

#56: Burnout is a State of Mind



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With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

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Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Hi, everyone, how is it going? What are you up to as you're listening to this? We're going to actually just jump right into the episode because we have a lot to cover. And today's episode, for some of you is going to be really interesting and insightful and be an aha moment. And for others of you, you might be upset. You might resist it and that's okay because we're talking about burnout. And I'm going to be sharing why burnout is actually a state of mind, a mindset and not a circumstance, not caused by other things outside of you.

And what I have noticed is we have this one way of looking at the concept of burnout, that it is the result of things outside of us. It's a result of our boss, or our job, or policies. And we are told the solution to burnout is to either get rid of those circumstances, those things outside of us or do certain activities to feel better. Both are focused on taking action to get out of burnout or eliminate burnout.

Last week I actually got a random email from a moving company, why they are contacting me was a surprise. And they're asking me to include their article on recognizing burnout at home and what to do about it. And why they have that article if they're a moving company, I don't really know. I said, "No, I don't promote those things", of course. And the whole article was just a list of activities to do, sleep more, eat healthy, do art, go outside. And I'm not saying those activities or actions are bad. I'm also not saying they won't be useful.

But if we could just action our way out of burnout, if we could just checklist our way out of burnout, we wouldn't have burnout as an issue. And also, there is a reason why people struggle taking those actions both at the

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stage where they're already burnout but even before they get there to prevent burnout. And the third thing is you can do all those activities and still be burned out.

How many times have you tried to meditate and still felt stressed, and couldn't shut your mind off? Or got a massage and just thought about work the whole time you were on that massage table? Or took a vacation and came back still overwhelmed? Yeah, all of us have had that. It's because activities are not the issue. They do not resolve the issue of burnout because burnout is a state of mind. The results in your life are a result of your thinking. If the result in your life is that you are burned out, it is a result of the way in which you are thinking, of your mindset.

You think it's because of a circumstance, because your boss is a jerk, you aren't paid enough, your to-do list is too long, whatever it may be. But your burnout isn't a result of those things. It is an outcome of your thinking. And how do we know? There are people all over in similar circumstances as you who aren't burned out. There are people in your very organization in extremely similar circumstances who aren't burned out. And that's only because you have different thoughts. Burnout has many definitions, and I haven't found one that I think is the best.

And in the Burnout Recovery podcast episode I share a few. But I think of burnout as a result of being in a consistent or constant state of stress. And by stress, emotionally what that could be is experiencing exhaustion, and frustration, and resentment, and overwhelm. And it's not just having one experience of those feelings or one thought that creates those feelings, but a series, a constant state over and over again. Those of you familiar with chronic stress, that is what burnout can be or turn into.

Stress, acute stress in and of itself isn't necessarily bad. There's actually a lot of studies that show it is useful. But chronic stress, always being in the stress cycle causes a lot of problems. That's burnout, that experience of

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being in that constant, consistent state or being stuck in, and experiencing stress over and over. Now, stress, if you've taken the Burnout Recovery course and then you know this from the first module. If you haven't taken it, I encourage you to.

But in short, stress actually is a physiological response in your body. Often when we're describing stress, we're actually describing an emotional experience, not the physiological experience. So often when we're talking about, "I'm so stressed", we really mean, I'm exhausted, I'm frustrated, I'm resentful, I'm overwhelmed. And those emotions are not an outcome of your circumstance but an outcome of your thinking. Now, stay with me, I know some of you right now are like, "Well, what about this? Well, what about that?" We'll get to that.

Let's walk through a specific example. One of the biggest things I hear people attribute their burnout to is time. They have too much to do and not enough time. And they end up overworked, exhausted, and overwhelmed. This is something I have also experienced so I hear you. When I started my job several years ago at UC Berkeley, I was in a role that was intended for three different people to be doing. So, when I first got hired on the role was designed as a combination of two separate positions.

And other schools and other universities that had these same roles, the roles were two different people and two different departments. And then in the first several months, there is a center in our school that was losing funding and staff. And because of that an additional role was added to my list of responsibilities. So, I had good reason or 'evidence' to state I have too much work. I was doing the job of what could be and should be, and in other places was three people.

