

Burnout - from Unlocking Us podcast

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Three Components

- Emotional exhaustion: fatigue that comes from caring too much for too long
 - Decreased sense of accomplishment: feeling that nothing you do makes any difference
 - Depersonalization: depletion of empathy, caring, and compassion
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Emotional Exhaustion

- Strongest link to health, relationship, and work issues
 - What is emotion?
 - Cycles that happen in your nervous system
 - *Involuntary* neurological response with a **beginning, middle, and end**
 - Instead of thinking of humans as **thinking** beings who, on occasion, **feel**, think of humans as **feeling** beings who, on occasion, **think**
 - Emotions are tunnels; if you go all the way through them, you get to the light at the end
 - **Exhaustion** happens when we get stuck in an emotion. We may get stuck because we're constantly being exposed to situations that **activate** emotion. Most difficult feelings:
 - Rage, grief, despair, hopelessness, shame
 - May be too treacherous to get through alone, we may get lost and need someone else—a loving presence—to help us find our way through
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A Beginning, a Middle, and an End

- It's not enough to deal with the issue that activates the emotion in the body
- We have to deal with the emotion, too; sometimes we're shut down because we're told we "shouldn't feel this way anymore"

- Shutting down and hiding emotions sometimes feels safer, but we *have* to finish the cycle, and we *have* to get to the end of the tunnel

Human Giver Syndrome

- Two kinds of humans
 - Human Beings: their job is to live, to express, to *be* their humanity, and to acquire whatever resources it takes to accomplish that moral obligation
 - Human Givers: their moral obligation is to give their humanity, their time, their lives, their bodies, their feelings, to the human beings
- When Givers "fail" to be, *at all times*, pretty, happy, calm, generous, and attentive to the needs of others, we deserve to be punished; if no one is around to punish us, we will punish ourselves

Stuck in the Tunnel

- Cardiovascular system
 - Blood vessels are designed to tolerate a steady, pulsing stream of blood-flow
 - When adrenaline level increases, blood pressure goes up and it's like a fire hose spraying in your blood vessels
 - The system is competent at dealing with this if it lasts as long as its supposed to in the environment where we evolved, which means it will last approximately 10 minutes then be over
 - When we stay in a constant state of chronically-elevated stress levels for hours, days, weeks, months, even years at a time, this causes wear-and-tear on our blood vessels and can lead to heart disease
- Digestive system
 - When stress shows up in the digestive system, the **upper** digestive system slows down and the **lower** digestive system speeds up (leads to IBS)

The Stress Response Cycle

- Stressors: things that activate the stress response

- Most are external (i.e. work, kids, money, social issues)
- Some are internal (i.e. body self-criticism, trauma history)
- Stress: what happens in your body—chemicals activated in response to stressors
 - Example: If a dangerous animal is nearby (stressor), this causes a stress response (run away). We arrive at shelter, then the animal gives up and goes away. We feel calmer, happier, and grateful to be alive. It's easy to think that the animal going away is what made that happen, but it's **not**. It's the running, and the connection. Your body only knows what those behaviors are, and those behaviors let your body know you have escaped from the stressful situation and your body is now a safe place for you to be.
 - It is the **behaviors**, not the change in your environment, that trigger the physiological change
- Removing the stressors **does not** mean the stress cycle is complete; you have to deal with the stress separately
- You have to do something that signals to your body that you are safe, or else you'll stay in that state with neurochemicals and hormones degrading, but never shifting, into relaxation
 - Your cardiovascular system, digestive system, immune system, musculoskeletal system, and reproductive system never get the signal that they're safe
 - You need to speak body language and fulfill the thing that it's intended to fulfill because we cannot separate the body from emotion
- Illness and stress
 - Your central nervous system only has a limited amount of bandwidth. If you're highly stressed, there's a lot of "noise" in the highway of your brain and spine
 - Your immune system communicates with you through your nervous system via symptoms (i.e. headache, exhaustion) and your brain can't hear over the noise
 - Example: A major paper is due (stressor) and you experience stress symptoms, but your brain can't hear past the noise of the stress in the highway of the brain and spine. Once you turn in your paper (stressor gone), you start to notice that you feel physically ill. You were sick all along, but now your immune system's voice is finally heard over the noise of all the stress.

