being used.

When you are burned out, energy becomes a limited resource. You may notice that you have less of it overall, that it fluctuates more throughout the day, and that certain tasks seem to take far more out of you than they used to. Despite this, many people continue to plan their days as though their energy is unlimited. This is where part of the problem lies.

If you treat every task as equal and try to fit too many demanding things into the same day, you are much more likely to end up overwhelmed, exhausted, or unable to follow through. This then feeds back into frustration, self-criticism, and the feeling that you are not coping. A more helpful approach is to start managing your energy more deliberately.

Not all tasks require the same level of effort. Some are mentally demanding, some are physically demanding, and some are relatively light. What counts as “heavy” or “light” will be different for everyone. For one person, a social event might feel energising. For another, it may feel draining. The same applies to work tasks, household responsibilities, and even things that are usually enjoyable. The first step is simply to notice this.

Once you begin to recognise which tasks take more out of you, you can start to plan your days differently. Instead of grouping several high-demand tasks together, you can spread them out. You can balance heavier tasks with lighter ones, or follow something demanding with something more routine.

It can also help to pay attention to when your energy tends to be higher or lower during the day or week. Some people feel more focused in the morning and more fatigued in the afternoon. Others are the opposite. There may also be patterns across the week, where certain days feel more demanding than others. You can use this to your advantage.

Higher energy periods can be used for tasks that require more focus, effort, or decision-making. Lower energy periods can be reserved for simpler, more routine activities. You can also use higher energy moments to prepare for times when you know your energy will be lower. This might include things like preparing meals in advance, organising your space, or getting ahead on tasks that would otherwise feel difficult later.

Another important part of energy management is limiting how many demanding tasks you take on in a single day. Even if you are capable of doing them, doing too many at once will often leave you depleted. This can have a knock-on effect on the following day, making it harder to recover and easier to slip back into the cycle of burnout. This is not about doing less for the sake of it. It is about doing things in a way that is more sustainable.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to think about the activities that make up your typical week.

Write down a range of tasks you regularly do. This might include work tasks, household responsibilities, social activities, and personal commitments.

[illegible]

Next to each task, note how much energy it tends to require from you. You might want to use a simple scale, for example from 1 to 5, where 1 is low effort and 5 is highly demanding. Try not to overthink this. Your perception is what matters here.

Once you have done this, look over your list and notice any patterns. Are there tasks that consistently take more out of you than you expected? Are there things that seem small but actually leave you feeling drained?

JULIA

To give you an idea of how this exercise might look in practice, here is an example of how Julia mapped out her typical week and the energy each task requires from her. This is not about getting it “right,” but about building awareness of where your energy is going and how your days are currently structured.

School run – 3

Work meetings – 5

Answering emails – 3

Weekly food shop – 4

Cooking dinner – 4

Laundry – 2

Cleaning the house – 4

Helping children with homework – 3

Paying bills and life admin – 4

Seeing friends – 2 (sometimes 4 if I’m already tired)

Scrolling on my phone – 2 (but often leaves me feeling more drained)

Exercise – 3 (hard to start, but I usually feel better afterwards)

Family time – 2

Organising appointments – 3

Driving – 2

Looking at this, I can see that a lot of my 4s and 5s are happening on the same days, especially midweek. Work meetings, emails, the school run, cooking, and life admin all tend to stack up, which is probably why I feel so exhausted by the evening.

I hadn’t really noticed before that things like the food shop and cooking dinner feel like quite heavy tasks at the moment, but they do. By the time I get to them, I’ve already used a lot of my energy.

I can also see that some things I thought were restful, like scrolling on my phone, don’t actually help much. They might feel easy in the moment, but they don’t leave me feeling recharged.

REFLECTION

Now look at how these tasks are currently spread across your week. Are you grouping several high-energy tasks together on the same day? Are there opportunities to spread them out more evenly? Could you pair a more demanding task with something lighter afterwards?

Finally, think about your natural energy patterns. When do you tend to feel more focused or capable? When do you feel more tired or less motivated? Make a note of how you could begin to align your tasks more closely with these patterns. Even small adjustments can make a noticeable difference over time.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

If it helps, add a few of these changes to your Action Plan so you can start putting them into practice.

