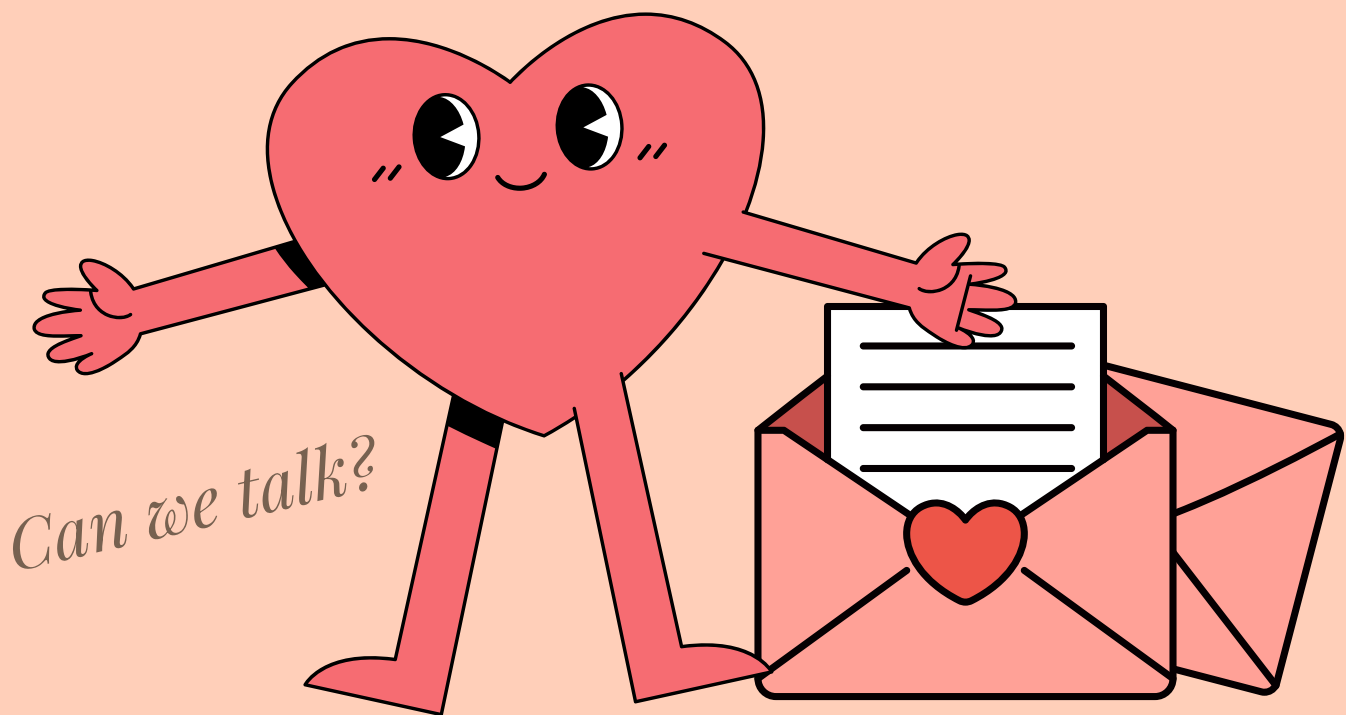




Deep Release
training counselling

UNDERSTANDING STRESS & BURNOUT



a mini e-guide for counsellors

deeprelease.org.uk

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STRESS & BURNOUT

Stress has become one of the defining experiences of modern living. It touches every part of our lives - our bodies, our relationships, our work, our sleep, our sense of purpose, and even how we see ourselves. For many people it feels like an unavoidable companion, something to be managed rather than understood.

Burnout can feel even more frightening. It can leave us wondering what has happened to the person we used to be. People often describe feeling exhausted, disconnected, overwhelmed, or as though they have somehow failed. Yet the reality is often very different.

One of the ideas running throughout this e-guide is that stress and burnout are not simply problems to eliminate. They may also be messengers. They may be pointing towards something in our lives that needs our attention, care, or compassion.

As counsellors, we spend much of our working lives helping other people listen to themselves. This companion invites us to also practise the same curiosity towards our own experience.

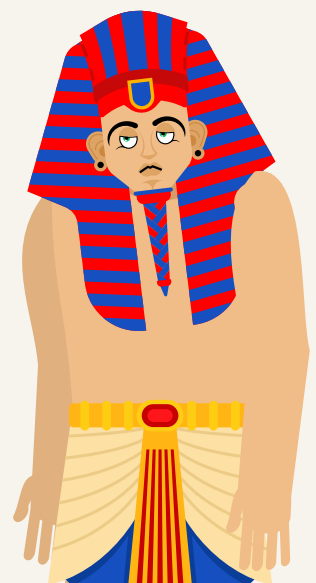
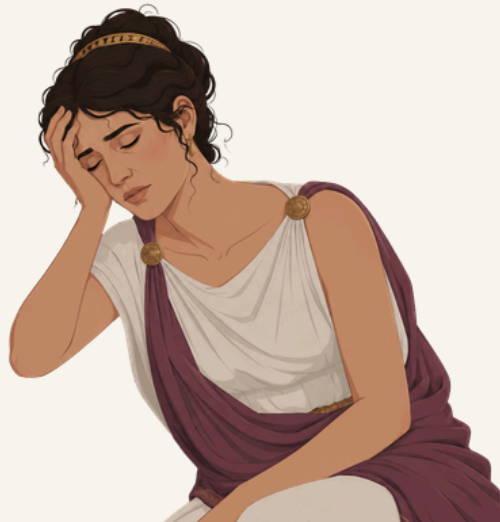
STRESS: AN ANCIENT HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Stress is not a modern invention. Humans have always faced challenges that demanded courage, adaptation, and resilience.

Throughout history, people have written about exhaustion, worry, grief, and feeling overwhelmed. What has changed is not that we experience stress, but the kinds of pressures we face and the pace at which they arrive.

Ancient Egyptian writings describe emotional suffering and exhaustion. The Greek physician Hippocrates recognised the close relationship between physical and mental health. Roman writers complained about the relentless noise and pressures of city life, while medieval monks wrote about becoming emotionally and spiritually depleted through prolonged labour.

We can see that stress is not a modern problem. Throughout history, human beings have faced enormous challenges. Previous generations lived through wars, famine, dangerous working conditions, infectious diseases, and uncertainty about whether they and their families would survive.



STRESS: AN ANCIENT HUMAN EXPERIENCE

To help us survive these threats, we evolved a remarkable stress response. When our brain senses danger, it automatically activates the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released, preparing us to fight, flee or freeze. Our heart rate increases, breathing becomes quicker, muscles receive more blood, and our attention becomes sharply focused.

This response was brilliantly adaptive. If our ancestors encountered a dangerous predator, these rapid changes gave them the best possible chance of escaping. More recently, the same survival system has helped people respond to emergencies, survive war, protect loved ones, and cope with other immediate crises.

Today, most of us are no longer running from predators. Instead, our ancient survival system is responding to a very different kind of threat. Financial worries, heavy workloads, caring responsibilities, relationship difficulties, information overload, constant connectivity, and uncertainty about the future can all activate the same physiological response.



(We didn't evolve alongside dinosaurs, but they remain a powerful metaphor for the life-or-death threats our stress response evolved to help us survive)

THE STRESS RESPONSE

In the short term, our stress response can be incredibly helpful, giving us the focus and energy to meet a deadline, deal with an emergency, or navigate a challenging situation.

The difficulty is that many of today's stressors don't simply disappear once the danger has passed. Unlike outrunning a predator, we often can't outrun an overflowing inbox, rising living costs, caring responsibilities, or ongoing uncertainty. These "modern dinosaurs" may stay with us for weeks, months, or even years, keeping our stress response activated for far longer than it was ever designed to be.

Researchers also suggest that the way we live has changed. While previous generations undoubtedly faced immense hardship, many people also lived within closer-knit families and communities, where responsibilities, practical support, and social connection were more readily available. Today, families are often geographically dispersed, many people live or work alone, and technology - although it keeps us connected- doesn't always provide the same sense of belonging or shared support. Strong relationships remain one of the greatest protective factors against the effects of chronic stress, and many of us now have to work harder to find and maintain those connections.



THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

When stress becomes chronic, this finely tuned system begins to work against us. Instead of protecting us, the ongoing release of stress hormones can gradually create wear and tear on both the body and the brain. Scientists call this allostatic load—the cumulative biological impact of living under prolonged stress.

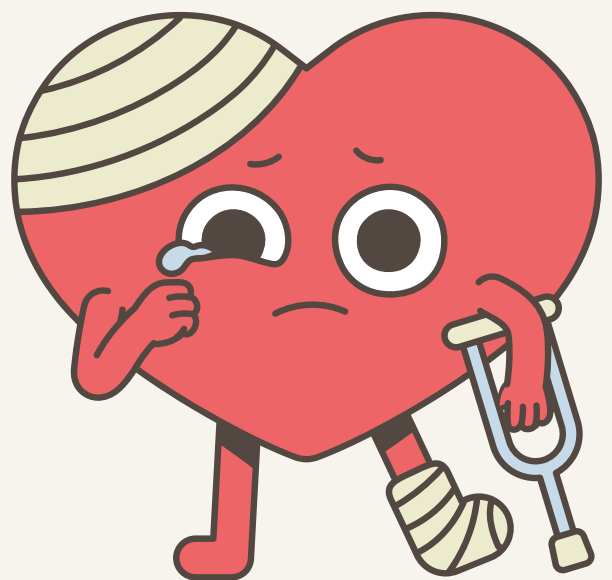
Over time, allostatic load can affect almost every aspect of our wellbeing. It can influence how we think, feel, sleep, relate to others, and even how our immune and cardiovascular systems function. This doesn't mean that everyone experiencing stress will develop these problems, but it helps explain why chronic stress deserves to be taken seriously.

Chronic stress can contribute to:

- Reduced concentration and memory
- Increased anxiety and emotional reactivity
- Poor decision-making and reduced cognitive flexibility
- Elevated blood pressure and heart rate
- Increased inflammation
- Weakened or dysregulated immune function
- Sleep disturbance and fatigue
- Increased risk of obesity, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes

Long-term outcomes:

- Higher risk of cardiovascular disease
- Increased likelihood of anxiety, depression and burnout
- Reduced resilience and overall wellbeing



THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Other **physical** symptoms of stress can include headaches, muscle tension, digestive problems, fatigue, or poor sleep, but it might reveal itself in other ways too. **Emotionally**, stress can appear as anxiety, irritability, or feeling overwhelmed. In **relationships**, we may withdraw, become less patient, or find ourselves feeling lonely even when surrounded by people.

Many of us also respond **behaviourally** by overworking, procrastinating, endlessly scrolling, avoiding difficult decisions, or using distractions to numb uncomfortable feelings.

At a deeper level, prolonged stress can also raise **existential questions**. We may lose our sense of purpose, wonder who we've become, or quietly ask ourselves whether the life we're living still fits who we are.

Rather than seeing these experiences simply as problems to eliminate, this guide invites us to become curious about them. They may be signs that something important within us is asking for our attention.

Reflection

Looking at the five areas below, where is stress speaking most loudly for you at the moment?

- Physical
- Psychological
- Relational
- Behavioural
- Existential

Is there one area that surprises you?

MODERN STRESSORS

Understanding how the stress response works is only part of the picture. To understand why so many of us experience chronic stress today, we also need to consider what keeps activating this ancient survival system. So, what are the "modern dinosaurs" that our brains and bodies are responding to?

Research suggests today's most common stressors include:

- Financial pressure
- Work and career demands
- Health concerns
- Relationships and family responsibilities
- Uncertainty about the future
- Information overload and digital life
- Lack of time

Research from the American Psychological Association consistently finds that financial concerns and work pressures remain among the most commonly reported sources of stress. In recent years, uncertainty about the future and digital overload have become increasingly prominent, reflecting the changing nature of modern life.

Pause & Reflect

Which two stressors currently take up most of your emotional energy?

Are there any you've become so used to that you barely notice them anymore?

TAKING OUR STRESS TEMPERATURE

We might think of stress like a thermometer. It rises and falls in response to what we're experiencing, and different areas of our lives may be running at different temperatures.

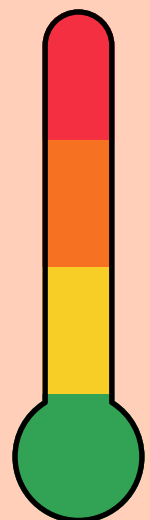
Sometimes work feels manageable, but family life is demanding. At other times our health, finances, or uncertainty about the future may be turning up the heat. Often, it isn't one overwhelming stressor but several smaller pressures building together.

Rather than asking simply, "Am I stressed?", this exercise invites you to pause and gently notice where the temperature feels highest today. There are no right or wrong answers. The aim is not to judge yourself, but simply to become more aware of where your energy is being stretched.

Using the thermometers on the next page, draw a line to show how "hot" each area of your life currently feels.

Using the Stress Thermometers with Clients

The stress thermometers can offer clients a gentle way of exploring their experience. Rather than asking, "How stressed are you?", they invite clients to pause, notice where the pressure feels greatest, and begin to make sense of how different areas of their lives may be affecting one another.



STRESS TEMPERATURES

What feels stressful today?

Draw a line on each thermometer to show how you feel about each area.



Financial pressure



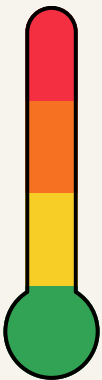
Work/
career demands



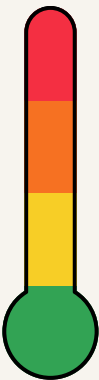
Health concerns



Relationships/
Family responsibilities



Future uncertainty



Information overload



Lack of time



Other?

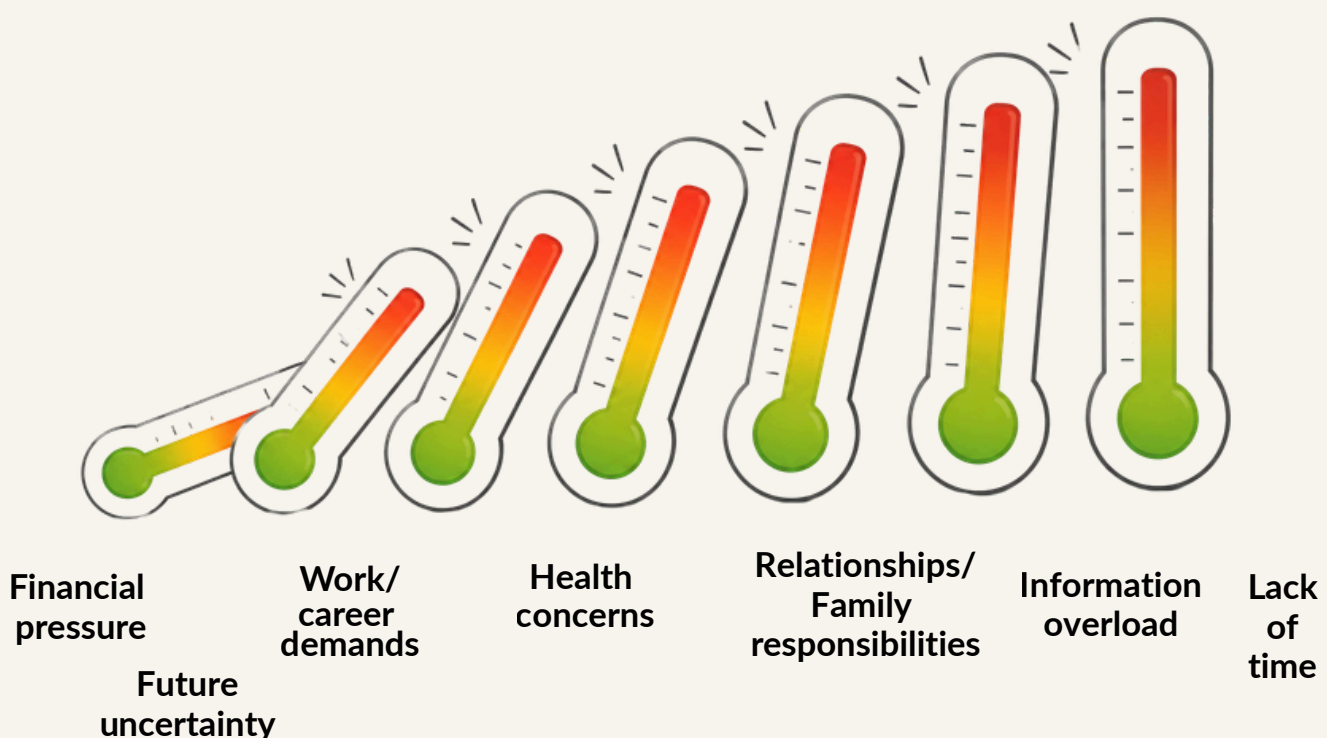
TAKING OUR STRESS TEMPERATURE

The Domino Effect of Stress

Stress rarely arrives as a single problem. More often, one pressure quietly knocks into another, creating a chain reaction that can gradually leave us feeling overwhelmed.

