

## BONUS CHAPTER

### Addressing Leader Well-Being & Burnout

Every now and then I hear a story that leaves me thinking. A story that inspires me and that I know will inspire others. A story that I know will move the needle, even if only a little, and spark change. These were the opening remarks a senior leader (and departmental head) shared prior to my workshop:

*In 2008, four years after joining my company as a senior leader, I had a nervous breakdown. Doctors called it major depressive disorder with anxiety distress.*

*My illness in 2008 followed five years of accumulating professional burnout. What started as burnout could have ended much earlier in its progression. But at that time, no leader admitted to mental health problems in my profession.*

*I was no stranger to depression and anxiety - my first wife died after a lifelong struggle with these ailments three years before I started down the burnout trail. But as my progression rapidly worsened in 2008, I was not willing to admit to myself that I too could become disabled by anxiety and resulting depression. That's just not how I saw myself - mental illness was something that happened to other people, not to me.*

*The demands of my work accelerated in 2003 when the economy roared back after the great tech crash of 2000 and the effects of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I joined my company at the end of March 2004. I got married three weeks later on April 18, 2004, and that day, a Sunday, was my first day off in the year 2004. There was no honeymoon - I came back to a 12+ hour day on Monday. I continued to work that way after my younger kids were born in 2005 and 2007.*

*I became increasingly anxious, and doing my job became increasingly difficult as the anxiety increased and never seemed to come back down. At one point, I was at one of my monthly team meetings listening to a colleague talk about an important issue. I was keenly aware of these types of issues, and yet when I tried to listen to this talk, I could not understand it. I just couldn't follow the topic through the fog of my anxiety. Unable to understand the presentation, my brain turned to wondering how I managed to convince the world I could handle this level of work when it was so obvious to me at that moment I could not?*

*I wondered, when did this happen? And I wondered how long it would be until what was now obvious to me would be obvious to everyone. How long until the company would ask me to leave, and I would be unable to support my family? My brain was broken. It's an organ. It can break. I sought treatment that day.*

*After the screening questions one gets about suicidal thoughts and suicidal plans, I was asked if I was looking forward to anything. My answer was no. Then a surprising*

*question - so what are you living for? My answer was, "I believe I'll get better." I was lucky that I hadn't yet reached the point where even that belief would evaporate. Many are not so lucky.*

*Fortunately, I did get better quickly with medication, keeping my leave to three weeks and doing my best to make it look like a vacation. When I returned, I changed my approach to respect the limits of my body and brain. After a while, I no longer needed medication. I still worked hard, but I was now aware that I had a breaking point, and I had to watch for it and stay clear of it. Believe me, it's totally doable to be a successful leader, do the hard work that's necessary, and still take care of your body and brain.*

Managers and leaders at all levels are burning out and leaving their jobs at an alarming rate. Managers are more likely than non-managers to be disengaged at work, burned out, looking for a new job, and feeling like their organization doesn't care about their well-being.<sup>1</sup> More than one-quarter of leaders feel burned out often or always, and two-thirds feel it at least sometimes.<sup>2</sup> More than 1,400 CEOs left their jobs in 2023, an increase of almost 50% compared to 2022, and it's the biggest turnover at that level in more than two decades.<sup>3</sup> In addition, 75% of the C-suite reported that they are seriously contemplating quitting their jobs for one that better supports their well-being, and 64% of managers said the same thing.<sup>4</sup>

Companies need leaders who are prepared to address how the world has changed and the ongoing volatile business landscape. The pandemic put a huge amount of pressure on CEOs and leaders to navigate unprecedented challenges under increased scrutiny from all of their stakeholders. Many leaders I talk to report that they absorb their team members' extra work so as not to burn them out. They are falling on their own burnout sword to save their teams, and none of this is helpful. Managers have more work, fewer people (or newer teams), and tighter budgets. That's a tough gauntlet to navigate.