REDUCING THE NOISE

Another factor that often goes unnoticed in burnout is the level of background stimulation you are exposed to each day. Modern life is rarely quiet. Phones, notifications, social media, emails, news, artificial lighting, constant sound, and visual clutter all compete for your attention. Much of this happens in the background, which is why it can be easy to underestimate the impact it is having.

When your system is already under strain, this level of input can become overwhelming. Your brain is required to process far more information than it needs to, which increases mental fatigue and keeps your nervous system in a more activated state. Even when you are not actively engaging with it, the presence of constant noise, light, and information can make it harder for your body and mind to settle.

Social media is a good example of this. It can feel like a way to switch off, but it often introduces more comparison, more information, and more stimulation. The same is true of constant news consumption. While it may feel important to stay informed, repeated exposure to negative or alarming information can increase stress and reinforce a sense that things are unsafe or out of control.

Physical environments matter too. Bright lighting, cluttered spaces, background television, or continuous noise can all contribute to a sense of overwhelm without you fully realising it.

Reducing environmental noise is not about removing everything or creating a perfectly calm environment. It is about being more selective. You might choose to limit how often you check the news, turn off non-essential notifications, or set specific times for social media rather than using it throughout the day. You might create small periods of intentional quiet, even if that is just a few minutes without input. You might look at your physical space and remove some of the clutter or reduce unnecessary noise.

These changes can seem small, but they reduce the amount of information your brain has to process. That creates space. And space is something your system needs in order to recover.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to think about the different types of input you are exposed to during a typical day. This might include your phone, social media, emails, news, television, background noise, lighting, or your physical environment. Write down the main sources of noise in your day.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Now look at your list and ask yourself which of these are necessary, and which are optional. Choose one or two areas where you could reduce the level of input, even slightly. This might be turning off notifications, limiting when you check certain apps, creating a short period of quiet each day, or making a small change to your environment. Keep this realistic. The aim is not to remove everything, but to begin reducing the load on your system.

If it helps, add these changes to your Action Plan so you can start putting them into practice.

JULIA

Below is an example of what Julia's might look like:

- *I check my phone constantly throughout the day, especially when I feel overwhelmed. I tell myself I'm just having a quick break, but I usually end up scrolling social media for longer than I intend to. It often leaves me feeling more distracted and sometimes a bit worse about things.*
- *I tend to have the news on in the background in the mornings and evenings. I don't always actively watch it, but it's there, and it often feels quite negative.*
- *I usually keep the TV on in the evening, even if I'm not really watching it, just for background noise. I've realised I rarely have any actual quiet time.*
- *My email notifications are always on, so I'm constantly seeing things come in, even when I can't do anything about them.*
- *The house feels quite cluttered at the moment, especially the kitchen and living room, which makes it harder to switch off.*

Looking at this, I can see that a lot of this is optional rather than necessary. I'm going to start by turning off non-essential notifications on my phone and only checking social media at set times rather than throughout the day.

I'm also going to stop having the news on in the background and choose one time to check it instead. In the evenings, I'm going to try having at least 20–30 minutes without the TV on, just to give myself a bit of quiet.

Finally, I'm going to spend a short amount of time this week clearing one area of the house so it feels a bit less overwhelming.

REVIEW

You've covered a lot in this chapter. Rebuilding is not a single change or a quick shift. It is a process of gradually creating a healthier environment for yourself, both physically and mentally. You've started looking at how you care for your body, how you manage your energy, how you respond to your thoughts, how you handle anxiety, and how you reduce the constant noise that keeps your system under pressure. None of this is small work.

It can feel like a lot to take in, and at times you may feel as though you are only making small changes. That is exactly how this process works. Burnout does not resolve through one big action. It shifts through consistent, manageable changes that begin to support your system rather than drain it. You are not aiming for perfection. You are aiming for something more sustainable.

