



## What to do (and not to do) for all those burned out people around you



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You've read the headlines: Burnout is rampant. For some of us, the best mood we've had lately is *meh* (also known as [languishing](#)). Some of us are suffering from depression or anxiety. It's understandable to find ourselves struggling, and it's no wonder that experts are [declaring](#) we're in the midst of a [mental health crisis](#) of epic proportions. We've been living through a lot, including a long global pandemic, a staggering amount of human loss to COVID, and the harrowing ongoing toll of systemic racism.

So what are we to do in the workplace to best help each other, as each person tries to get through these crises in their own ways? I've been asking myself this question a lot lately. For answers, I've turned to the experts who study our human condition. I've listened to podcasts, read books, watched interviews, and asked my mental health professional friends for advice on supporting those with everything from burnout to depression. I'm sharing here what I've learned in the hopes it's helpful to you at work and beyond. While tips like reducing Zoom hours or meditating are useful, the resources highlighted in this article enabled me to dig deeper into the kind of emotional intelligence necessary to navigate this moment.

### Four Things Not to Do

1. **Toxic Positivity:** When someone is down, we may feel tempted to tell them to be positive. [Dr. Susan David](#), who studies emotional agility, calls this toxic positivity. She relates an example: telling everyone to write their hard feelings on a piece of paper and then to turn it over and write the reasons they are grateful in an attempt to erase what's on the other side of the paper. This kind of exercise implies there are good emotions (happy ones) and bad emotions (unhappy ones), and that only positive feelings are permissible. It leaves no space for people's burnout,

pain or humanity, and it implies the comfort of the person forcing positivity is more important than the experience of the person who is struggling. Toxic positivity also can take the form of telling people to move on from loss or to stop being so angry in the face of injustice. This denial shuts down the kinds of conversations that allow us to move forward. "The only way through [suffering] is through it," says Dr. David, and toxic positivity "bypasses the way we get through it."

2. **Avoidance:** We may be tempted to treat people's emotional lives as personal and not relevant to work. Or if we're not directly impacted by something, we might feel it's not our place to acknowledge it. This avoidance is as damaging as trying to force positivity. It ignores people's reality and makes them feel invisible. In the words of Dr. Susan David, "Tough emotions are part of our contract with life." We can't pretend they aren't there. And anyway, tough emotions are part of work. We can't have collaboration without conflict or innovation without the feelings that come from failure. Cultures that ignore these realities lack the [psychological safety](#) necessary for great work.
3. **Surface acting:** If we feel we can't bring our whole selves to work, we need to put on a show. We must cover up true emotions, and that requires acting one way on the surface while feeling another way inside. This so-called surface acting is an exhausting form of faking it. It requires massive amounts of emotional labor (as documented by [psychological research](#)), with significant collateral damage to employee health, well-being and performance. Relentless levels of surface acting are correlated with harmful interactions with co-workers and customers. As Dr. Sarah Rose Cavanagh [has noted](#), we need to find ways to be professional even when we're not feeling our best, but surface acting is not a sustainable option. (Healthier strategies are described below.)
4. **Victimhood:** Bad things are not us. They are a bad system acting upon us. We are not a burnout; but we may very well be burned out. We have a condition; but we are not that condition. When the psychologist [Dr. Edith Eger](#) was a teenager forced onto a cattle car to Auschwitz in 1944, her mother whispered in her ear, "Listen, we don't know where we're going. We don't know what's going to happen. But no one can take away from what you put in your own mind." Many years later, she would embrace that wisdom as she sought to distinguish between victimization and victimhood and arrive at the belief that, "what was done to me is not who I am." As Dr. Eger writes, "At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimization. It comes from outside. It's the neighborhood bully, the boss who rages, the spouse who hits, the lover who cheats, the discriminatory law, the accident that lands you in the hospital. In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you." We can feel lousy but that doesn't make us a lousy person. Our feelings are not our identity. Neither are our challenges. You are not a success or a failure. But you are most certainly a person who will experience both.

## Ten Things to Do

1. **Reduce the stigma.** By "[making it OK to not be OK](#)," we can normalize conditions like burnout and mental health challenges, and that starts with setting aside toxic positivity and leaning into the discomfort of acknowledging the tough feelings that come with life and work, especially today. This establishes a level of trust that this the foundation of [psychological safety](#) by reducing the fear we will be punished for feeling less than chipper or making mistakes. As Dr.

Laura Delizonna has [noted](#), "Psychological safety is both fragile and vital to success in uncertain, interdependent environments" -- and those environments are exactly where we find ourselves now. Now is the time for curiosity, not judgment, about how we are faring.