Preventing burnout at any level is a complicated task. It involves taking what I call a "me and we" approach because burnout is caused by a mix of individual and organizational factors. The point of *Lead Well* is to help leaders address the "we" factors – how you make work better by creating more meaning, thriving, and resilience for your team. This bonus chapter, however, focuses on the "me" factors that help you prevent or recover from burnout.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ben Wigert & Heather Barrett (September 6, 2023). The Manager Squeeze: How the New Workplace is Testing Team Leaders. Gallup. Download at, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/510326/manager-squeeze-new-workplace-testing-team-leaders.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Gallup (June 2024). State of the Global Workplace Report.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Schwab (October 30, 2023). CEO Turnover is Big Right Now. Marketplace. Download at, <https://www.marketplace.org/2023/10/30/ceo-turnover-increase-great-resignation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jen Fisher, Paul H. Silverglate, Colleen Bordeaux, & Michael Gilmartin (June 20, 2023). As Workforce Well-Being Dips, Leaders Ask: What Will It Take to Move the Needle? Online at <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-well-being-research.html>.

Let's review some ideas that can help.

**Going Deep Part 1: Understand your wiring.** To prevent and recover from burnout, you must go deep. The starting point here is to understand your mindsets and “wiring” – the traits, styles of thinking, and behaviors that help you both prevent and recover from burnout. These are your core values and beliefs, or your rules, about how you think you and others should behave in the world, and they are called “icebergs” or “rules.” I talked about icebergs at length in chapter 8 of my first book, *Beating Burnout at Work*. In the 15 years I've been doing this work, I have yet to encounter a conversation with a leader, whether via formal coaching or otherwise, when rules or icebergs don't arise. Examples, like saying yes to everything, working at a relentless pace, feeling like you can never let anyone down, that you must have all the answers, produce perfect work, and thinking that your self-worth is tied to your career success or title are all common icebergs or rules I hear from leaders. These core beliefs can be part of what helps you launch a successful career, but over time, these rules can lead to a host of issues, including burnout, if they remain too inflexible. Once you surface these icebergs, reflect.

- Where did they come from?
- How have they contributed to your success? How have they interfered?
- How are they too inflexible or rigid for the way you want to live, lead, and work today?
- How will you reshape or soften these rules?

A big problem, though, is that organizations continue to hire for and reward these traits, which can perpetuate “playing the game” despite the negative consequences to well-being.

You can also engage in this exercise, which is the path I followed in my own burnout recovery (and which gets to the same depth of self-awareness and reflection as the detect icebergs exercise):<sup>5</sup>

1. **Look back:** Reflect on the traits, mindsets, and wiring that caused your burnout. This takes time. It took me months to sort this out, and I'm still a work in progress, 15+ years later.
2. **Look forward:** Think deeply about the sort of work and life you want to have. This is also a process. I started by creating “The List.” As I was contemplating leaving my law practice, I thought about what had to be present in the next phase of my career. The List included: writing, researching, talking to and teaching people, and traveling. I knew I needed to be out in the world sharing important

---

<sup>5</sup> This framework is a blend of my own steps in addition to what leadership researcher, Nick Petrie, has found in his research interviewing thousands of people about their burnout experiences. You can learn more about Nick and his work at [www.nicholaspetrie.com](http://www.nicholaspetrie.com). I also highly recommend following him on LinkedIn.

ideas and learning from others; not cooped up in an office 12 hours a day. You don't necessarily need a job or career change to see effective outcomes – you just have to get clear, very clear, about what you want.

3. **Seek help:** Look for and find people, such as therapists, friends, coaches, mentors, and peers, who have walked this path and can offer guidance. I hired a coach to help me think about career next steps. I found her name in *Success* magazine, and to prove that the universe truly works in mysterious ways, it turned out that she had just graduated from the applied positive psychology program from the University of Pennsylvania. I had never heard of the program, but instantly knew it was my next step. I applied, was accepted, and the rest as they say, was history.

**Going Deep Part 2: Know what's causing your chronic stress & replenishing your energy at work.** Burnout is more likely to happen when you have an imbalance between your job demands (the aspects of your job that require sustained effort and/or energy) and your job resources (the aspects of your job that help you achieve your goals, reduce the stress “cost” of your job demands, and stimulate growth and learning).<sup>6</sup> The word “imbalance” is subjective, and the first step is to map your job demands and job resources.

