How do we deal with mental burnout?

What research tells us about being successful without fear

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There is a moment in every leader's week that nobody puts on a résumé: The meeting where you said something slightly dismissive, or the decision you made too quickly because sitting with uncertainty felt unbearable.



We rarely talk about these moments because we have been taught that leadership is about having answers. The research says otherwise, and the findings are worth listening to.

Brené Brown, a University of Houston professor who has spent decades studying courage and vulnerability, recently described a finding that upends how most of us think about brave leadership. After taking 150,000 leaders across 45 countries through her Dare to Lead program, she expected to find that fear was the enemy of courage. It wasn't. A Fortune 30 CEO told her plainly that he goes to bed afraid and wakes up afraid—and he was one of the bravest leaders she had met. The thing that gets in the way of daring leadership, she concluded, is not fear; it's armor.

Armor is whatever we reach for to protect ourselves when we are scared. For some of us, it is perfectionism. For others, it is being the smartest person in the room, or making fast decisions so we never have to sit in uncertainty. Brené calls this last one out on her own. Her coach once told her she was using decisiveness as armor, making quick calls not because she was being discerning, but because she was uncomfortable not knowing.

As a physician, I recognized this immediately. We see it in patients who would rather have any diagnosis than an open question. The body does the same thing the leader does. It braces.

That bracing has a cost we can measure. Chronic self-protection keeps the nervous system in a low simmer of stress, and sustained stress is not a metaphor; it is cortisol, raised blood pressure, poorer sleep, a thinking brain that works less well.

Loneliness, which so many leaders carry quietly, is heavier still. The late University of Chicago researcher John Cacioppo described loneliness as a biological signal, like hunger, telling a social species to reconnect. His point was that for humans, hyper-independence is not a strength. We are built to depend on one another. The data backs him up. Brigham Young University's Julianne Holt-lunstad found that weak social connection raises mortality risk on a scale comparable to well-known lifestyle hazards. The armor we wear to look strong is, over the years, quietly expensive to the heart.

So what does daring leadership actually look like? Brené is precise about it. Daring leaders value being learners, not knowers. They are not there to be right; they are there to get it right— a small difference in wording that changes everything in a room.

Humility, in her definition, is not false modesty. It is being clear-eyed about both your skills and your skill gaps. The skills she now identifies as the future of leadership are not the ones we put on slides: self-awareness, emotional awareness (including the ability to manage your own nervous system), mindfulness, metacognition (knowing how you think), and systems thinking. Notice that none of them are about charisma. All of them are learnable.

My favorite of her tools is the most practical. She calls it "above the line, below the line," an idea that traces back to Robert Kiyosaki and the organizational thinker Carolyn Taylor to the Conscious Leadership Group. The line is fear. Above it, you are in the driver's seat, curious and aligned with your values. Below it, fear is driving, and we slide into one of three familiar roles psychologists call the drama triangle: the hero ("I'll just do it myself"), the victim ("nobody understands how hard this is"), or the villain ("I don't care what you think, just get it done"). The work is not to never go below the line. It is to notice when you have, name it out loud, and climb back up.

Here is where it gets hard for us. Brené's teams build systems "braver than people," anyone can pause a meeting by simply saying, "I'm below the line," and the team takes 15 minutes to reset. In a Filipino workplace, that sentence catches in the throat. "Hiya" (shame), "pakikisama" (getting along with others), and our deep

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respect for hierarchy make it genuinely harder to admit, in front of your boss, that you are not okay. And yet "kapwa" and "malasakit"—our sense of shared self, our instinct to care —are exactly the soil this kind of leadership needs. Daring leadership is not an imported idea. It is a return to how we already know how to be with each other.

The numbers say we need it. In one 2024 Axa Mind Health report study, 87 percent of Filipino workers reported a work-related mental health consequence, well above the global average; burnout here ranks among the highest in Southeast Asia. The Mental Health Act has required workplace mental health programs since 2018. The infrastructure exists. What is often missing is a leader willing to go first.

That is the whole science, really. Take off the armor before you ask anyone else to.