



# BURNOUT RESET

## A TRAUMA-INFORMED EXERCISE TO RECLAIM ENERGY AND RESTORE PURPOSE

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Based on the E.L.I.S.M.E. Resilience Model





# INTRODUCTION

Burnout doesn't happen overnight. It builds—quietly and gradually—as we override our limits in the name of service, survival, or success. For many, burnout is directly connected to trauma responses: the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn reactions that become chronic patterns in our bodies and minds.

Recent research published in the International Journal of Stress Management demonstrates that burnout often develops when "needs are high but resources are low" (Dewey & Allwood, 2022), creating a persistent imbalance that taxes both mind and body. Emerging evidence suggests that burnout may affect as many as 1 in 5 workers globally, with even higher rates in helping professions and during periods of societal stress.

This exercise is your space to pause, reflect, and realign using trauma-informed principles that honor your mind, body, and spirit.



## You may use this as:

- A self-guided journaling and grounding practice
- A group exercise in workshops or support circles
- A coaching tool with individuals or teams



## Key Trauma-Informed Principles in This Exercise:

- Everything is optional—you have full permission to adapt, pause, or skip any element
- You control the depth of your engagement
- There are multiple pathways to healing
- Your body's responses are protective, not problematic



# UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT: MORE THAN JUST BEING TIRED

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## What Is Burnout?



**Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to:**

- Physical and emotional exhaustion
- Cynicism and detachment
- Feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment
- A sense of depletion that rest alone cannot fix

Unlike ordinary fatigue, burnout doesn't resolve with a good night's sleep or a weekend off. It's a gradual erosion of your capacity to engage, care, and perform that affects every dimension of your life. The World Health Organization officially recognized burnout in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an "occupational phenomenon" requiring professional attention (Batanda, 2024).

## The Science Behind Burnout



**Burnout isn't just psychological—it creates measurable changes in your body:**

- Dysregulation of the stress-response system
- Elevated cortisol that eventually flattens into adrenal fatigue
- Inflammatory responses that affect immune function
- Changes in brain structure and function, particularly in areas related to emotional regulation
- Disruption of sleep architecture, making restorative sleep difficult
- Decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex, affecting decision-making and executive function

Recent research confirms that burnout significantly impacts cognitive functioning and performance. According to Maslach and Leiter (2023), long-term stress associated with burnout can alter brain function in ways that mirror changes seen in certain trauma responses.





## The Relationship Between Trauma and Burnout

Burnout and trauma are intimately connected. People with histories of trauma are more vulnerable to burnout, while chronic burnout can create conditions similar to trauma in the nervous system.

A 2022 study by Dewey and Allwood found that "exhaustion symptoms of burnout are associated with secondary traumatic stress" among healthcare workers exposed to potentially traumatic events. This research confirms the bidirectional relationship between trauma exposure and burnout symptoms.



### Trauma affects how we respond to stress in several ways:

- It lowers our threshold for stress activation
- It creates unconscious triggers that deplete our energy
- It often leads to compensatory behaviors (perfectionism, people-pleasing, overworking) that increase burnout risk
- It disrupts our ability to recognize our own needs and limits

Epstein et al. (2020) describe how moral distress, a sense that one cannot take ethically appropriate action, contributes significantly to burnout and can interact with secondary traumatic stress to create profound occupational strain.





## Prevalence and Risk Factors



### Current research reveals alarming burnout rates across professions:

- According to the American Psychological Association (APA), burnout has reached "all-time highs across professions" in recent years.
- A 2024 study from the Society for Human Resource Management found that 44% of surveyed U.S. employees feel burned out at work, 45% feel "emotionally drained," and 51% feel "used up" at the end of the workday.
- Schaufeli (2018) found that the prevalence of burnout was approximately 10% for the European workforce and 17% for workers in non-European countries.



### While anyone can experience burnout, certain factors increase vulnerability:

- Helpers and caregivers (healthcare workers, teachers, parents)
- Those working in high-demand, low-control environments
- Perfectionists and those with high personal standards
- People from marginalized communities who face daily microaggressions
- Those with histories of trauma or adverse childhood experiences
- People lacking adequate social support or working in toxic environments
- Individuals whose identity is strongly tied to achievement or service

## Beyond Individual Responsibility

While this exercise focuses on personal strategies, it's important to acknowledge that burnout is not simply a personal failure of self-care.



### Systemic factors create conditions where burnout flourishes:

- Workplace cultures that reward overwork
- Economic precarity that forces multiple jobs or chronic overwork
- Unequal distribution of care responsibilities
- Lack of structural support for basic human needs
- Societal values that prioritize productivity over wellbeing

As you work through this exercise, hold compassion for yourself. Burnout is not your fault, even though healing from it requires your participation.



## Step 1

### E — Empowerment

#### Prompt:

"When I feel burned out, I often feel powerless. But even then, I still have choices."

#### Body Awareness Check-In:

Take a moment to notice where you feel tension or constriction in your body right now. Gently acknowledge this sensation without trying to change it.