JOB DEMANDS	JOB RESOURCES
<p>Which of the Core 6 account for your chronic stress? Circle all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unmanageable workload</li> <li>● Lack of recognition</li> <li>● Unfairness</li> <li>● Values misalignment</li> <li>● Lack of control/flexibility</li> <li>● Lack of community</li> </ul> <p>What does this look like? (e.g., too many emails; too many meetings; etc.)</p>	<p>What aspects of your job increase your energy? Stimulate growth and learning? What or who generally gives you positive energy about your job?</p> <p>List them here:</p>

---

<sup>6</sup> Arnold B. Bakker & Evangelia Demerouti (2017). Job Demands-Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward. 22(3) *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 273-285.  
 © Davis-Laack Stress & Resilience Institute, LLC & Paula Davis. 2025. All rights reserved.

<p>What other factors exist in your day-to-day that increase your stress?</p>	<p>How do these resources help mitigate against the stress created by your demands? Do you need more resources, and if so, what might those be?</p>
---	---

When I teach this exercise in my workshops, most people find that they can populate the demands column quickly, and it's usually a long list of items. Even if it isn't long, the items people list are "big;" meaning, they account for a great deal of the stress problem. Conversely, many people struggle to capture their resources – the energy giving aspects of their work. Your columns don't have to contain even numbers of answers. It's not about evenness – it's about strength. Some people may only list 3-4 resources, but they may be so strong and so important that it's enough to counter the stress weight of the demands. For example, many people tell me that having strong relationships with their colleagues gets them through the day and often serves as an important buffer for stress.

What's also important to note is the same mindsets I'm telling you to develop and practice in *Lead Well* are also the same mindsets your leaders need to develop to help you. Strong relationships, having decision authority, getting meaningful, in-time feedback, feeling appreciated, having a manageable workload, autonomy, leader support, and the opportunity to learn new things have all been shown to be very powerful job resources that not only slow burnout, but also build your work engagement.<sup>7</sup>

### Going Deep Part 3: How Bad Is It?

**Step 1:** You are moving out of stress and into burnout when you are feeling all of the following *chronically* (that is, more often than not, over an extended period of time): physically and emotionally exhausted, cynical (often frustrated and annoyed by colleagues and clients), and a lack of impact (the research calls it "inefficacy," which I translate into a feeling of "why bother, who cares?").

---

<sup>7</sup> Arnold B. Bakker, Evangelia Demerouti, & Ana Sanz-Vergel (2023). Job Demands-Resources Theory: Ten Years Later. 10 Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior 25-53.  
© Davis-Laack Stress & Resilience Institute, LLC & Paula Davis. 2025. All rights reserved.

Which of these components are you experiencing, if any.

---

**Step 2:** I found this great quiz in Harvard Business Review during the pandemic. I have given this quiz to thousands of workshop participants, and while it's not empirically validated, it's a great starting point to help you think about the frequency with which you're feeling good or bad about your job.

The scale is 1 to 5 – with one being lowest and five is highest. Now reflect on your last full week of work and answer with the corresponding number:

- How overwhelmed did you feel?      Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- How effective did you feel?      Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- How productive did you feel?      Score: \_\_\_\_\_
- How much fun did you have?      Score: \_\_\_\_\_

The worst possible score is an 8 and the best is a 16. If you've been overwhelmed at a level four this past week, ask why. Are you in the middle of a big project? Was there a last-minute urgent matter that consumed all your time and energy? Or, have you been feeling at a level four for months? Chronic exhaustion is one of the three dimensions of burnout. In addition, these are some early burnout warning signs to consider:<sup>8</sup>

- Increased procrastination
- More ailments, especially things like headaches, colds, stomach aches
- Inattentive
- Lack of concentration
- Mood changes
- Drop in productivity

**Step 3:** Assign it a zone.<sup>9</sup> Burnout tends to happen in phases. Where are you?

**ZONE 1:** You go through heavy periods of stress, but the stress generally comes and goes. You may feel overwhelmed from time to time, but you continue to work effectively. Self-care strategies may continue to help in this zone.