Imagine someone who is experiencing financial pressure. They begin to worry about the future and decide to work longer hours to make ends meet. While this may help financially in the short term, it leaves less time for rest, exercise, or managing an existing health condition, which gradually begins to worsen.

Feeling exhausted, they have less patience and energy for family life. Relationships begin to feel strained, bringing another source of stress. At the end of the day, they find themselves scrolling on their phone for an hour or two, perhaps trying to reclaim a little time for themselves or simply to switch off. Ironically, this "revenge bedtime procrastination" means they go to bed later, sleep less, and wake up even more tired the next morning.



TAKING OUR STRESS TEMPERATURE

Before long, almost every thermometer has started to rise. Financial worries have affected work, work has affected health, health has affected relationships, poor sleep has reduced resilience, and the feeling of never having enough time has become both a cause and a consequence of stress.

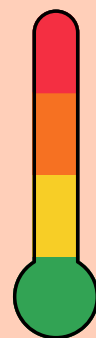
This is the domino effect of stress.

Rarely is there just one domino. And equally, recovery often begins not by trying to stand every domino back up at once, but by gently identifying the first domino that might create the greatest positive ripple effect.

Pause and Reflect

Looking at your own stress thermometers...

- Can you spot a domino effect in your life?
- Which stressor came first?
- Which areas of your life have been most affected as a result?
- If you could gently stand one domino back up, which one might create the biggest difference?



LISTENING TO OUR STRESS SIGNALS

We've already explored how chronic stress can affect both our minds, bodies, relationship and more. Sometimes, however, these changes happen so gradually that we barely notice them. We may simply find ourselves feeling "not quite ourselves" without recognising the role that stress may be playing.

Another way of listening to stress is to notice how it is showing up in different areas of our lives.

As counsellors, we often invite clients to become curious about their experiences rather than rushing to change them. We can offer ourselves that same curiosity and compassion. Sometimes, simply noticing where stress is showing itself is the first step towards understanding what we may need.

Listening to Our Stress Signals

As you look through the list on the next page, see if you can approach it with curiosity rather than judgement. There is no right or wrong number of boxes to tick, and there is no expectation that every stress signal will resonate with you.

- Which feel most familiar?
- Which seem to have become louder over time?
- Which might be asking for your attention right now?
- Are there any you have simply come to accept as "normal"?

You may also wish to imagine exploring these questions alongside a client. Rather than searching for problems to solve, the invitation is to gently wonder together what these experiences might be communicating, and what they may be saying about the client's current circumstances, needs, or way of living.

LISTENING TO OUR STRESS SIGNALS

Exercise: What signs might our bodies, emotions or actions be giving us?

Physical

- *I can't sleep*
- *I feel tense*
- *My stomach hurts*
- *I'm exhausted*
- *My head hurts*
- *I'm always ill*

Psychological

- *I feel irritable*
- *I am anxious*
- *I feel overwhelmed*
- *I can't concentrate*
- *I can't switch my mind off*

Relational

- *I just want to be alone*
- *People!!!!*
- *I can't see it from your side...I'm too busy surviving*
- *I don't want to see people*
- *I feel alone*

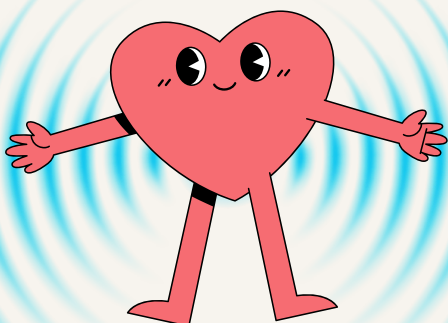
Behavioural

- *I overwork*
- *I distract myself (scrolling, binge watching, shopping etc)*
- *I procrastinate*
- *I avoid making decisions*
- *I use substances to cope*

Existential

- *I've lost my sense of purpose*
- *I feel hopeless*
- *I don't know who I am anymore*
- *I avoid thinking about what I really want from life*

Other?



BURNOUT

Understanding Burnout

Stress and burnout are closely related, but they are not the same thing.

Many of us experience periods of high stress. We may feel busy, anxious, under pressure, or as though we're constantly juggling too many demands. Although uncomfortable, we are often still engaged with what we're doing and hopeful that things will improve.

Burnout is different.

Burnout develops gradually when chronic demands continue to exceed the time, energy, support, recovery, or control available to us over an extended period. Rather than feeling driven to keep going, we may begin to feel emotionally depleted, detached, and unable to keep functioning in the way we once could.

It rarely happens overnight. More often, it is the slow accumulation of stress without enough opportunity to recover.



BURNOUT

People experiencing **high stress** often feel:

Busy

Anxious

Over-engaged

Hypervigilant

Constantly "switched on"



People experiencing **burnout** often feel:

Emotionally exhausted

Flat

Detached

Hopeless

Like they have nothing left to give



Burnout or Depression?

Burnout and depression can look very similar, and it is not always easy to distinguish between them. Both may involve exhaustion, reduced motivation, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep, and a loss of enjoyment in life. Burnout is generally understood as arising from prolonged, chronic stress - often (though not exclusively) linked to work or other sustained caregiving roles - whereas depression is a mental health condition that affects many areas of life and may occur with or without an obvious external cause. It is also possible for someone experiencing burnout to develop depression.

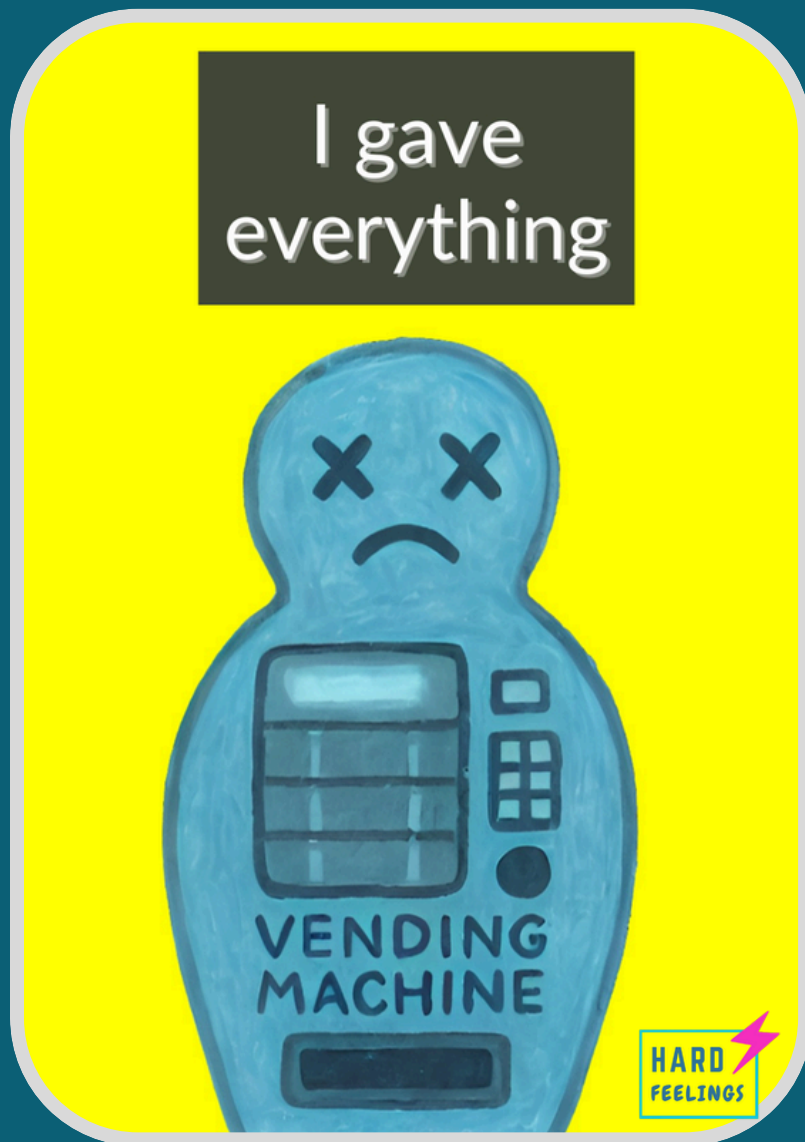
THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