#### Reflection Questions:

- What is one small decision you can make today that supports your well-being?
- What is one "no" you need to say to create space for yourself?

 **Write it here:**

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**Micro-Action:** Choose one tiny action (taking less than 5 minutes) that you can do today as an act of self-care and self-determination.



## Step 2

### L — Leadership

#### Prompt:

"True leadership includes leading ourselves gently through stress and fatigue."

#### Trauma-Informed Insight:

Our inner critic often speaks in the voice of past criticism or unrealistic expectations. Leadership of self begins with challenging these internalized voices.

#### Reflection Questions:

- What would it look like if you led yourself with the same compassion you offer others?
- If your wisest, most compassionate self could speak to your exhausted self, what would they say?
- What permission do you need to give yourself?

#### Reflect here:

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**Sensory Resource:** Identify a sensory anchor (a sound, texture, smell, or image) that helps you feel centered when overwhelmed.



## Step 3

### I — Insight

#### Prompt:

"Burnout is often a messenger, not just a malfunction."

#### Body Response Mapping:

Your body communicates through sensations. Burnout often appears first in physical signals before emotional ones.

✓ **Physical signs:** \_\_\_ Tired \_\_\_ Tense \_\_\_ Sick often \_\_\_ Digestive issues \_\_\_  
Sleep disruption \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

✓ **Emotional signs:** \_\_\_ Cynical \_\_\_ Anxious \_\_\_ Numb \_\_\_ Irritable \_\_\_  
Detached \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

✓ **Behavioral signs:** \_\_\_ Withdrawing \_\_\_ Overworking \_\_\_ Forgetting \_\_\_  
Procrastinating \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Trauma-Response Patterns:

\_\_\_\_\_ Fight (irritability, control-seeking)

\_\_\_\_\_ Flight (avoidance, busyness)

\_\_\_\_\_ Freeze (numbness, procrastination)

\_\_\_\_\_ Fawn (people-pleasing, boundary struggles)

#### Journal freely:

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**Wisdom Connection:** What might your symptoms be trying to protect you from? What needs might they be pointing toward?

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## Step 4

### S — Safety

#### Prompt:

"Safety is not just physical—it's emotional, psychological, spiritual, and relational."

#### Multi-Dimensional Safety Check:

Physical Safety: Where and when does your body feel most at ease?

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Emotional Safety: With whom can you be authentic without fear of judgment?

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Psychological Safety: What practices help you feel internally stable?

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#### Grounding Practice for Activation or Numbness:

1. Identify five objects you can see in your immediate environment
2. Notice four things you can physically feel right now (textures, temperature)
3. Acknowledge three sounds you can hear
4. Recognize two scents in your environment
5. Note one taste you're aware of

**Safety Resource Development:** What person, place, memory, or image represents safety for you? Visualize this resource in detail.

 **Describe your safety resource:**

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## Step 5

### M — Mindfulness

#### Prompt:

"Present-moment awareness creates space between trigger and response."

#### Choice of Grounding Activities (2-3 Minutes):

##### Option A (Touch-Based):

- Put your hand on your heart or another comfortable place on your body
- Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold for 2, and exhale for 6
- Whisper this affirmation: "I am worthy of rest. I honor what my body knows."

##### Option B (Non-Touch):

- Focus your gaze softly on an object in front of you
- Notice three details about this object you hadn't seen before
- Take three deep breaths while maintaining this gentle focus
- Whisper this affirmation: "I am here now. This moment is enough."

**Mindful Check-In:** After completing either practice, notice any subtle shifts in your body or mood without trying to change anything.





## Step 6

### E — Education

#### Prompt:

"Knowledge empowers change."

#### Trauma-Informed Insight:

Understanding how stress and trauma affect the nervous system can help us respond with self-compassion rather than self-criticism.

#### Reflection Questions:

- What is one boundary, resource, or tool you want to learn more about to protect your energy?
- What patterns in your life might be connected to past experiences?
- What sources of information feel trustworthy and supportive to you?

#### Your learning goal or curiosity:

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**Resource Connection:** Identify one book, podcast, person, or community that could support your learning.



## Integration & Practice

### Prompt:

"Small, consistent steps create lasting change."

### Implementation Planning:

1. From this exercise, what one insight feels most important to remember?
2. What tiny, doable step could you take in the next 24 hours based on this insight?
3. What might get in your way, and how might you respond if it does?

### Your micro-plan:

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**Practice Tracker:** Create a simple way to notice and celebrate small moments of self-care and boundary-setting over the next week.





## OPTIONAL GROUP REFLECTION

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Share one word that represents what you are reclaiming today.

(Examples: peace, clarity, permission, joy, rest, grace, boundaries, dignity)

In pairs or as a group, discuss: "What supported you most in this exercise, and what was challenging?"

## CLOSING AFFIRMATIONS

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Choose the affirmation that resonates most with you, or create your own:

"I am not a machine—I am a living soul. Rest is my right, not my reward."

"My worth exists separate from my productivity."

"I honor my limits as a form of self-respect."

"Healing happens in gentle waves, not straight lines."

"I can be both a work in progress and worthy of love and rest."



# References

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