**ZONE 2:** Stress has become chronic. You feel more consistently fatigued, and your motivation and effectiveness are starting to decrease. You are moving into survival

---

<sup>8</sup> Denise Albiери Jodas Salvagioni et al. (2017). Physical, Psychological, & Occupational Consequences of Job Burnout: A Systematic Review of Studies. PLOS ONE.

<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 5. This is Nick Petrie's research that I found via his posts on LinkedIn. To my knowledge, he does not publish in scientific journals, but instead tends to communicate his findings on LinkedIn and through his own webinars and workshops.

mode. You will need to start setting more boundaries and dig into the Going Deep Part 1 and 2 exercises above.

**ZONE 3:** You are burned out (and meet all three components above – chronic exhaustion, chronic cynicism, and lost impact). Simple tasks have become unmanageable, and your emotions are unpredictable and hard to control. Your day-to-day world is becoming impacted by the stress. You may need to consider whether you need help from a coach, therapist, or other professional. You may also need to consider whether you need to make deeper life and work changes.

As you can see, this is an imprecise process. That’s because it’s generally accepted that burnout is not a medical condition, and therefore, there isn’t an agreed upon and readily established process to officially diagnose it. Rather, it is viewed as a specific type of stress associated with one’s work.

**TNT: Improve “anti-burnout” behaviors.** Leadership researcher Nick Petrie and his team have spent the past several years talking to high performers to better understand the conditions under which they burnout (or don’t). He’s found that people who perform at very high levels, yet don’t burnout, exhibit similar behaviors. I have put them in the chart below and added a section to help you start to recognize where you might need to improve. Take some time to write what strategies you might deploy to get better at some or all of these behaviors.

<b>“ANTI BURNOUT” BEHAVIOR</b>	<b>STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE</b>
Make peace with not getting everything done each day.	
Have rituals for switching between work and home.	
Create clear boundaries between work and home.	
Develop many different roles and identities outside of work (who are you and what do you love to do when you’re not at work).	
Decide on a “phone strategy” to intentionally manage phone use at home.	
Reflect on the best and worst ways to work. Examine what works for you each	

day in terms of how you get your work done.	
---	--

**TNT: Build a stronger relationship bench.** Microstressors are the small moments of stress in your personal and professional life that accumulate over time, and the accumulation can have a significant impact on your well-being, health, and resilience.<sup>10</sup> Researchers discovered that focusing on your relationships is a critical pathway for helping you better manage microstress. Why? These connections provide important pathways to thriving and resilience. Specifically, they suggest you need to build a relationship bench that includes people in seven different categories. Please complete the chart below by writing down the name of a person or people who help you in each category. If you can't think of a person, please leave it blank. Then add a few notes about how this person or these people help.

RELATIONSHIP CATEGORY	PERSON/PEOPLE WHO HELP	HOW HE/SHE/ THEY HELP
Gives you empathetic support		
Helps you identify a path forward when you're stuck		
Helps you manage work or home surge & unpredictability		
Helps you take a break		
Provides levity		

<sup>10</sup> All of the ideas from this section come from Rob Cross & Karen Dillon (2023). *The Microstress Effect: How Little Things Pile Up and Create Big Problems – and What to Do about It*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.



Helps you navigate people and organizational politics		
Offers you perspective about work and life challenges		

Now review your list.

When I lead groups through this exercise, one of the biggest issues I see is that people write down the same name for every category. It's usually a significant other or spouse, maybe sometimes a close friend. If that's the case, you're asking a tremendous amount of that one person, and he or she likely isn't the best person to support you in *every* category.

In addition, people, especially leaders, rarely list their colleagues in these categories. Many work environments, especially as you ascend the career ladder, are competitive and cutthroat. Unfortunately, that makes it more unlikely that you'll reach out to a colleague in these valuable ways. The workplace can't afford this - not with more than 20% of the global workforce experiencing loneliness.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the Going Deep factors above, effective recovery habits are crucial to preventing and recovering from burnout.