Psychologist Christina Maslach and her colleagues identified three core dimensions of burnout that continue to underpin much of today's research.

1. Exhaustion

Feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally drained.

Many people describe feeling as though they have nothing left to give, even after rest.

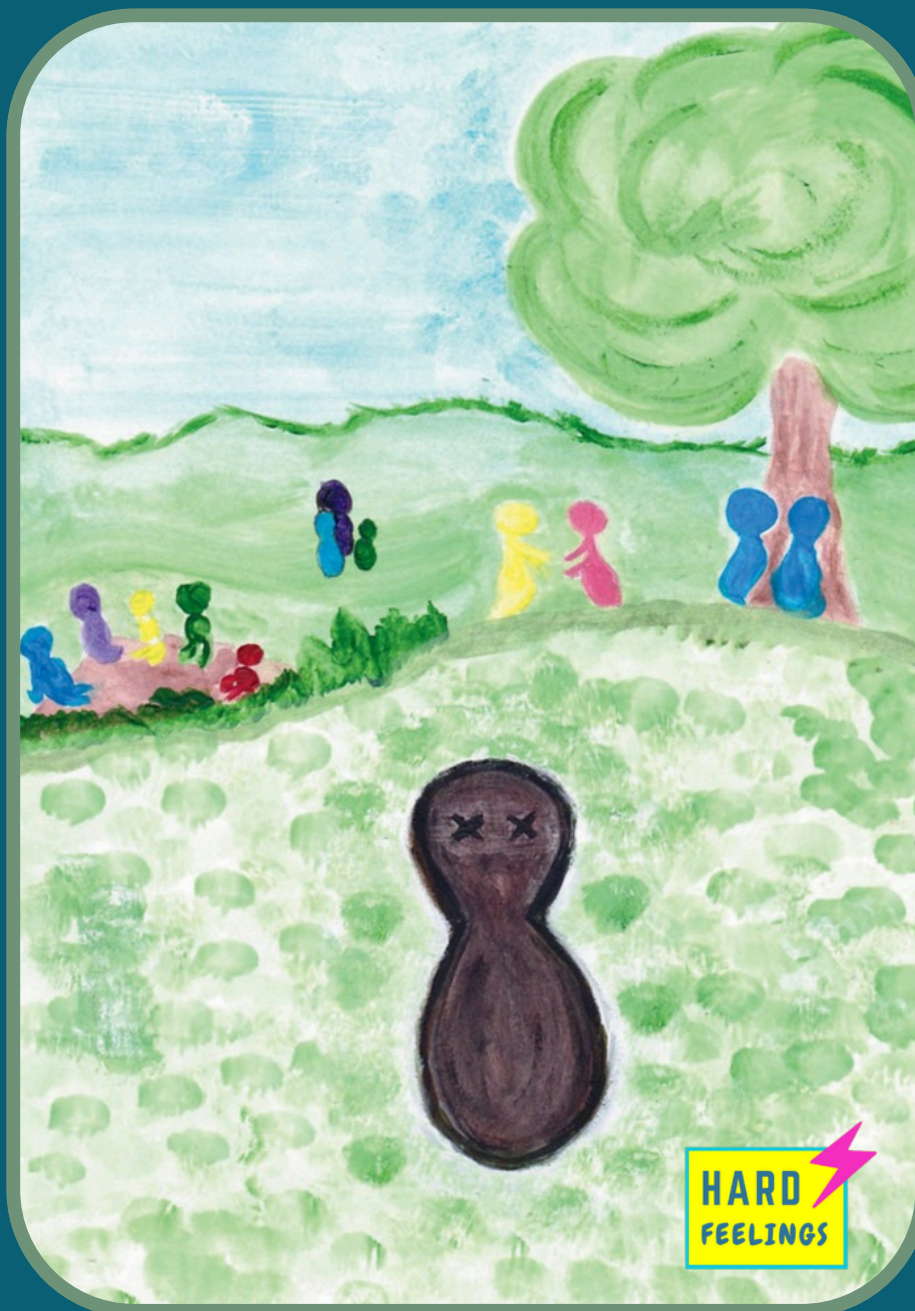


THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

2. Cynicism or Detachment

Becoming emotionally distant from work, people, or responsibilities.

Some people notice increased negativity or irritability, while others simply feel numb or disconnected.

