

The Culture of Burnout

WHY YOUR EXHAUSTION
IS NOT YOUR FAULT

PREVIEW

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This book is about how we can all human better.

And, we, The Good Doctors, have long felt that the answer to how to human better is a simple one: ask more questions, make fewer assumptions. But that's easier said than done.

Humans are really, really good at making assumptions. Our brains love to group people, find patterns, and jump to conclusions. When pattern recognition is helping you tell the difference between a branch and a deadly snake, it can save your life! But, when you jump to conclusions about how other people feel, why they're reacting to a situation a certain way, or how they might react to something in the future, you put yourself at risk of misunderstanding the people around you. And, when people are misunderstood in a relationship — be it at work, at home, at school, at church, while volunteering — those relationships erode. They disconnect, they struggle, and they may even burn out.

America has a culture of burnout. This country is built on and continues to perpetuate the ideas that a person's worth comes only from hard work, that rest is a wasteful indulgence, that exhaustion is a personal failure instead of a cultural inevitability, and that good health starts and stops with physical fitness. We are also inundated with the message that there is only "one right way" to find well-being (and it'll cost you just three easy payments of \$19.99!).

In the immortal words of our favorite infomercials: there's got to be a better way. And, there is. We can build a culture of *balance*. A culture where everyone is valued as a human being with inherent worth, emotions, individual life experiences, and something to contribute.

So, this book is actually about a lot of things. It's about how to prevent burnout in your organization. It's about how to better relate to your kids. It's about how to strengthen the relationships in your life, and it's also about how to better understand *yourself* and why you might be the way you are.

So, it's about how to human better, and we believe that in that regard there is always room to grow.

From Chapter 1: What is Burnout?

What is the difference between stress and burnout?

Clearly, stress and burnout are inextricably linked, but they're also not one and the same. It's common to refer to a heightened period of stress as "feeling burnt out," but true burnout is living in a pervasive state of stress, regardless of the fluctuations of outside stressors.

Think of it this way. We experience stress on a scale. As stressors enter and leave our lives, the level of stress we have and the amount of time we spend in the stress cycle goes up and down like the gain level on a microphone as we speak.

When life is in balance and stressors are low, the stress level is low.

Stress-O-Meter



No major stressors

When something stressful happens, such as when work piles on an extra project or your elderly mother gets sick, the stress spikes.

Stress-O-Meter



Family member
gets sick

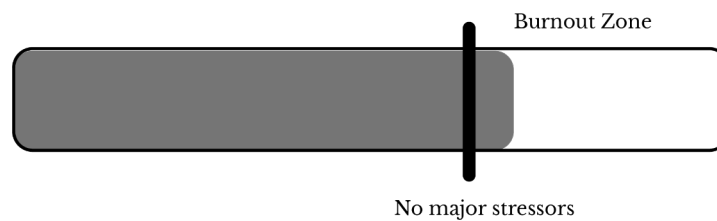
At the high end of the meter is the burnout area. Peaks of high stress will pop you into it, but with a normal cycle, you'll be able to process the stress and return to normal levels. If you can't process that stress, however, you become locked in that burnout zone perpetually. This requires being pushed into that heightened state of stress over and over for a long time without access to the skills or environment you need to complete the stress cycle and return to baseline.

Everyone's "long time," everyone's "heightened state," and everyone's "being pushed" is going to look different, but we all have the capacity to end up locked in the burnout zone.

The longer you remain in the burnout zone without an opportunity to cope with your stressors, the more the bottom end of that area becomes a brick wall. Your lowest state of stress becomes that line. And, then, as stressors continue to come and go, you fluctuate up and down only

within that post-burnout space where the lowest possible level of stress is still over halfway up the scale.

Stress-O-Meter

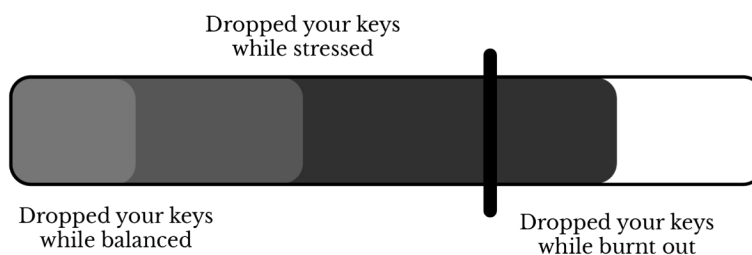


When you're feeling healthy and balanced and you drop your keys in a snowbank, it sucks, maybe even ruins your morning, but by the time you've gotten to work and had your coffee and been distracted by your emails, that feeling fades.