### Workload Sustainability Promotes Recovery

Workload unsustainability impacts everything. It impacts good teaming, your ability to appreciate and recognize others, how cohesive people feel in their work community, innovation, and your health and well-being. When workload is more consistently at sustainable levels, it allows you to more fully recover from the stress associated with work, both at work and after work hours.

Recovery is simply the act of processing the day's stress, and the research around effective recovery activities is more complex and nuanced than what you may read in popular media or hear from self-help experts.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 2.

As you think about processing stress each day, I want you to think about these six pathways as being promising avenues to do so:<sup>12</sup>

**Psychological detachment:** Refraining from or limiting work-related thoughts and gaining mental distance from your work during non-work time.

**Relaxation:** The experience of everyday activities that calm the body and mind.

**Autonomy:** Knowing that you have some degree of self-determination and agency in deciding what to do and how to do it during nonwork time.

**Mastery:** Activities that include the experience of growth and/or learning experiences.

**Meaning:** Activities that connect you to your values or something important.

**Connection:** Pursuing activities associated with friends, family, or close others that you care about. Spending time in the presence of others who matter to you.

As you review this list, note that the ABC needs I talked about in chapter 4 of *Lead Well* are part of this framework, with the “C” being called mastery. You can use different combinations of recovery activities and recovery experiences and these combinations can fluctuate from day-to-day.<sup>13</sup> Here are some ideas for you to consider that use one or more of the above pathways:

**TNT: Have an “opposite world.”** Research shows that one of the most effective things you can do to manage stress and prevent burnout is to create an “opposite world.”<sup>14</sup> For many high achieving professionals, their work role has become too much of their identity, and having an opposite world to go to helps to relieve some of the work-only focus and strain. So, who are you when you’re not your work role? Are you a master gardener? A sports enthusiast? A salsa dancer? A volunteer at an animal shelter? You need to develop activities, interests, and identities outside of work.

**TNT: Create an impact goal.** Impact goals are less about the objective goals you have like working a set number of hours, but more how you see yourself within your community (which could mean in your company, family, or larger community). When people are connected to impact goals, they are more hopeful, curious, grateful and

---

<sup>12</sup> David B. Newman, Louis Tay, & Ed Diener (2014). Leisure and Subjective Well-Being: A Model of Psychological Mechanisms as Mediating Factors. 15 Journal of Happiness Studies 555-578.

<sup>13</sup> Sabine Sonnentag, Bonnie Hayden Cheng, & Stacey L. Parker (2022). Recovery from Work: Advancing the Field Toward the Future. 9 Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior 33-60.

<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 5. This is Nick Petrie’s research I have found on LinkedIn.

inspired. Not surprisingly, they also show greater well-being and satisfaction with their lives.<sup>15</sup>

Questions to think about in creating an impact goal:<sup>16</sup>

1. What do you want to contribute to the world?
2. What change do you want to create?
3. What kind of positive impact do you want to have on the people around you?
4. What mission in life or at work most inspires you?

### *Recovery Nuances*

It's important to note that “chore breaks” – things like doing the laundry or running errands – have not been shown to enhance recovery. Among the various recovery activities, active leisure activities (e.g., physical activities, social activities, creative activities) are more helpful for improving well-being than passive leisure activities (e.g., watching TV).<sup>17</sup> No, I'm not going to tell you to stop binge watching Netflix.

Cyber activities show mixed results. Spending time on cyber activities (using digital devices for recovery purposes) was positively related to bedtime procrastination and that in turn was related to low sleep quality and low vitality. However, spending time on cyber activities was also positively related to psychological detachment from work, which in turn was related to high sleep quality and high vitality.

Psychological detachment from work mattered only on days when distress at work had been high, so it's particularly important to detach on days when work has been highly stressful, though those tend to be the days in which it's hardest to do so.

