STRESS

6 Causes of Burnout, and How to Avoid Them

by Elizabeth Grace Saunders

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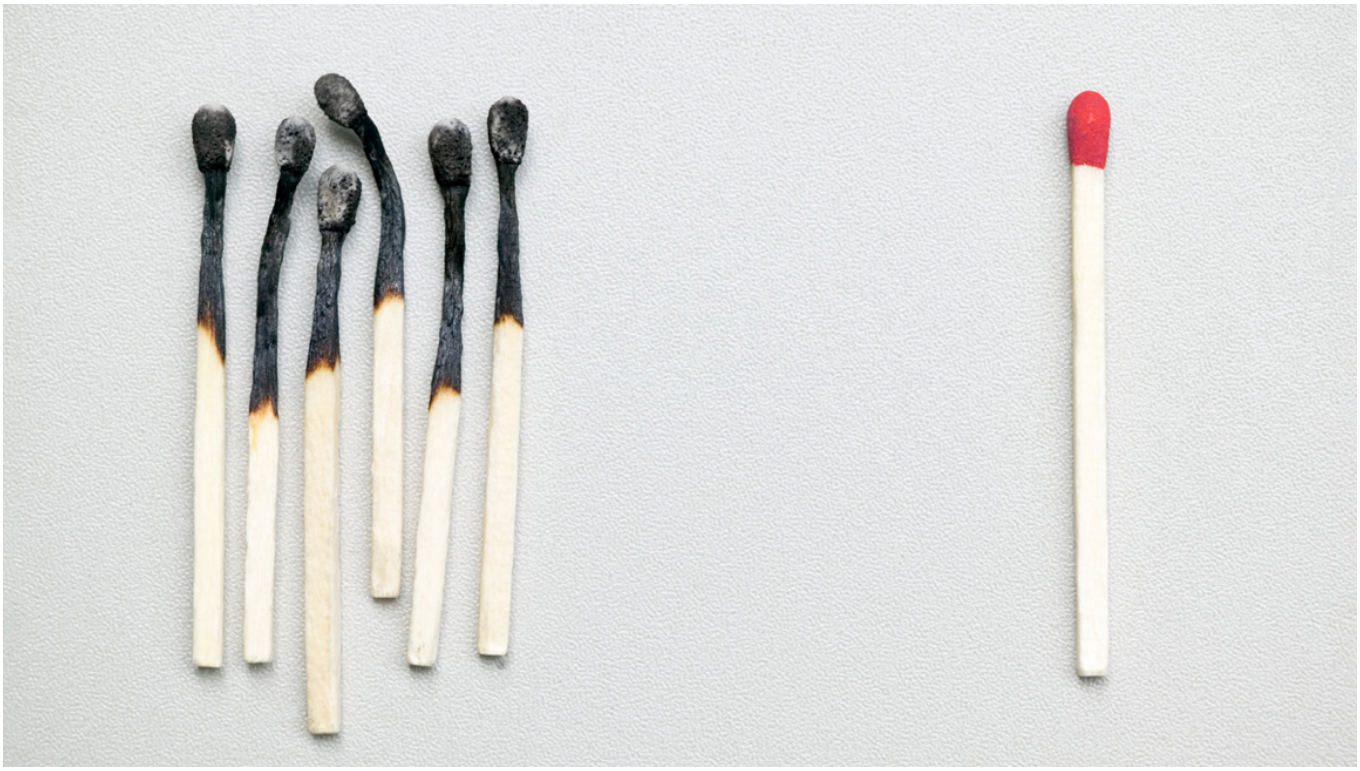

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A fog of burnout surrounds you: You're perpetually exhausted, annoyed, and feeling unaccomplished and unappreciated. Everything in you wants to quit your job. But is that the best choice? Ultimately only you can know what is right in your

situation. But there is research that can help you determine whether you can salvage your current job or whether the mismatch between you and your current position is so great that you need to look for a new one.

Various models help to explain and predict burnout, which is now an official medical diagnosis, according to the World Health Organization. One, called the Areas of Worklife model (drawn from research by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter of the University of California at Berkeley and Acadia University, respectively) identifies six areas where you could experience imbalances that lead to burnout. As a time management coach, I've seen that some individuals can make positive shifts in one or more of these areas and then happily stay in their current position while others discover that the mismatch is still too great, and decide that it's time to move on.

Here are the six areas that can lead to burnout and how you can attempt to remedy each one.