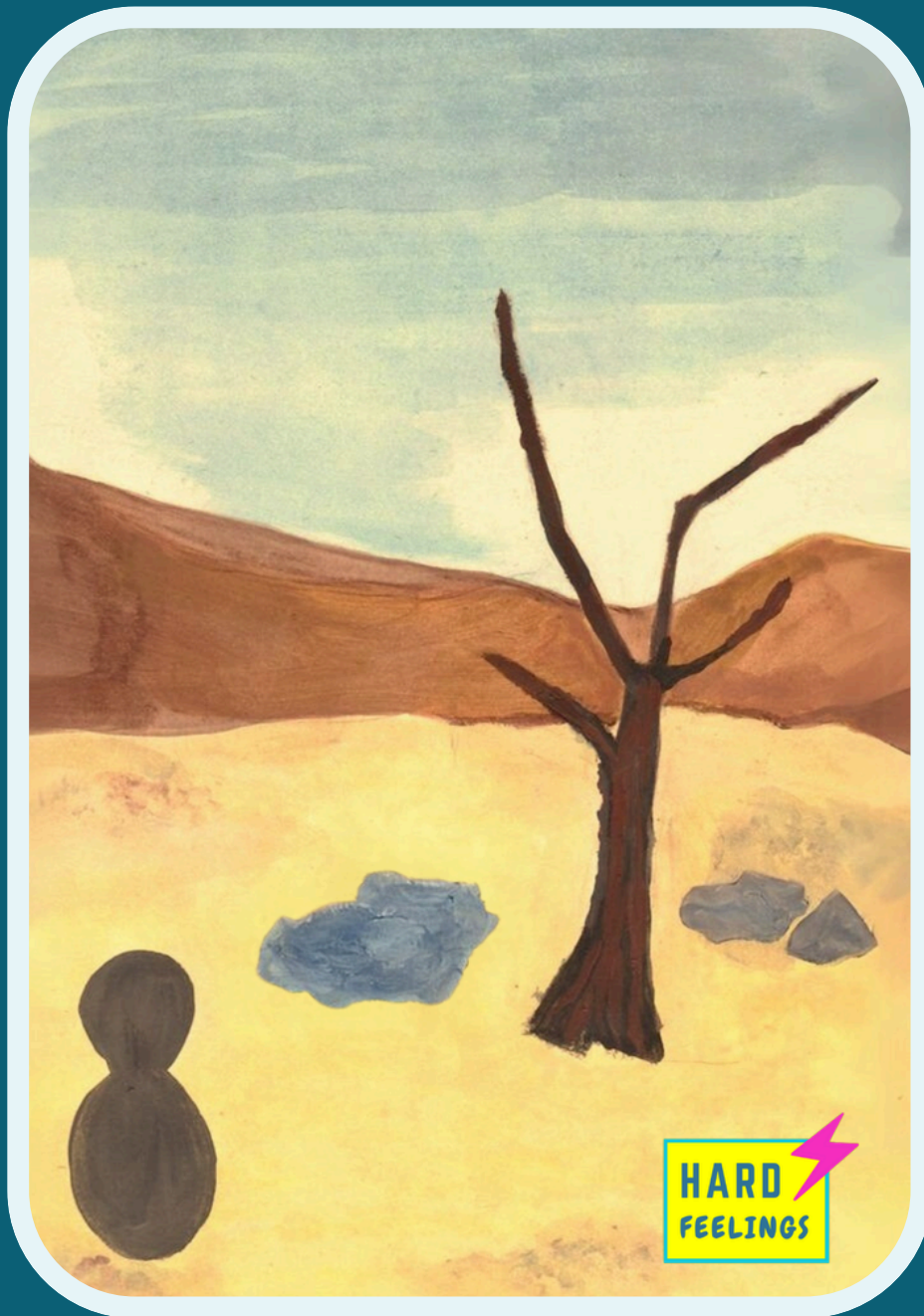


THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

3. Reduced Effectiveness

Feeling that whatever you do is never enough.

Tasks that once felt manageable may now feel overwhelming, and confidence in your own abilities often begins to decline.



THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

Pause and Reflect

Looking back over the past few months...

- Do you recognise any of these experiences in yourself or in clients?
- Which dimension do you think is most often noticed first?



BURNOUT IS USUALLY A SLOW BURN

Burnout rarely begins with collapse.

More often, it develops quietly.

At first we work a little harder to keep up. We tell ourselves that things will settle down soon. We skip breaks, push through our tiredness, and convince ourselves we'll rest later.

Over time, recovery becomes shorter than the demands being placed upon us. Exhaustion grows, motivation begins to fade, and eventually even simple tasks can feel difficult.

By the time many people recognise burnout, they have often been living with chronic stress for months, or even years.



BURNOUT IS USUALLY A SLOW BURN

Early stage

- Working harder
- Feeling under pressure
- Less recovery between demands

Middle stage

- Emotional exhaustion
- Irritability
- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of motivation

Later stage

- Detachment
- Emotional numbness
- Feeling ineffective
- Difficulty functioning day to day



Why Early Recognition Matters

The earlier we recognise chronic stress and begin responding with curiosity, compassion, and practical changes, the greater the opportunity to prevent burnout from becoming deeply entrenched.

Research suggests that recovery from severe burnout often takes months rather than weeks. In one long-term study, many people with severe burnout were still experiencing significant symptoms 18 months later, particularly fatigue and difficulties with concentration. Recovery is certainly possible, but it often requires both rest and recovery and meaningful changes to the conditions that contributed to burnout in the first place.

IS BURNOUT ONLY ABOUT WORK?

The World Health Organisation describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

This definition has helped researchers study burnout consistently. However, many people recognise that the same conditions can exist outside paid employment.

Parents caring for young children, people supporting a partner with illness, carers looking after ageing parents, and those managing a household under financial pressure may experience prolonged demands, emotional labour, limited control, and little opportunity for recovery.

Whether or not we use the word burnout in these situations, the experience of chronic depletion can feel remarkably similar.

What about a "nervous breakdown"?

Although many people still use the term nervous breakdown, it isn't a medical diagnosis. Instead, it's a popular expression used to describe a period of overwhelming psychological distress in which a person temporarily struggles to function in everyday life.

As counsellors, our focus is less on the label itself and more on understanding what the person means when they use it. One person's "burnout" or "nervous breakdown" may look very different from another's.

WHAT MAKES BURNOUT MORE LIKELY?

Burnout can affect anyone.

It isn't a sign of weakness, poor coping, or lack of resilience. It develops through the interaction of many different factors, including our life circumstances, personality, relationships, responsibilities, and the environments in which we live and work.

Some people face greater demands than others. Some have fewer opportunities to recover. Some experience additional challenges because of illness, discrimination, financial insecurity, or caring responsibilities. All of these can increase the likelihood of chronic stress and burnout.

Rather than asking, "Who burns out?", it may be more helpful to ask, "What conditions make burnout more likely?"

Research suggests burnout is more common among people experiencing:

- Heavy or prolonged workloads
- Caring responsibilities
- Financial insecurity
- High emotional demands
- Perfectionism or chronic worrying
- Limited support
- Ongoing uncertainty



WHAT MAKES BURNOUT MORE LIKELY?



Certain professions also report particularly high rates of burnout, including healthcare, education, counselling, social work, emergency services, and other helping professions.

Life Stages Matter Too

Although burnout can occur at any age, the pressures we face often change across our lives.

Young people may experience stress linked to education, identity, friendships, and social media. Adults often juggle work, finances, relationships, and caring responsibilities. Later in life, concerns may shift towards health, bereavement, retirement, or caring for ageing partners.

Stress doesn't disappear with age, it simply changes shape.

Research suggests:

- Children and teenagers often experience stress related to school, exams, friendships, and family life.
- Young adults (18–24) report some of the highest levels of psychological distress during periods of transition and uncertainty.
- Adults (25–45) commonly experience stress linked to work, finances, parenting, and relationships.
- Older adults often report lower overall stress, although many face significant health or caring challenges.

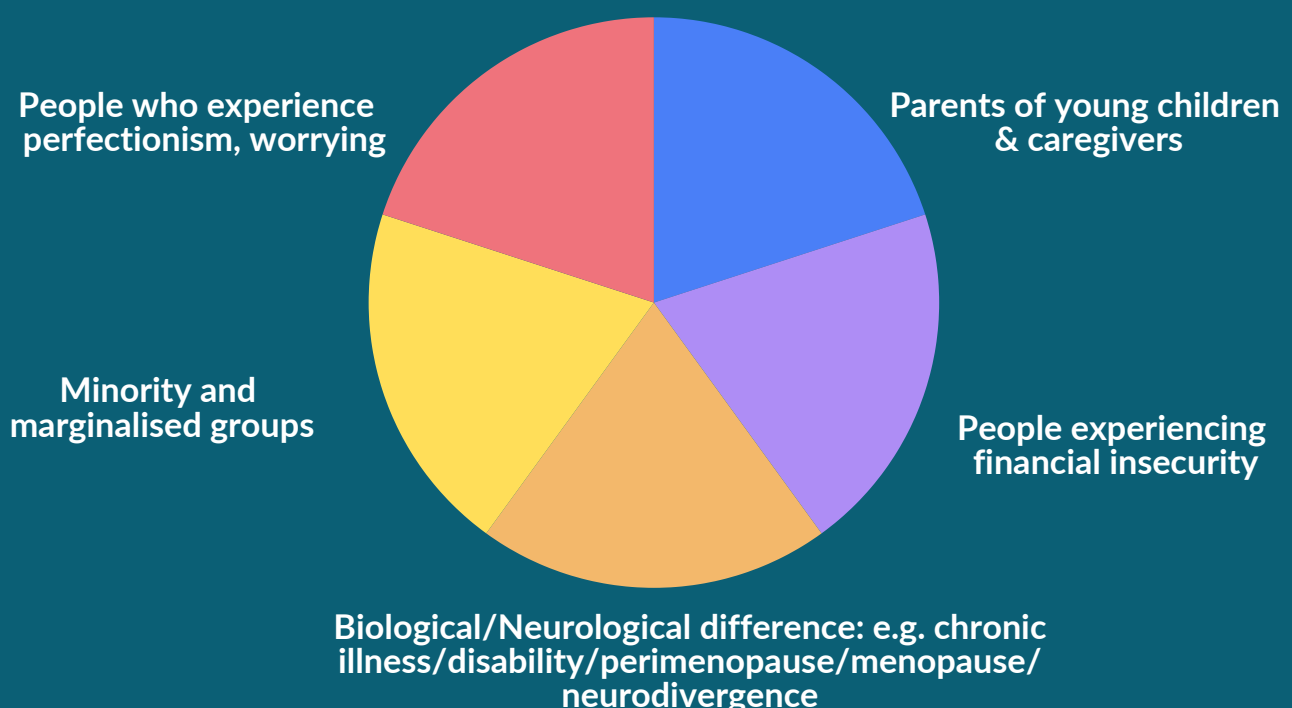
WHAT MAKES BURNOUT MORE LIKELY?