Recovery experiences are related to better well-being and more favorable emotional states at bedtime and at the start of the next morning; however, events happening at work the next day might “wash out” the effects of the prior night's recovery fairly quickly. Still, recovery experiences from the prior evening can buffer the detrimental impact of next-day negative work events. So even though there might be a “wash out” effect, coming to work having recovered the night before can make the stress sting less potent. The key takeaway is that some activities affect individual well-being in complex and sometimes contradicting ways.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Crocker & Amy Canevello (2012). Consequences of Self-Image and Compassionate Goals, in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Patricia Devine and Ashby Plant eds.) 232-273 New York, NY: Elsevier Publishers. See also, Kelly McGonigal (2015) *The Upside of Stress* pp. 143-153. New York, NY: Avery. Dr. McGonigal uses the term “bigger-than-self” goals in her book.

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* note 16 (McGonigal) at page 149.

<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 13 and for all of the information given in the “nuance” paragraphs that follow.

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 13.

## Recovery At Work

Recovery during non-work hours is critical, but you also need to pay attention to the ways in which you recover while at work. A common piece of advice is to take small micro-breaks at work. Micro-breaks are short pauses (10-15 minutes or so in length) that can help you better manage your energy and stress levels during the day. Newer research shows that micro-breaks can be beneficial, with some nuance. Overall, the research supports the role of micro-breaks for increasing well-being (meaning, short breaks can efficiently alleviate fatigue and increase energy); however, recovering from highly depleting tasks may require more than 10 minutes to help you continue to perform effectively.<sup>19</sup> Taking short breaks from routine tasks and creative tasks can help people perform better on subsequent tasks; however, for cognitively demanding tasks, taking short breaks does not appear to confer the same benefit. That doesn't mean that taking a break won't help, it just means it will likely need to be longer than 10 minutes.<sup>20</sup>

Here are some examples of at-work breaks that help you to better manage your energy, promote thriving (a powerful combination of vitality and learning), and may also enhance one or more of the ABC needs from chapter 4:<sup>21</sup>

- Show respect in the form of active listening, putting your phone away during conversations and being fully present, and making eye contact during conversations.
- Volunteer.
- Say a thank you “plus” (a strategy I talk about in chapter 3 of *Lead Well*).
- Learn something new (which showed the highest correlation with vitality in one study).
- Reflect on the meaning of your work and how you make a difference at work.
- Set new work goals.
- Help your colleagues – do something to make their day a bit brighter.

It's hard enough to lead when everyone's exhausted; it's even harder when that includes you. And too much stress drains your cognitive and emotional resources, which makes it harder for you to operate effectively and makes it more likely that your team will be stressed and burned out as well.<sup>22</sup> Normalizing conversations about stress go a very long way, as the leader at the beginning of the chapter discovered. Ultimately,

---

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Albuлесcu et al. (2022). “Give Me a Break!” A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on the Efficacy of Micro-Breaks for Increasing Well-Being and Performance. 17(8) PLoS ONE 1-27.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Christine L. Porath, Cristina B. Gibson, & Gretchen M. Spreitzer (2022). To Thrive or Not To Thrive: Pathways for Sustaining Thriving at Work. 42 Research in Organizational Behavior 1-17. Charlotte Fritz, Chak Fu Lam, & Gretchen M. Spreitzer (2011). It's the Little Things That Matter: An Examination of Knowledge Workers' Energy Management. Academy of Management Perspectives. 28-39.

<sup>22</sup> P.D. Harms et al. (2017). Leadership and Stress: A Meta-Analytic Review. 28 The Leadership Quarterly 178-194.

by nurturing their own well-being, leaders set a precedent for resilience and inspire teams to thrive in the challenging work landscape of today and tomorrow.

**Paula Davis JD, MAPP**, is the Founder and CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute. For 15 years, she has been a trusted advisor to leaders in organizations of all sizes helping them to make work better. Paula is a globally recognized expert on the effects of workplace stress, burnout prevention, workplace well-being, and building resilience for individuals and teams. To order *Lead Well* or to learn more about her work, please visit [www.stressandresilience.com](http://www.stressandresilience.com).

## References