2. **Name how you're feeling and encourage others to do the same.** There is incredible power in simply sharing your emotional state and inviting others to do the same. Sometimes we struggle to do that well. In fact, most people only identify three emotions -- bad, sad and glad. [Dr. Marc Brackett](#), the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and author of *Permission to Feel*, talks about the value of building our emotional intelligence and more precisely naming our feelings as the first step to understanding their origin in our own lifetime of experiences, learning how they matter, and regulating them. While it may seem like a small thing in the face of the big challenges we face, it never ceases to amaze me how powerful this act of naming a feeling can be. And as a colleague recently shared with me -- that makes it a big thing, not a small thing, when people are struggling.
3. **Recognize everyone grieves as they uniquely need to grieve and copes as they uniquely need to cope.** There's no one answer for everyone. Burnout for example, like any mental health issue, can take many forms, each of which requires a different kind of mitigation approach. According to the organizational experts [Yu Tse Heng](#) and [Kira Schabram](#), burnout is "not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather, it can present as any combination of three distinct symptoms: exhaustion (a depletion of mental or physical resources), cynical detachment (a depletion of social connectedness), and a reduced sense of efficacy (a depletion of value for oneself). To recover from burnout, you must identify which of these resources has been depleted and take action to replenish those resources." Self-care helps with exhaustion. Connecting with others can mitigate the alienation of cynicism. A reduced sense of value can be addressed by helping others, finishing a product, or otherwise taking actions of agency. There is no one thing that helps everyone -- which is why shining a light on the complexity of our human conditions is important to navigating what will help for whom.
4. **View emotions as signposts.** Dr. Susan David [speaks of](#) the power of not only naming our emotions but also reflecting on what they're telling us. We can view them as useful signposts that suggest what is the best next action for ourselves or our teams. For example, if we're angry and upset, maybe it's because our values are being challenged, and our next best action is to step toward those values in our response. Or if we're feeling overwhelmed, maybe that's a sign we're doing high stakes work that stretches us. Dr. Brackett has another useful tool for this process - RULER: Recognize the emotion, Understand the consequences and causes of our feelings, Label the feeling accurately, Express it and Regulate it (which is about acceptance). When we see a feeling as a useful clue to what we need, we're able to tap into emotions as tools.
5. **Tap into your inner observer.** This tip has been among the most helpful to me: mentally stepping back and examining how I feel as if my emotions are outside me rather than swirling around inside. This allows me to be curious rather than judgmental about them. I imagine the emotion lying in a basket at my feet, ready for consideration. This mindfulness practice also works well in stressful situations when someone says something critical or annoying. I imagine the comment landing in the basket, where I can look at it with some distance. This mental exercise, which I learned from [Wendy and Tiphani Palmer's work](#) in embodied leadership, can help us respond rather than react in emotionally charged moments. In examining things outside ourselves, we choose what to take within ourselves. This is not about disconnecting from ourselves but rather tapping into a deeper wisdom. By observing and not internalizing, we

become more connected to ourselves, what we need, what matters to us, and what is the right next thing to do. It gets us out of mental spaces that can entrap or imprison us, and it reminds me of the the old riddle: *Imagine you are in a room and find it has no doors, windows or other avenues of exit. How do you get out?* Answer: *You stop imagining.* Stepping back from inside our heads gives us the freedom to show up as we most want to be.

6. **Be compassionate to yourself so you can be compassionate to others.** If you struggle with self compassion, ask yourself what a kind, wise and brave friend would recommend and try to channel that inner voice rather than worrying that self compassion is self indulgent. Celebrate the small wins as you get through the day. And give yourself a break: Engage in the self care that works for you and draw boundaries to gain uninterrupted time for reflection. Then normalize self-care and compassion for others, by sharing the ways you are taking those steps for yourself. "Compassion — whether towards yourself or your colleagues — is a muscle that can be trained, and developing and practicing compassion is the key to combatting burnout," [according to](#) Yu Tse Heng and Kira Schabram.
7. **Lean into your values and purpose.** In the words of the trailblazing psychologist [William James](#), "My experience is what I agree to attend to." What we notice about what matters deeply to us shapes our mindset. Directing our attention to our values and sense of purpose can help us find a sense of energy and meaning. It is also a way to engage in "deep acting," which is different from the exhausting insincerity of surface acting described above. Deep acting involves tapping into a deeper truth about who we are in order to summon the self we need to be. As Emily and Amelia Nagoski describe in their book [Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle](#), one of the most effective ways to get through stressful days is to know what we want and to align our lives with something bigger than ourselves -- our sense of meaning. I find this sense of meaning and the values tied to it help me navigate tough moments as a leader. When I don't have all the answers, I can ask, who do I want to be in this moment?
8. **Recognize your agency.** Viktor Frankl drew a contrast between a system that acts upon you and your capacity to choose your response. Dr. Eger notes the lesson she took from his book, [Man's Search for Meaning](#), is that "Each moment is a choice. No matter how frustrating or boring or constraining or painful or oppressive our experience, we can always choose how we respond." By her own admission, this can be a hard distinction to make, especially in the face of rejection, injustice, criticism or harm. It's easy to forget we have some agency - not over what might happen to us, but rather over the degree to which we let it mentally or emotionally imprison ourselves.
9. **Make it easy and affordable to access help.** Employee Assistance Plans, many including new digital tools, can provide mental and behavioral health support from teletherapy to meditation apps. It's a great time to offer a range of options that meet people where they are. Fortunately, these resources appear to be on the rise: according to [Korn Ferry](#), a 2021 Business Group on Health survey of large companies found that 69 percent of companies are currently offering mental health apps, which will grow to 88 percent by the end of the year. The same survey found "nearly two-thirds of the companies will provide manager training to recognize deteriorating mental health and substance-use warning signs, and half will launch anti-stigma campaigns." All are steps in the right direction.

**10. Above all, know that empathy isn't soft leadership. It's the hard work of great leadership.**

Being empathetic -- recognizing what people are feeling so we can know we're not alone -- is human, and in its humanity, it's powerful. We're here to walk through life together, including in the workplace. So we must aspire to take the hard path of authenticity and engagement in the face of suffering and uncertainty, for our teams, our organizations, and our own sanity. Showing up as an empathetic leader who names what's really going on also puts positive pressure on a culture so other leaders will do the same.

Human beings have hearts, and for many of us, those hearts are heavy. If we want people to be able to do whole-hearted work, we must care for the ways in which we are burdened. As the experts and science show, we can't move on from that truth, but we can move through it. And in so doing, we can move forward, together.

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