Although burnout can affect anyone, not everyone begins from the same starting point. Our life circumstances, identities, and the environments we live and work in can all influence the amount of stress we carry.

For example, people living with chronic illness or disability may experience ongoing physical, emotional, and practical challenges. Neurodivergent people may find themselves constantly adapting to environments that were not designed with them in mind, or expending considerable energy masking their differences.

Hormonal changes during perimenopause and menopause can also increase vulnerability to stress, particularly when combined with work, family, or caring responsibilities.

Parents and carers often give enormous amounts of themselves to others, leaving little opportunity for rest or recovery. Financial hardship, insecure housing, discrimination, and social isolation can all add further layers of chronic stress.



WHAT MAKES BURNOUT MORE LIKELY?

For people from minority and marginalised communities, stress may also arise from experiences of prejudice, exclusion, microaggressions, or the ongoing impact of discrimination. Having to navigate environments where we feel unsafe, unseen, or misunderstood can create an additional and often invisible emotional burden. Research suggests that these experiences can contribute to chronic stress and increase the risk of burnout over time.

Recognising these wider contexts helps us move away from asking, "Why can't I cope?" towards a more compassionate question: "Given everything I'm carrying, how understandable is it that I'm finding this difficult?"

Burnout rarely develops in a vacuum. As counsellors, we can hold in mind not only what is happening within our clients, but also what is happening around them.

Carl Rogers encouraged us to understand people from within their own frame of reference. Exploring the social, cultural, relational, and environmental contexts of our clients' lives can deepen our empathic understanding and help us avoid locating the problem solely within the individual.

Reflection

As you think about a current or recent client experiencing stress or burnout, ask yourself:

- What might they be adapting to every day?
- What invisible pressures or barriers might they be carrying?
- How might understanding their unique context deepen my empathy and shape the way I work with them?



WHY DO WE BURN OUT?

One of the most interesting findings from burnout research is that burnout is often less about working hard and more about the conditions in which we are working and living.

Many people can work incredibly hard for long periods without burning out if they feel supported, valued, have enough recovery, and believe their efforts matter.

Burnout becomes much more likely when certain conditions persist over time. As you read through these, you may notice they apply not only to paid work, but also to parenting, caring responsibilities, studying, and many other parts of life.

1. Demands Exceed Resources

Burnout is more likely when the demands placed upon us consistently exceed the time, energy, support, or resources we have available.

This might mean an impossible workload, constant interruptions, caring responsibilities, financial pressures, or feeling emotionally responsible for everyone around us.

Working hard isn't necessarily the problem. The difficulty comes when there is no realistic way of meeting the demands being placed upon us.



2. Lack of Control

This finding surprised many researchers - and it surprised me too. We can tolerate remarkably high levels of pressure when we have some choice about how we meet those demands.

Burnout becomes much more likely when we feel trapped, powerless, or unable to influence what happens to us.

This might include:

- micromanagement
- unpredictable schedules
- conflicting demands
- bureaucracy
- constantly changing priorities
- having no say in how your work is done



Micromanagement isn't simply frustrating. It can gradually undermine confidence, autonomy, and our sense of agency. Over time, feeling powerless can become deeply stressful.

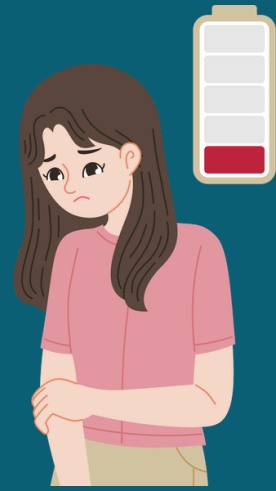
3. Insufficient Recovery

Perhaps the biggest myth about stress is that stress itself is the problem.

Our bodies are designed to experience stress and they are also designed to recover.

Burnout becomes more likely when recovery is repeatedly interrupted or never fully happens. Recovery isn't only about sleep. Research suggests it also involves:

- leisure
- enjoyment
- movement
- social connection
- psychological detachment from work
- moments when our nervous system genuinely feels safe enough to switch off



It's possible to take a week's holiday while still worrying constantly about work.

Likewise, ten peaceful minutes in the garden can sometimes offer genuine recovery.

4. A Mismatch Between Values and Reality

This is another finding that often surprises people.

Burnout frequently affects people who care deeply. Teachers who long to teach well but feel buried in paperwork, or healthcare professionals unable to give patients the care they believe they deserve. Counsellors who entered the profession to help people but find themselves overwhelmed by administration, targets, or financial pressures.

The more our daily reality conflicts with what matters most to us, the greater the emotional cost can become.

Sometimes burnout isn't telling us we care too little. It's telling us we care very much.



5. Lack of Recognition or Fairness

Feeling appreciated matters more than many of us realise.

People generally cope better with difficult work when they feel respected, valued, and treated fairly.



The same workload can feel very different depending on whether someone experiences encouragement, trust, and appreciation - or criticism, unfairness, or being taken for granted.

6. Social Isolation

Human beings are wired for connection.

Supportive relationships don't remove life's challenges, but they often make those challenges feel more manageable. Burnout becomes more likely when we become isolated - whether because we're working alone, caring for others without support, or quietly believing we have to cope by ourselves.



Understanding clients

As you listen to clients experiencing chronic stress or burnout, the points on the next page may help you remain curious about the conditions surrounding their experience. They are not a checklist, but an invitation to deepen empathic understanding.

Holding Burnout in Mind

Demands and Resources

Listen for the balance between what is being asked of your client and the resources they have available. Notice where they may be carrying more than is realistically sustainable.



Choice and Control

Listen for experiences of feeling trapped, powerless, micromanaged, or unable to influence what is happening in their lives.

Recovery

Notice whether there is space for genuine rest and recovery, or whether your client seems to move from one demand to the next without time to replenish themselves.

Values and Congruence

Listen for moments where your client speaks about what truly matters to them—and where their current way of working, or living, may feel at odds with those values.

Recognition and Fairness

Notice experiences of feeling unseen, unappreciated, criticised, or treated unfairly. Consider how these experiences may be contributing to emotional exhaustion.

Connection and Support

Listen for the presence—or absence—of supportive relationships. Notice who your client can lean on, and whether they feel they are carrying life's burdens alone.

Burnout in the Counselling Profession

Counselling is deeply rewarding, but the emotional labour of therapeutic work, alongside practical pressures such as caseloads, finances, and working in isolation, can increase the risk of stress and burnout.

Risk factors

- Emotional labour
- High caseloads
- Trauma exposure
- Isolation
- Limited supervision

Protective factors

- Regular supervision
- Peer support
- Healthy boundaries
- Realistic workloads
- Self-compassion

We are often skilled at noticing when our clients are running on empty. How easy is it to notice the signs in ourselves?

PAUSE AND REFLECT DRAW YOURSELF AS A PLANT

- DOES IT NEED MORE LIGHT?
- SOME WATER?
- A LARGER POT?
- FEEDING?
- A LITTLE SUPPORT?
- IS ONE LEAF THRIVING WHILE ANOTHER LOOKS TIRED?
- DOES IT SIMPLY NEED TIME TO RECOVER?



RECOVERING FROM BURNOUT

Early intervention matters. Recognising chronic stress before it progresses to burnout is associated with better outcomes and a quicker return to wellbeing.

Returning to the same high-pressure environment without meaningful changes can increase the likelihood of relapse.

Many people with severe burnout still experience significant symptoms 18 months later, particularly fatigue and reduced cognitive functioning.

Other studies have shown that while exhaustion often improves first, difficulties with concentration, memory, and confidence may take longer to recover.

Research consistently shows that addressing the causes of burnout - not just the symptoms - is associated with more sustainable recovery.

