

# THE LINK

## When Burning Out Becomes a Trend

I'm Burnt Out, You're Burnt Out, We're All Burnt Out

SPECIAL ISSUE Sarah Boumedda — Published April 2, 2019



Graphic Joey Bruce

### Hey. How have you been doing, lately?

Really, though. I don't care about how your classes are going, or if you got the last job you applied to. I don't care about how many hours you've worked in the past week, or how your over-achieving tendencies aren't actually ruining your life, because you're just living that #hustle kind of lifestyle.

I mean, how are you, really? How is your body doing? What about your mind?

Are you tired?

Yeah, me too. My classes are going well, I have a stable and rewarding job, and I'm actually studying and working in something I absolutely love. But if I'm honest with myself, maybe I've been working too much. Studying too hard. Not living enough.

It's gotten to the point where I don't really know where my grindin' hours end, and when my self-care time begins.

Hell, I don't even know if I practice any kind of self-care at all. I haven't seen some of my friends in weeks—others in months. And I kind of hate everything, right now.

Relatable, huh?

If you've been feeling chronically stressed, overworked, so much so that you've started losing interest in most things and you feel like you're not even as good at working or studying (or anything, really) as you used to be, the answer is simple. It's called burnout—you're burnt out.

So am I.

If you've noticed the same thing in your circle of friends and coworkers, chances are they're probably burnt out, too. In fact, it's becoming such a sickening trend that there's a term that's been coined specifically to refer to this phenomenon: burnout culture.

Dr. Emily Blake is a psychologist, and the founder and clinical director of Blake Psychology in Montreal. She described symptoms of burnout as physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic stress at work (it can be professional, academic, social, or resulting from something else).

That also leads to negative feelings towards said work—and ironically, no matter how stressed we are about doing well, burnout also results in decreasing performance. Talk about a vicious cycle.

How exactly does that translate in everyday life?

“If you work long hours and don’t have time for adequate self-care, your overall health can deteriorate,” said Blake. “For example, if you are so focused on work that you don’t have time or energy to eat well, or get enough sleep, exercise, fun and relaxation—this can take a toll on you.”

“When you start feeling run down, and your work tasks keep piling up, you can start to feel overwhelmed, which makes it even harder to get things done,” she continued.

That’s where the cycle begins:

Having a harder time to get work done increases the pressure we put on ourselves. We do more work, and have less time to eat, to sleep, and to live.

But one’s lifestyle is far from the only factor leading to burnout. In fact, the causes of burnout are increasingly systemic. “Our society rewards success, and the achievement of success takes effort and time,” Blake explained.

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— *Emily Blake*

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A 2017 study conducted in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom by the Psychological Bulletin revealed that tendencies towards perfectionism have increased since 1989 and 2016. The researchers highlight, “That recent generations of young people perceive that others are more demanding of them, are more demanding of others, and are more demanding of themselves.”

The study also points out that, “The emergence of neoliberalism in the industrialized world has reshaped the cultural, political, and economic landscape,” which has consequently changed us as people. We are more competitive, more individualistic, more perfectionistic, and tend to strive towards “irrational ideals of the perfectible self.”

These societal changes in behaviour don’t come without a price. The study also highlights the possibility of a “link between rising perfectionism and rising psychopathology.” Among possible resulting disorders and symptoms, the researchers list depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and one sad, increasing feeling: loneliness.

At first glance, these conclusions might seem quite obvious, despite their alarming tone. Yet why aren't any of us doing anything?

Because the system we're evolving and working in isn't letting us.

We live in a world that's increasingly connected and expensive, which obviously has its drawbacks. While burnout might arise from the pressure we put on ourselves, Blake also listed the rising cost of living as well as, "The increased number of daily tasks outside of work—such as housework, childcare, and social media" as other factors leading to burnout.

If burnout is such a present, almost inevitable part of our modern lives, is there anything we can do to prevent it?

The first step is to recognize it. If you feel overwhelmed, if you feel guilty about taking breaks from any type of work, if you have even an inkling that you might be burnt out, take some time to acknowledge those feelings.

"Sometimes people feel guilty acknowledging limits and needs," she explained.

"Unpleasant thoughts can show up, such as 'taking a break is a sign of weakness,' or 'I shouldn't be tired, others do more than I do.' If you can make space for these thoughts and feelings to show up, and still take a break when you need to, this can help you."

"Speaking to a professional [...] can be helpful to put a plan in place to either prevent burnout or help you cope," Blake said. "Ideally, there is a way for you to meet your external demands, while still having time for relationships and self-care activities such as healthy eating, exercise, sleep, fun, and relaxation."

And of course, we have a lot of work to do as a society, especially regarding the prevalence of burnout in our communities. "We can place greater importance on valuing mental health and well-being," said Blake. "We can demonstrate openness towards having conversations about burnout and problem-solving, [and find] concrete ways to reduce workloads and promote health."

Changing the system obviously cannot happen overnight—but recognizing the problem is already good enough of a first step, and

that also applies for ourselves and our loved ones. Check up on your friends. Let them know it's okay to take a break, to breathe. Sometimes, just the reassurance is enough.

Don't know where to start? Simple. Ask them one simple question.

“Hey, how have you been doing, lately?”

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