Why We Get Stuck

- Chronic stressors and chronic stress
 - Chronic stress: If your stress level outpaces the resources you have available to drain off the stress, it will keep accumulating
 - Social appropriateness: expectations are to never show anger, express any intense emotions at all, and to smile and be nice in the face of stressors
 - Safety: avoid responding to *stressor* in the moment (i.e. person cat-calling you while walking on the street at night), but deal with *stress* on its own, separately, when in a safe place
- Fight: in less than a second, your brain assesses potential threat as something that you can survive best by fighting
 - Fight emotions: irritation, annoyance, frustration, anger, rage, the "approach" motivation
- Flight: in less than a second, your brain assesses potential threat as something that you're most likely to survive by running away
 - Flight emotions: worry, anxiety, fear, terror, the "avoid" motivation
- Freeze: when brain assesses a threat and sees you're too weak to fight and too slow to run, it tells you to "play dead" and slams on the brakes
 - When the threat goes away, the brakes gently come off and you complete your cycle (i.e. prey shivering then running away after predator goes away; anesthesia is medically-induced freeze)
- Fight, flight, and freeze are **ALL** morally neutral; one is not a better or stronger approach than the others, but we have a hierarchical sense that "only the weak people freeze" (when you criticize yourself for not thinking of a comeback until later on)

The Answer

- Turn toward the difficult feelings with kindness and compassion and let yourself finish the feelings and complete the cycle
- Most efficient ways to complete our cycles:

- Physical activity (most effective): any movement of your body (walking, running, climbing, biking, dancing, standing, stretching, tensing/releasing muscles, etc.)
- Breathing: **slow** breaths in, and **slow** breaths out, at least a minute and a half or two minutes of turning your attention to your breathing*

*even if you don't pay attention to your thoughts or practice mindfulness, breathing alone will **still be effective**; this is evidence-based

- Positive social interaction: natural inclination to connect with other people tells your body that you're somewhere safe (can even be a simple, positive interaction with your barista)
- Laughter: has to be **genuine**, uncontrollable, slightly-embarrassing laughter **OR** reminiscing about a time you laughed like this helps too; laughter evolved as a way for us to maintain social bonds and work through emotions
- Affection (the one most people are likely to say that they incorporate into their life: a 20-second, warm hug in a safe and trusting context can do as much to help your body feel like it has escaped a threat as jogging a couple of miles; research suggests a hug where you lean in but maintain your own center of gravity can change your hormones, lower your blood pressure and heart rate, and improve mood
- Crying: difference between dealing with the stress and dealing with the situation that causes the stress; physical expression of stress that, when allowed to complete, will allow the emotion to be released and not trapped in your body; how to cry - set stressor aside for a moment and turn toward the physical experience of crying (how many tears, how hot does my face feel, where's the tension in my body, how much snot is pouring out of my nose) and if you don't continue feeding it thoughts about why you feel stress, it usually only lasts a few minutes
- Creative expression: everything you make that's made out of your energy is partially made out of **you** and **your experiences** (example: widow who's a dancer choreographs an entire dance for her husband's death and reports this is the only thing that kept her alive); directly connected to imagination—you can think or imagine your way through a story

How Do You Know You've Completed the Cycle?

- Your body will tell you
- You just have to learn how to listen
- The **cure** for burnout *isn't* self-care, it has to be all of us caring for each other
- Don't worry if you're not sure you can recognize when you've completed the cycle, especially if you've spent a lot of years—like your whole life maybe—holding on to worry or anger. You've probably got a whole lot of accumulated stress response cycles spinning their engines waiting for their turns, so it's going to take awhile before you get through the backlog.
- All you need to do is **recognize when you feel *incrementally* better than you felt before you started; you can notice that something in your body has changed and shifted in the direction of peace.**
- Stress is not the problem. The problem is that strategies that deal with stressors have almost no relationship to the strategies that deal with the physiological reactions our bodies have to those stressors.
- To be well is not to live in a state of perpetual safety and calm, but to move fluidly from a state of adversity, risk, adventure, or excitement back to safety and calm and out again.
- Stress is NOT bad for you. Being stuck is bad for you.
- Wellness is not a state of being. It is a state of action and the freedom to oscillate. There is no gold at the end of the rainbow, *the rainbow* is the gold.