These findings aren't intended to discourage us. Rather, they remind us that burnout is a genuine state of depletion, not something people can simply "snap out of."



RECOVERING FROM BURNOUT

Many people imagine they'll feel better after a holiday, a few early nights, or a couple of weeks away from work. While these can certainly help, burnout usually develops gradually over months or years. It therefore makes sense that recovery also takes time.

Again, it seems that recovery is rarely a straight line. There may be days when you feel more like yourself, followed by days when the exhaustion or overwhelm returns. This doesn't necessarily mean you are "back to square one." Recovery often happens through many small steps forwards, with occasional steps backwards along the way.

The encouraging news is that recovery is possible. The earlier we recognise chronic stress and respond with compassion, support, and practical changes, the greater the chance of preventing burnout from becoming more severe.



What helps:

1) Prioritise recovery

Adequate sleep, genuine breaks, and enjoyable activities that allow mental detachment from work and responsibilities

2) Address the source of stress

Identify recurring stressors and reduce, delegate, postpone, or renegotiate them where possible

RECOVERING FROM BURNOUT

3) Protect sleep

Consistent, sufficient sleep is one of the most effective ways to recover

4) Move regularly

Moderate exercise such as walking, cycling, or strength training

5) Practice mindfulness or relaxation

Regular mindfulness, meditation, or similar practices

6) Maintain social support

Connection with supportive friends, family, or colleagues is associated with better stress recovery and lower burnout risk

7) Temporarily lower overall demands

Reducing commitments and avoiding additional responsibilities can create the space needed for recovery



WHY IS RECOVERY SO HARD?

Many people know, intellectually, what might help.

They know they need to rest.

They know they need boundaries.

They know they need to ask for help.

Yet they often find themselves unable to do these things consistently.

This isn't usually because they lack motivation or insight.

As we'll explore in the next section, recovery can be difficult because it may ask us to challenge deeply held beliefs about responsibility, productivity, identity, and our own worth.

Sometimes changing our circumstances is difficult. Sometimes changing ourselves is difficult. Often, recovery involves both.

A hopeful note...

Burnout usually arrives gradually and often leaves gradually too. This can feel frustrating, but it is also understandable. A nervous system that has been living in survival mode for a long time needs time, safety, and support to rediscover a different way of being.

Although recovery can take time, the vast majority of people do improve. Many describe emerging from burnout with a clearer sense of their values, healthier boundaries, and a different relationship with work and themselves. Burnout can be a painful experience, but for some it also becomes a turning point.

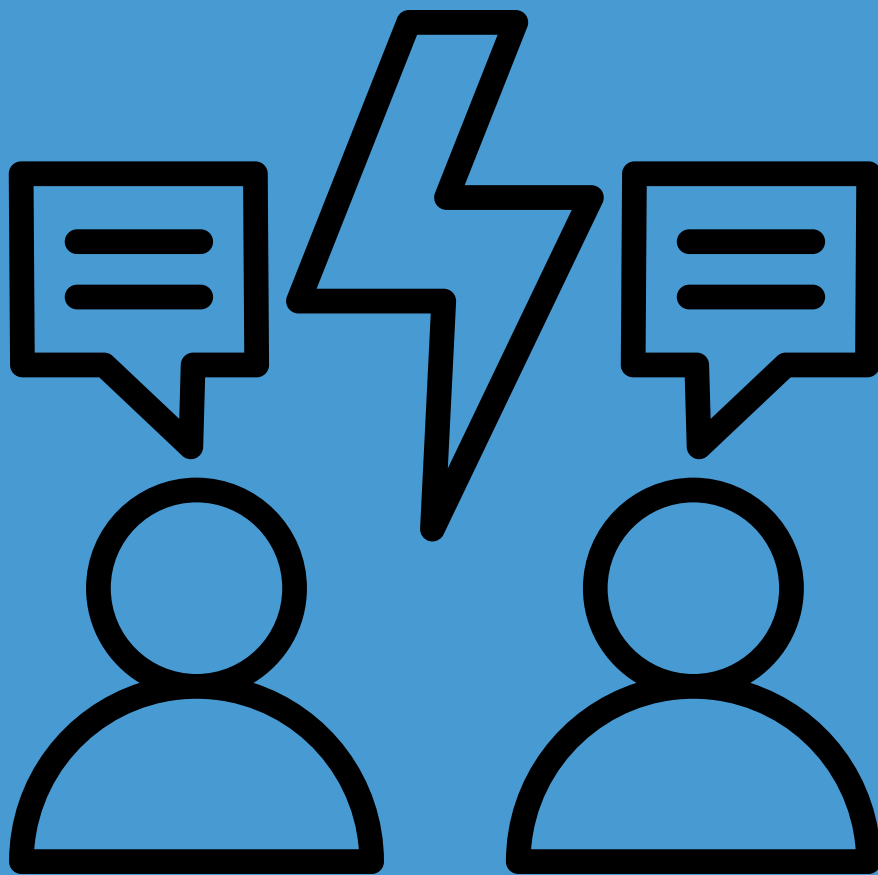
LISTENING TO BURNOUT – PERSON-CENTRED PRINCIPLES

We have touched on the idea that self-care isn't always simple, because recovery isn't simply about changing our behaviour.

Sometimes it asks us to challenge deeply held beliefs about who we are, what makes us worthwhile, and what we believe we must do in order to deserve love, acceptance, or belonging.

This is where a person-centred perspective offers something unique.

Rather than asking, "Why aren't I looking after myself?", we might begin to ask, "What makes looking after myself feel so difficult?"



LISTENING TO BURNOUT – PERSON-CENTRED PRINCIPLES

Person-centred theory proposes that each of us has an innate tendency towards growth, healing, and fulfilment. Carl Rogers called this the actualising tendency. We might think of it as the inbuilt drive that keeps us moving towards life, encouraging us to pick up the compass, even after we've lost our way.

The compass itself is what Rogers called our organismic valuing process (OVP). It is our inner capacity to sense what supports our wellbeing and what takes us away from it. When we are able to listen to it, it gently guides us towards what helps us flourish.

Sometimes it whispers:

"I'm exhausted."

"I need rest."

"This no longer feels right."

"Something needs to change."



But Our Compass Doesn't Always Point Clearly...

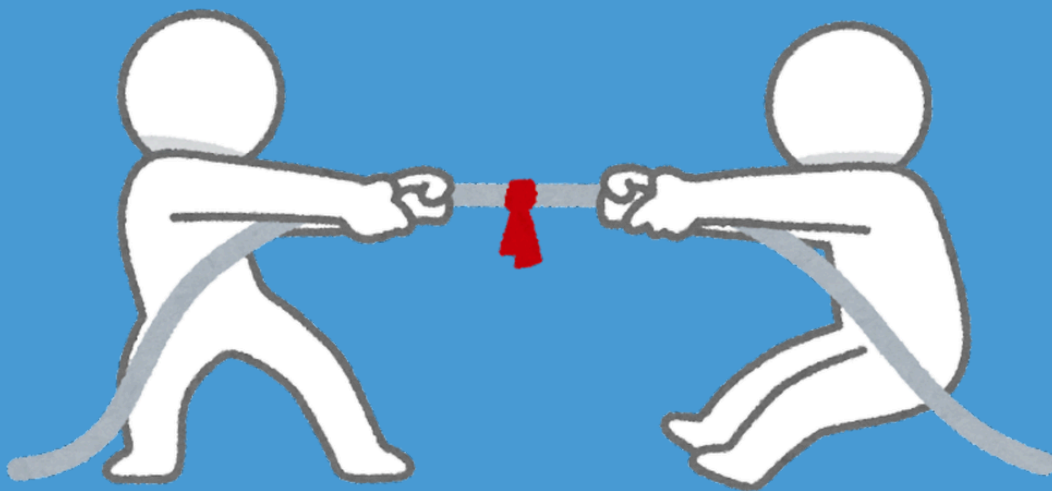
Throughout our lives we receive messages about who we should be, how we should behave, and what makes us acceptable. Rogers called these conditions of worth.