When you're already feeling stressed and you drop your keys in a snowbank, it layers over the other stressors you're already dealing with in your life. You might curse and groan, even stomp your foot. Perhaps, on your drive to work, you need to vent to a friend about how it's barely nine and you're already having a horrible day. But, by the time you come home for dinner, that stress has faded — the baseline might still be a little higher, but maybe you don't even remember you dropped your keys. And, tomorrow is a new day.

When you're burned out and you drop your keys in a snowbank, it probably feels like the end of the world. The relatively small stressor of a minor inconvenience, such as having to get your hand wet as you dig around for your keys, stacks on top of a base state of being that is characterized by a never-ending stress cycle.

Stress-O-Meter



To an outsider, your reaction might look like a major overreaction, but to someone in burnout, dropping your keys has absolutely blown the lid off your stress scale because there was so little space left to manage stressors. Someone who is living with a normal stress baseline can't understand why you dropped your keys and then burst into inconsolable tears. Or, how dropping your keys made you just turn around, walk back inside, and crawl into bed, keys be damned.

Burnout is a trauma that holds you in a constant, pervasive place of stress. It rewrites your relationship to stressors and rebuilds your baseline state into one of perpetual stress. And, it can be impossibly difficult to escape from this cycle of trauma.

From Chapter 3: **A Culture of Burnout**

A Culture of Burnout

In the spirit of asking questions, you might be asking: why should I care? Or, if you do already care (because you're reading this book, after all), you might ask: why should the organizations I work for care? And, honestly, those are both fair questions!

On a human level, you should care because the toxic expectations our culture promotes don't just hurt people who are actively in burnout, they hurt everyone. Shifting expectations to protect your friends, family, neighbors, kids, grandkids, co-workers, and community from mass-scale burnout helps everyone.

On a personal level, you should care because you might think you're personally safe from experiencing burnout, but when unhealthy behavior is written so deeply into our culture, no one is safe. All it might take is a new unexpected stressor — a sick family member, a new boss, layoffs, a health issue — to send your stress levels sky-high. And, if the environment you are in doesn't provide enough support to survive that stressor, then you could get stuck there, right in the middle of high stress and quickly sliding into full burnout.

On a cultural, communal, and organizational level, leaders and decision makers should care because burnout is incredibly expensive and destructive. Harvard Business Review estimates that burnout costs the U.S. \$125-\$190 billion dollars in healthcare spending annually. That's right: billion.

According to the WHO, burnt out employees are tired and cynical, and they lack a sense of accomplishment. It's not difficult to imagine the negative impact that attitude and feeling of exhaustion will have on performance. Burnt out employees take more sick days — for both their mental and physical health — raise insurance costs, are more likely to quit and turnover quickly, and are less productive, even when they're working as hard as they can. Happy employees see a 12% boost in their productivity while unhappy ones see a 10% drop.¹⁹ That spread can mean a world of difference for an organization, especially a small one.

A 2021 study by Headspace found that almost half of Americans took a sick day that year due to stress, anxiety, or mental health. 45% of people surveyed also admitted that stress caused up to a two-hour hit on their daily productivity.²⁰ At an average hourly wage of a salaried employee clocking in at about \$30, that means a loss of \$14,700 per year, per employee, for nearly half of a company's entire staff. Stress-related sick days are estimated to cost U.S. companies \$30 billion a year.²¹

Companies want solutions to this problem. Even if the cynic in all of us finds it hard to believe that big organizations want happier employees, we can confidently say that they do want lower turnover rates and lower insurance and healthcare costs.²² High stress workers are 30% more likely to have accidents than those with low stress. 60% to 80% of on-the-job accidents are attributed to stress,²³ and insurance claims for stress related industrial accidents cost, on average, nearly twice as much as non stress-related accidents.²⁴

Burnout also damages relationships with customers. Customers who interact with employees who are experiencing depersonalization and demonstrating emotional disconnection, which you might remember was the WHO's second sign of burnout, are more likely to rank the service from both the employee and the organization as worse.²⁵

Unhappy employees (or volunteers, or parents or, or...) simply don't perform as well, on any front. Reflect on the last bad day you had — did you get a lot checked off your to-do list? Now, imagine that every day's baseline is a bad day and all you can hope for is for things to be slightly less bad than the day before. A burnt out staff is expensive in time, money, productivity, and loss of goodwill. If the damage burn out does to an individual's health and well-being isn't enough to spur organizations into action, then hopefully profit loss and decreased productivity will motivate organizations to change their cultures of burnout.

So what's the takeaway of all of this?

The short and short of it is that burnout is a normal stress response pushed too far. A human body designed to handle brief, intense periods of stress, such as the threat of a tiger attack, is instead plunged into a constant state of tiger-stalking until every ringing phone, crying child, or project request feels like another tiger added to the ever-growing, never-shrinking ambush of tigers.

