

- Burnout (Psychology) / Fatigue

Beating burnout

Switch off from 'the rant', cut the stress-calming vices, and take time to find your inner peace and just read a book, writes Karen Nimmo.

Taranaki Daily News · 26 Oct 2022 · 14

Feeling exhausted and lethargic? Struggling with overwhelm? Feeling negative and cynical? Failing to achieve to your capacity? Finding nothing fun any more? If, like so many Kiwis, the answer to these questions is yes, you may be struggling with burnout. While burnout officially refers to chronic work stress, work doesn't have territorial rights over it. It can show up in relationships, parenting, social lives and life generally.



The traditional signs of burnout are deep mental and physical fatigue; feeling disengaged, negative and cynical; and a feeling of underperforming at work, as partners, parents and friends.

Burnout's symptoms are similar to mild to moderate depression. There will be sleep problems, low motivation/energy, persistent low mood, lethargy, irritability, exaggerated emotional responses, disinterest in favourite activities and people, and a general heaviness. The difference is that burnout tends to be a more temporary condition than depression. A decent break or rest, a change of gear, a return to healthy habits, or the introduction of a new interest can help to lift symptoms. But you do have to acknowledge your struggle and commit to doing things differently.

Here are some offbeat strategies to help.

Park the car

It is ideal to counter burnout with a long holiday. But not everyone can afford a month off work and a luxury holiday. Just know that if you are feeling this way, it is super important to take the foot off the gas for a bit.

So park up and cut back hard on all the nonessential activities in your life, including hard physical activity. Rest is essential and all-powerful in your recovery.

Stop self-numbing

Many of these troublemakers are just waiting to reel us in when we are feeling stressed and vulnerable. Think alcohol. Drugs. Cigarettes. Porn. Coffee. Irresponsible spending. Food. Many people are surprised to see food on the list, but it is common to use food to keep the lid on negative or distressing feelings.

Sadly, it just ends up making you feel worse, if not harming your health. If you are self-numbing in any way, own it because it is feeding your burnout, not getting rid of it.

Cut off 'the rant'

'The rant' is all the noise in the world. It is the constant feed of news and social media. It is people talking, yelling, table-thumping, writing, posting, tweeting their own opinions, and in doing so, trying to bully others into believing they are right or cool, a leader, or someone who should be listened to. It is boring, often mean

– and potentially damaging for your mental health – to spend too much time up close to it. So unplug for a bit, in whatever way that works for you. Let everyone rant at each other while you reclaim your inner peace.

Hang out with your body

This one is a little weird. It is a bit hard to hang out anywhere without your body. But many people are not friends with their bodies. They treat them poorly, like they are some kind of enemy.

But your body is not going to attack you. It wants to work for you. And if you spend time watching and listening to its physiological messages, it will tell you its problems, where you need to put your energy and what you need to do.

Read a whole book

Yes, that's right. Not a literary classic or a Pulitzer Prize winner or something you need to read for book club, just a whole book. That is because when you are burnt out, your concentration will go west. You will barely be able to get through a social media post. So you will need to retrain your focus.

I encourage my clients to buy or borrow a book – a thriller or or a romance – anything that is fun or easy. (A physical book is better than audio when your head needs decluttering.) And then commit to reading it from cover to cover.

Make bad art

This is my favourite. Creativity of any kind is an elixir for mental health struggles.

I have seen clients pull themselves out of deep holes by tapping their creative vein. One man turned out to be a latent genius at portrait painting. But being a genius is not the point.

It is all about engaging in something that stops you from overthinking. Besides, it is good (and humbling) to be very bad at something.

Cook a meal slowly

We all have to eat so why not make it work for our mental health too? Slowly, methodically, preparing and cooking a meal (or baking) is the simplest kind of mindfulness exercise. You can't be anywhere else – mentally or physically – when you are chopping, peeling, measuring and stirring.

You will also get a sense of achievement (producing food), contribution (if you are cooking for someone else) and self-care (if it is healthy).

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