

From Burnout to Balance

A registered dietician and nutritionist shares a road map to help manage stress and beat burnout

By Patricia Bannan, MS, RDN

Burnout feels like a decidedly modern problem, but burning the candle at both ends has happened since long before we earned the right to vote. Before burnout had the official “endorsement” of the World Health Organization, we had all sorts of euphemisms for it: exhaustion, hysteria, the vapors... Whatever we call it, now we know it’s not “all in our heads.”



It's in our lives. Our always-too-busy, always-on-the-go, always-one-step-behind, trying-to-squeeze-in-just-one-more-thing lives.

The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay warned us back in 1918:

My candle burns at both ends; It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—It gives a lovely light!

A candle burning at both ends is a fire hazard, friends. Getting too close is a recipe for disaster. It's burned skin and singed hair and blaring fire alarms just waiting to happen. Sounds a lot like your mood during burnout, doesn't it?

After 9/11, we saw an uptick in compassion fatigue and burnout among the "helpers"—first responders, social workers and clergy.

We also saw an increase in PTSD among those who were seriously impacted. Natural disasters like the deadly wildfires in California, where I live, or hurricanes such as Katrina or Rita, can lead to the same.

And I know in my heart we'll see something similar in the coming years now that we've lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. During the stressful and scary time of sheltering in place, I read story after story of women being pushed to their limits—little to no child care support, working from home, struggling with lost work, extra emotional labor, not to mention the fear and anxiety that go along with so much uncertainty and stress.

A couple of months into staying "safe at home," I read a piece by Arianna Huffington, whose own burnout led to her literal collapse back in 2007. She calls COVID-19 a crucible that "revealed fundamental weaknesses in our society—many of which we knew about but were content to ignore." Huffington suggests we view the pandemic as an opportunity to change, a chance to rise from the ashes and bring with us only what works—and leave behind or replace everything else.

You get that same opportunity as you heal and move forward from burnout. For Mireille, that meant plotting to leave her 80-hour-a-week job and move home to Europe. It meant putting an hour-long walk on her calendar every single day without fail.

For Tamika, it meant giving up a high-powered position where she collected achievements, praise and bonuses like brass rings. Instead, she learned to be okay with "not being the best." She's still providing for her family and living a comfortable life, only now it's a life where she gets to be present.

Why doesn't everyone burn out?

In talking to other women, I found that each one felt alone—like she was the only one who couldn't hack it as a supermom, star employee, beloved wife and best friend.

One interesting perspective on stress comes from Dr. Leanne Williams, founder of Stanford University's Center for Precision Mental Health and Wellness. With her team, she identified specific subtypes for depression and anxiety.

These “biotypes” are:

Rumination

(worrying repeatedly and getting “stuck” in negative thought cycles)

Anxious avoidance

(avoiding situations that cause stress)

Threat dysregulation

(staying in fight-or-flight mode after a threat has passed)

Anhedonia

(losing interest in pleasurable activities or experiences)

Cognitive dyscontrol

(inability to control emotions, behaviors, thoughts, etc.)

Inattention

(struggling to concentrate and focus)

During the pandemic, Dr. Williams shared that our biotype—which can be observed in part via MRI—impacts not only depression and anxiety but also how we adapt to stress.

And once we know how we adapt to stress, we start to notice when we're experiencing it—so we can avoid letting it progress toward burnout!

Is this burnout—or just stress?

By now you might be wondering about the difference between burnout and stress.

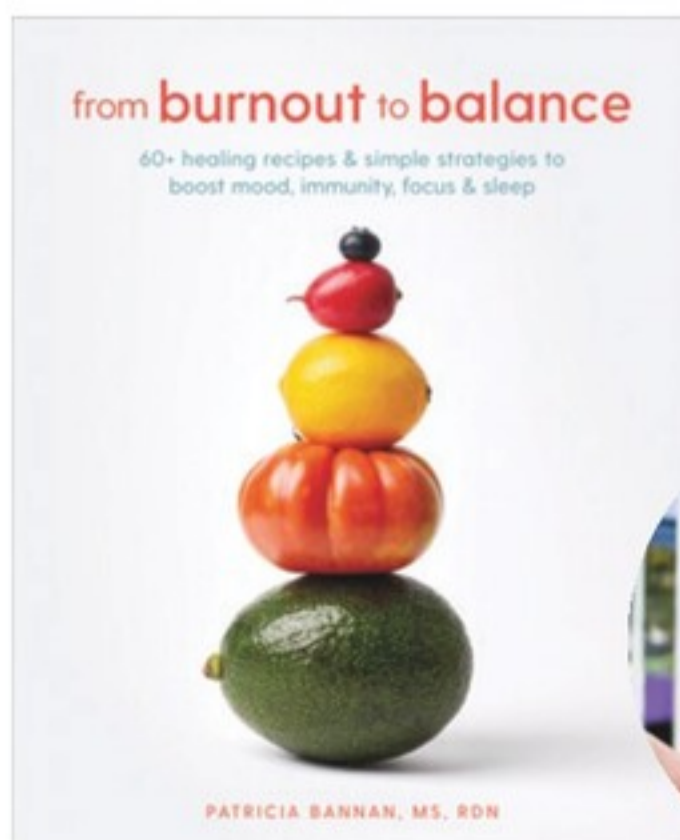
While chronic, unrelenting stress can lead to burnout, the symptoms are different. That's because burnout is stress that's taken such a toll that you no longer feel like yourself. While stress—even intense bouts of it—might motivate you to work harder and parent “better,” burnout makes you feel like you can't function and no longer want to.

Stress can and will take a toll on your physical and emotional health. Think of it like going into debt because you keep putting everything on credit cards.

Stress happened when Rebecca watched the medical bills pile up after her husband's brain surgery, when her boss threatened to fire her for missing work to care for him, and when she stepped into her husband's role as the breadwinner, the protector and the one who took care of everyone.

Burnout is when you've maxed out those cards, drained your savings, maybe bounced some checks and don't have even a dime left to your name.

Burnout happened when Rebecca was so stressed out that she stopped caring—when she told her boss to go ahead and fire her, when she would get into bed at night and realize her whole day had been spent on autopilot, and when she was “no longer living—only functioning and doing one thing at a time to ‘just keep going.’”



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