While burnout is often defined as being a workplace issue, a workplace is more than the place you show up to from 9-5 to earn money, and burnout isn't the same for everyone. There are many compounding factors for how we experience burnout individually, and a singular list of signs or symptoms doesn't serve us all that well.

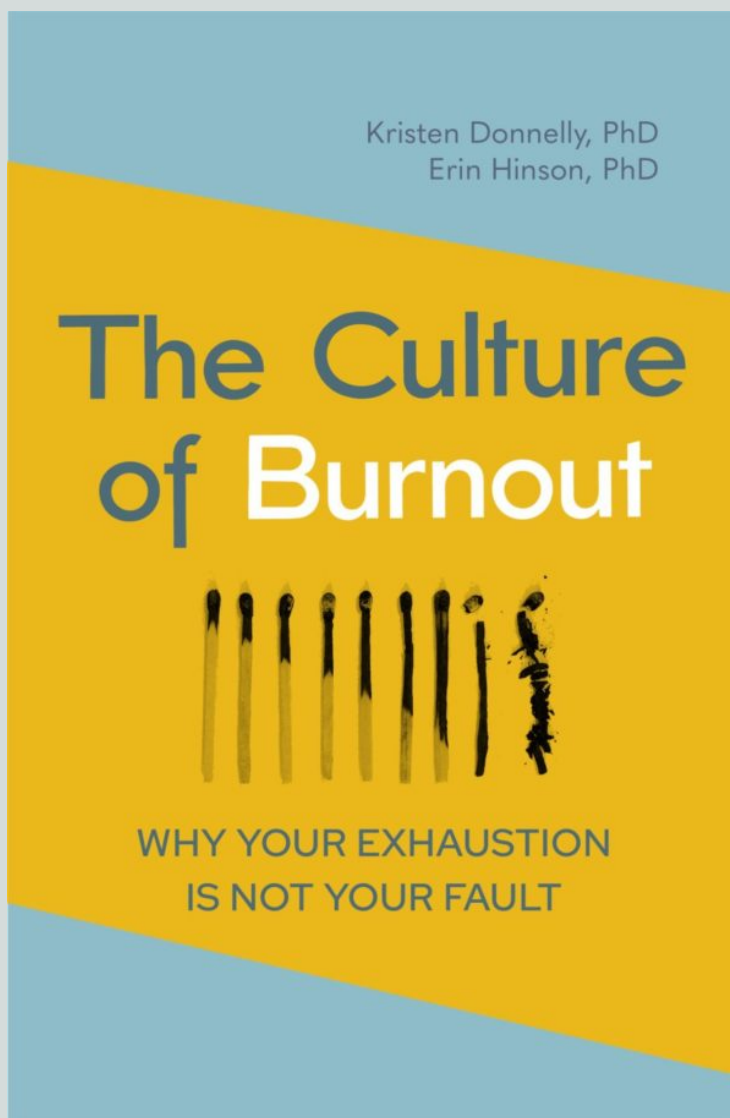
Burnout is destructive, both to individuals and to organizations. The approach in the past has largely been that burnout is an individual problem with individual solutions, but we need to examine the cultural environment that is cultivating more experiences of burnout in record numbers.

So what do we do about it?

Our culture of burnout means that we are all, collectively, fostering an environment that breeds exhaustion, disconnection, and a sense of personal failure. If we can, instead, move to a culture of balance, then we can foster an environment that supports growth, comfort, safety, and community

We think the first step to that is understanding.

Keep reading...



MEET THE GOOD DOCTORS



Dr. Kristen Donnelly and Dr. Erin Hinson are The Good Doctors of Abbey Research. They are researchers and educators with social science PhDs, who also happen to be best friends. Kristen and Erin have a long history of being obnoxiously curious, which means they have always been interested in how and why people do what they do. Their passion for understanding, research, and writing -- as well as their fascination with the origins of burnout culture -- are the foundations of this book.

Kristen Donnelly (MSW, M.Div, PhD) is an award winning, four time TEDx speaker, international empathy educator, and researcher with two decades of experience in helping people understand the beauty in difference, and the power in inclusivity. She is one of The Good Doctors of Abbey Research, COO of their parent company, co-founder of the Community Research Institute, and an unapologetic nerd for stories of change. Kristen is a regular contributor to Forbes, Medium, and Thrive Global. She lives outside of Philadelphia with her husband, where they are surrounded by piles of books and several video game consoles.



Erin Hinson (MA, PhD) is a researcher, international educator, and tea enthusiast with over a decade of experience in cultivating curiosity in herself and others. As one of The Good Doctors of Abbey Research, Erin advocates for inclusion, equity, and understanding through conversation. She is passionate about international education and volunteers as the Student Support Advisor for the Study USA program run by the British Council Northern Ireland. Erin lives in Pittsburgh with her mother, cat, and international gin collection.

