



What Is Burnout?

Bill Gorton: "How did you go bankrupt?"

Mike Campbell: "Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."

Ernest Hemingway - The Sun Also Rises

I've always been intrigued by the quote above, as it perfectly describes how bad things tend to happen. While there are always exceptions, most failures involve an extended period where things gradually get worse, until suddenly...disaster. Apparently I'm not the only person who likes this quote, as it's well-known and has been applied to everyday situations like the slow build-up of clutter in your home to more dire events such as financial crises, avalanches, and medical ailments.

Burnout follows this exact trajectory. It isn't a sudden medical emergency that hits you like a bolt of lightning; it's more like blowing up a balloon. You keep adding air, trying to make it bigger and better, ignoring the tension in the rubber, until you reach that inevitable tipping point where it explodes in your face.

But what *is* that air we keep pumping in? To understand burnout, we have to look past the surface-level exhaustion and see it for what it truly is: a failure of management, both of our "workload" and of our own lives.

The Definition

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies Burnout not as a medical condition, but as an **occupational phenomenon**. I beg to differ, as I believe the stress that causes Burnout can come from places outside of work. Or maybe your work isn't a career, and your primary task is as a parent or caregiver instead. Whatever the source of stress, I can agree with the WHO that Burnout is a syndrome resulting from "chronic stress that has not been successfully managed."

Crucially, burnout is not necessarily caused by the number of days or hours you "work". In my own research, I found many people who work 50+ hour weeks, six days a week without burning out. So if workload alone isn't the culprit, what is? The common theme in my research is a sense of **regret or guilt**. Burnout happens when your work, no matter how you define it, prevents you from doing the things that are most important to you. It is the stress of the life you wish for but are missing

The "Many Jobs" We Juggle

We often think we only have one job, but as Bruce Feiler suggests in *"The Search: Finding Meaningful Work in a Post-Career World"*, we actually juggle several. When the balance between these "jobs" isn't managed, the balloon pops. Some may include:



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- **The Main Job:** Your primary source of income or primary taker of your time.
- **The Care Job:** Looking after children or aging relatives.
- **The Passion/Relationship Jobs:** Prioritizing the people and/or hobbies that fill your emotional cup.
- **The Ghost Job:** The mental health challenges, like self-doubt and regret, that drain your energy. Unfortunately, you can't clock out from this one, and it is often a trigger for Burnout.

In 2026, this balancing act is harder than ever. Over 50% of employees report burnout, with women and younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) feeling it most acutely. For many women, the "triple burden" of a career, caregiving, and household labor (that's three jobs according to Bruce Feiler!) creates a chronic state of stress that leads to Burnout.

Mona Lisa or David?

When we feel ourselves burning out, our default strategy is often **Maximization (Creation by Addition)**. Like Da Vinci painting the *Mona Lisa*, we add more: more activities to our "To-Do List", more commitments to keep, more "rise and grind." We think if we just add one more brushstroke, we will become a masterpiece.

However, the cure for Burnout often lies in **Minimization (Creation by Subtraction)**. Like Michelangelo chiseling away at a block of marble to find the statue of *David*, we must remove the pieces that no longer serve our values. Perfection is achieved, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said in his book *Wind, Sand and Stars*, "not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

Reclaiming Your Life: The Strategy of Optimization

To stop the "gradual" slide before the "sudden" collapse, we must move toward **Optimization**. This requires asking brutal questions:

1. Is your current strategy (Addition or Subtraction) actually serving you?
2. What **one change** could you make right now that would better serve you?
3. Are you providing yourself the bandwidth to find meaning outside of your Main Job?
4. Are you chiseling away the unnecessary noise in your life so you can actually hear the music?

Burnout hits you in three specific dimensions: **emotional exhaustion** (you're drained), **cynicism** (you stop caring), and a **reduced sense of efficacy** (you feel like you're failing, no matter how hard you try). But that isn't you, and those feelings don't define you.

You are defined by the way you treat other people. By the way you inspire others and build them up. By the smile on your face and the things that make you happy. By your beliefs and the goals you strive toward. By the confidence you deserve to have about yourself. By your hopes and dreams. Don't let Burnout stop you from being the person you want to become.