1. Workload. When you have a workload that matches your capacity, you can effectively get your work done, have opportunities for rest and recovery, and find time for professional growth and development. When you chronically feel overloaded, these opportunities to restore balance don't exist.

To address the stress of your workload, assess how well you're doing in these key areas: planning your workload, prioritizing your work, delegating tasks, saying no, and letting go of perfectionism. If you haven't been doing one or more of these things, try to make progress in these time management skill areas and then see how you feel. For many individuals, especially those who have a bent toward people pleasing, some proactive effort on reducing their workload can significantly reduce feelings of burnout and provide space to rest.

2. Perceived lack of control. Feeling like you lack autonomy, access to resources, and a say in decisions that impact your professional life can take a toll on your well-being. If you find yourself feeling out of control, step back and ask yourself, "What exactly is causing me to feel this way?" For instance, does your boss contact you at all hours of the day and night, and make you feel like you need to always be on call? Are the priorities within your workplace constantly shifting so you can never get ahead? Or do you simply not have enough predictability in terms of your physical or people resources to effectively perform your job?

Then ask yourself what you can do to shift this situation. Is it possible to discuss the issue with your boss to establish better boundaries and not respond to messages 24/7? Could you come to an agreement that certain priorities will remain constant? Or could you have more resources if you communicated about what you needed? Once you've considered these areas, you can then see what you can do to influence your environment versus what won't change no matter what you say or do.

3. Reward. If the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards for your job don't match the amount of effort and time you put in to them, then you're likely to feel like the investment is not worth the payoff.

In these instances, you want to look within and determine exactly what you would need to feel properly appreciated. For example, perhaps you need to ask for a raise or promotion. Maybe you need more positive feedback and face time with your boss. Or perhaps you need to take advantage of the rewards you've already accrued, such as taking the comp time that you earned during a particularly busy time at the office. Experiment to see which rewards would make what you're doing worth it to you and whether there is the opportunity to receive more of those rewards within your current work environment.

4. Community. Who do you work with or around? How supportive and trusting are those relationships? In many cases you can't choose your colleagues and clients, but you can improve the dynamic. It could be as simple as taking the time to ask others how their day is going — and really listening. Or sending an email to someone to let them know you appreciated their presentation. Or choosing to communicate something difficult in a respectful, nonjudgmental way. Burnout can be contagious, so to elevate your individual engagement, you must shift the morale of the group. If you've found that once you've done all you can, others can't improve or don't want improved relationships, then you may want to consider a job change.

5. Fairness. Think about whether you believe that you receive fair and equitable treatment. For example, do you get acknowledged for your contributions or do other individuals get praised and your work goes unnoticed? Does someone else get regular deadline extensions or access to additional resources when you don't?

If you feel that a lack of fairness exacerbates your burnout, start by speaking up. Sometimes individuals are unaware of their biases or won't take action until you ask for what you want. You can request to be mentioned as a contributor, to give part of a presentation, or for additional time and resources. And if you still find that the response seems inequitable, you can consider bringing that up in a polite way: "I noticed that the Chicago team got an additional week to work on their project that was originally due on the same date as ours. Can you help me understand why that's not possible for our team as well?"

6. Values mismatch. If you highly value something that your company does not, your motivation to work hard and persevere can significantly drop. Ideals and motivations tend to be deeply ingrained in individuals and organizations. When

you're assessing this element of burnout, you need to think carefully about how important it is to you to match your values with those of the organization.

Also consider whether the leaders in your company have shifted their values. Look around you and ask yourself: How does my boss, my team, and my organization make decisions and invest resources? Do I feel good about those underlying motivations? Do they seem open to change? If you have strongly held values and those with influence in your organization differ from yours, you may need to look for a more congruent opportunity.

Burnout isn't simply about being tired. It's a multifaceted issue that requires a multifaceted solution. Before you quit, really think through what *exactly* is contributing to your burnout and attempt to make changes. If you find that despite your best efforts, little has changed, then see if it makes sense to stay or if it's time to leave.

Elizabeth Grace Saunders is a time management coach and the founder of Real Life E Time Coaching & Speaking. She is author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money* and *Divine Time Management*. Find out more at www.ScheduleMakeover.com.

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Harry Karydes 5 days ago

Thanks for the great article, Ms. Saunders. We see a lot of these patterns in our physicians as well. For the physician the increasing workload and loss of autonomy is paramount to their burnout. Thank you for sharing. Harry @medicinerevived| www.medicinerevived.com

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