Over time, these messages can become so familiar that we begin to mistake them for our own voice. They don't remove our inner compass, but they can make it much harder to hear or trust. The actualising tendency continues to draw us towards growth, while our organismic valuing process quietly keeps pointing the way, even when other voices make us doubt its direction.

LISTENING TO BURNOUT – PERSON-CENTRED PRINCIPLES

Our inner compass may quietly say,
"I'm overwhelmed."
while another voice replies,
"You should be able to cope."
Or...
"I need help."
followed immediately by,
"Asking for help is weakness."

The difficulty is not that our inner compass disappears.
It's that it can become harder to hear when our conditions of worth are speaking too. This could be likened to a tug of war, and we have a unique opportunity to help clients hear and experience this internal conflict within an accepting, empathic and real therapeutic relationship, in which conditions of worth natural dissolve, freeing the person towards natural growth.



LISTENING TO BURNOUT – PERSON-CENTRED PRINCIPLES

Taking a closer look at conditions of worth; it is notable that they don't develop in isolation. Perhaps we can imagine them as a soup we spend our lives swimming in.

The ingredients are added gradually:

- Parents and caregivers
- Teachers
- Friends
- Culture
- Workplaces
- Advertising
- Social media
- Past experiences
- Current expectations



These messages can quietly pull us away from ourselves.

As counsellors, we are often working not simply with today's stress, but with years of accumulated messages about what people believe they must do in order to be acceptable or worthwhile.

Pause and Reflect

Looking at the list above...

- Which conditions of worth feel most familiar to you?
- Can you remember where they might have come from?
- Which messages still influence how you respond to stress today?

IN INTEGRATIVE PRACTICE

We've explored stress and burnout through a person-centred lens. Carl Rogers' ideas about the actualising tendency, the organismic valuing process, and conditions of worth offer a compassionate way of understanding why burnout develops and why recovery is often about much more than simply learning better coping strategies.

Many counsellors, however, work integratively, drawing on a range of theories and approaches. The principles we've explored here need not be confined to person-centred therapy. They can be woven into many ways of working.

Whether we use Transactional Analysis, Gestalt, CBT, psychodynamic ideas, attachment theory, or another therapeutic model, we can still remain curious about what stress and burnout may be communicating. We can still offer empathy, authenticity, and acceptance. We can still help clients reconnect with their own values, needs, and capacity for growth.

The model may differ, but the therapeutic attitude can remain person-centred.

So rather than finding 'solutions' or telling clients what they should do, we create a relationship in which they can begin to:

- notice their own experience more clearly
- reconnect with feelings, needs and values
- recognise conditions of worth and other limiting beliefs

IN PRACTICE

- understand recurring patterns (in Transactional Analysis these would be scripts, drivers, injunctions and counterinjunctions, in Gestalt introjects)
- develop greater self-compassion
- make choices that feel more congruent with who they are
- In this sense, therapy is not simply about reducing stress or recovering from burnout
- It is about helping people reclaim trust in themselves.

They may begin to notice:

- "Actually... I'm tired."
- "That relationship isn't working for me."
- "I don't have to prove my worth."
- "I do deserve support."
- "This pace of life no longer fits who I am."

These insights cannot be forced, they emerge gradually as people reconnect with their own organismic valuing process - their inner compass.



LISTENING TO OUR BODIES

Throughout this guide we've explored how stress and burnout can affect our minds, bodies, relationships, and sense of self. We've considered what research tells us, reflected on our own experiences, and explored how therapy might help us make sense of what we're carrying.

This final exercise offers a different kind of invitation.

Rather than thinking about stress, we are invited to gently notice it. Our bodies often become aware of stress long before our minds do. Tight shoulders, a clenched jaw, butterflies in the stomach, a heavy chest, or an aching back may all be part of the body's way of communicating with us.

Rather than trying to change or analyse these sensations, this exercise invites us to approach them with openness, curiosity and compassion.

There is no right or wrong experience.

You may notice a great deal.

You may notice very little.

Both are equally okay.

LISTENING TO OUR BODIES

TAKEN FROM: THE ART OF EMOTIONAL HEALING BY
LUCIA CAPACCHIONE (SHAMBHALA, 2001)

1. Body scan Meditation

Get yourself in a comfortable seated position and make sure that your feet are flat on the floor.

Close your eyes and place your hand on your belly, just below your navel. Allow yourself to breathe in and out and become aware of your breathing. Allow the breath to go down in to your belly and feel that area rising on the inhale and contracting on the exhale. Allow your breathing to be deep and slow and rhythmic.

Take a sensory awareness trip through your body.

Starting at the top of your head, notice all the sensations there. Then slowly move down your face from forehead to chin and jawline, checking out the sensations inside your eyes and mouth and throat as well.

Then tune in to your ears and back of your head. Continue down your neck both front and back, shoulders, arms, palms and fingers (one side, then the other).

Check out the sensations inside your torso: chest, heart and lungs, upper back. Then move your awareness down to your midsection: stomach, liver and gall bladder area, spleen, pancreas and the kidneys in the back. It doesn't matter whether you know where these organs are, just feel whatever sensations are going on in this part of your body.

LISTENING TO OUR BODIES

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LUCIA CAPACCHIONE (SHAMBHALA, 2001)

Next move your awareness to your pelvic area: intestines, bladder, reproductive system and genitals, and your anus and buttocks. Then complete the journey through your body by becoming aware of each leg: hip, thigh, knee, calf and shin, ankle, top and sole of the foot and each toe.

2. Draw it out

Draw an outline of a body (front and back) or use a body template.

Colour in the different areas on the body that ‘spoke’ to you during the body scan. You may have noticed feelings of tension or pain, discomfort or achiness, or pleasure and relaxation. Which colours, shapes or strokes best represent the different sensations that you became aware of.

If these areas could speak, what would they be saying? Draw a speech bubble from each one and using your non-dominant hand give them a voice/and or note any feelings attached to them.

3. Have a chat

Select the body part/sensation that is speaking the loudest or that grabs your curiosity the most and have a conversation with it. With your dominant hand ask the following questions:

- Who or what are you?
- How do you feel?
- What is causing you to feel this way?
- What can I do to help you?

LISTENING TO OUR BODIES

TAKEN FROM: THE ART OF EMOTIONAL HEALING BY
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·What are you here to teach or tell me?

Allow the body part/sensation to have a voice by answering with your non-dominant hand. Stay open to the process – try not to ‘think’ too hard about it, rather feel your way and see what comes up – you may be surprised! After you’ve finished the exercise tune in to your body and notice any shifts or changes.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Stress is part of being human

Stress is not a personal failing or a sign of weakness. It is one of the remarkable ways our minds and bodies try to protect us.

Burnout rarely happens overnight

It usually develops gradually when demands continue to exceed our capacity to recover. The earlier we notice the signs, the kinder we can be to ourselves.

Recovery is rarely quick or linear

Healing often takes longer than we hope. Small, compassionate steps matter, and setbacks don't mean we've failed.

Knowing what to do isn't always enough

Many people already know they need rest, boundaries or support. Often the challenge lies not in understanding what might help, but in gently exploring what makes those things so difficult.

Counselling offers more than coping strategies

Whether working from a person-centred, integrative, TA, Gestalt, psychodynamic or another therapeutic approach, we have the opportunity to offer a relationship in which clients can feel deeply heard, reconnect with themselves, and begin to move towards lives that are more congruent with their values.

Burnout can become a turning point.

None of us would choose burnout, but for some people it becomes an invitation to question old patterns, soften conditions of worth, and build a more sustainable and authentic way of living.

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CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY WITH US

We hope you've enjoyed engaging with this resource and that it has offered something useful to take into your practice.

You might choose to revisit these interventions over time, bring them into supervision, or begin to integrate them into your work with clients in ways that feel natural to you.

If you're interested in exploring this approach more deeply, we offer:
We offer a range of CPD opportunities, including:

- In-depth online and in person training courses exploring many different areas of counselling - theory made easy to understand and apply
- Therapeutic card sets to support creative and relational work
- Books on working creatively
- Training videos
- Tools for working online

For courses visit: deeprelease.org.uk

For resources visit: pact-resources.co.uk

we look forward to staying in touch!

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