Some of what you've explored in this chapter may feel easier to implement than other parts. Some things may take time. Some may feel uncomfortable at first. That does not mean you are doing it wrong. It means you are learning new ways of approaching things that have likely been in place for a long time. What matters is that you are starting to notice, to question, and to make different choices where you can.

As you move forward, you may find that certain areas naturally begin to improve. You may feel slightly more steady, slightly clearer, or slightly more in control of your time and energy. These shifts can be subtle at first, but they build. Recovery is not about returning to how things were before burnout. It is about building something that works better for you.

Before you move on, take a moment to pause. The next page has been left free for you to write down any thoughts, feelings, or reflections that have come up for you during this chapter. You do not have to use it, but it can be a helpful way to process what you have taken from this and to notice where things are already beginning to shift.

JOURNAL PAGE

Journal page template with horizontal dotted lines for writing.

CHAPTER 8

FORWARD

STAYING WELL

Burnout is not something that simply appears out of nowhere, and it is not something that disappears overnight. It builds over time, often quietly, through patterns that go unnoticed until things begin to feel unmanageable. The difference now is that you can see those patterns more clearly.

You understand what overload feels like. You recognise the signs of pressure building. You are more aware of the habits, expectations, and environments that contribute to it. That awareness alone puts you in a very different position than you were before. Recovery is not about getting everything “right” all of the time. It is about noticing earlier.

You may still have periods where things feel heavier, where your energy dips, or where old patterns start to creep back in. This does not mean you are back at the beginning. It simply means something needs your attention. The key is catching it sooner.

This might look like:

- recognising when your energy is consistently low
- noticing when your self-talk becomes more critical or pressured
- becoming aware that your routines have slipped or your environment feels overwhelming again

When you notice these shifts, you can return to the tools you have built:

- reducing unnecessary load
- revisiting your non-negotiables
- simplifying decisions
- creating space to rest and reset

You do not need to wait until things feel unmanageable again.

This is not about preventing stress entirely. That is not realistic. It is about having the awareness and the tools to respond differently when it arises. That is what protects you going forward.

MOVING FORWARD

You've done a significant amount of work to get to this point. You've taken the time to understand what burnout is, how it develops, and how it shows up for you. You've looked honestly at the pressures in your life, made changes to reduce the load, and started to rebuild in a way that supports your body and mind. That is not small.

There is no clear line where you suddenly arrive at being “fully recovered.” Instead, what tends to happen is more subtle. Things begin to feel more manageable. You feel slightly more steady. You start to recognise what you need, and you are more able to respond to it. And most importantly, you are no longer operating without awareness.

You now have a clearer understanding of:

- what drains you
- what supports you
- where your limits are
- and where you have control

You are not expected to do everything perfectly. There will still be times where things feel difficult, where old patterns show up, or where life becomes demanding again. That is part of being human, not a sign that you have failed. The difference now is that you can recognise it.

This is not about becoming a completely different person. It is about working with yourself more effectively, with a better understanding of what you need to stay well. You are not starting over. You are moving forward with more awareness, more tools, and more control than you had before.

You don't need to have everything figured out before you begin. You don't need the perfect plan, or the right moment, or more certainty. If something is draining you, that's enough information to start making a change. If something supports you, that's enough reason to do more of it. This isn't about getting it right. It's about paying attention, adjusting, and continuing to move forward — one small shift at a time.

A FINAL REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on what you are taking forward from this book.

- What has changed in how you understand your burnout?
- What stands out most to you from the work you've done?
- What feels different now compared to when you started?
- What are the key things you want to continue with?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ACTION PLAN

[illegible]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Pace Yourself: A Guide To Living Well With Limited Energy - Kate Robbins

<https://amzn.eu/d/080Eg9ol>

Set Boundaries , Find Peace - Nedra Glover Tawwab

<https://amzn.eu/d/0avwuNnS>

All content in this workbook remains the intellectual property of the author and may not be copied, reproduced, or distributed without written permission.

Kate Robbins Coaching
The Barn
Springfield Farm
Brailes
OX15 5JH

<https://katerobbinscoachingb.co.uk/>
info@katerobbinscoaching.co.uk