The circumstance was that the list of job responsibilities I had were from three varying roles. No additional staff were hired. No additional funding was offered, very limited, if any reduction of my duties on my kind of list of

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to-do's. That was my circumstance. My burnout mindset was a list of thoughts I thought every single day, on play, on repeat like a record player. I have too much to do. I'm too busy. I won't be able to get it all done. This is unfair. How can they expect this of me? And many, many, many more. And I'm sure you share some of these thoughts.

Those thoughts is what creates the stress. For me it created the anxiety, and the worry, and the overwhelm, and the resentment. And what happened when I felt those emotions? Did I get my work done efficiently? Did I advocate for help in a useful way? Did I have my own back? Did I streamline my efforts? Did I say no? No, I didn't do any of that.

Anxiety, and worry, and overwhelm, and resentment, and frustration, and all the emotions I was felling because of my burnout mindset. Because of the thoughts I was telling myself all day every day. Whether I was actually working or even on nights and weekends, that drove actions of spinning, avoiding, complaining, trying, and then giving up, not setting boundaries, not deciding what to do, not advocating, delaying working nights and weekends, not saying no.

All those actions, the result of that is not only did I ensure I didn't get all my work done, not because it was impossible. But because I kept telling myself I couldn't and disempowering myself. And then taking actions to actually not do my work. But then it created the reality that I believed I was in, the outcome of not doing my work and delaying my work, and spinning, and avoiding, and complaining. Was that I always had too much to do, not because it was a fact but because I didn't do the work. I didn't reduce it. I wasn't efficient.

And then I used that as evidence that my thoughts were true, that it was a fact I had too much work, that it was a fact this was unfair, that it was a fact I didn't have enough time. And because of that I stayed in a consistent emotional state of resentment, and anxiety, and overwhelm. Not because

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my job was creating that, not because of my to-do list, not because of my position responsibilities, not because of my boss.

Because I had a burnout mindset where I was thinking thoughts on repeat every day that created stress, and anxiety, and overwhelm, and resentment, that drove inaction that resulted in more work. That then I used as evidence that my thoughts were true when in fact they were not. My friends, that is burnout. Burnout is not a result of your workload, your role, your boss' behavior. It is a result of how you think about those things, how you think about your workload, your job, your salary, the number of staff on your team.

And that creates how you feel. And that drives your actions, often very unhelpful actions, often inaction which creates the result of burnout because you continue to do that over, and over, and over again and get stuck in a cycle. Burnout is a result you experience because of the mindset you have, of the set of thoughts you believe and think over and over. And you believe they are facts, which create stress, and unhelpful emotions, that drive actions that ensure you continue to feel bad or worse, that's burnout.

And once I got out of my burnout mindset I stopped thinking those thoughts. I stopped believing they were true. Everything changed in my experience without anything outside of me changing. Yeah, there were still leaders who didn't respect my time. There was still limited staff and limited resources. But how I thought about that, how I reacted to that was different. Burnout mindset, how you think about your circumstances, even if they are challenging is disempowering.

Getting out of burnout mindset and thinking different thoughts about the same circumstances allows you to be empowered. Because when I believed I was in charge of my time, guess what happened? It created confidence to set and hold boundaries, and protect my time. When I

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believed I did not have to respond to emails outside of hours, that created empowerment. I turned off notifications, did not check emails. I had my back. I was in integrity with myself. I didn't lie to myself.

When I believed I could get it all done, that created certainty. That sometimes led me to stay focused and on task. And other times led me to say no. So much more useful actions driven by more empowering feelings and emotions because of the change of thoughts. If you want to address burnout, you have to address the burnout mindset. When you change a circumstance, let's say you quit your job and go to a new job, or you get a new boss, or they hire one new staff member, your thoughts may be different to start.

All of a sudden you might be thinking, maybe things are changing. This is going to be easier. Now I can get it done. Now this is a lot more fair or whatever it may be but then what happens? Your past thought patterns come back. They never went away. They were just a little quieter because no matter what happens in your circumstance your brain is still inside of your head. Your brain comes with you to that new job. Your brain is still your brain if you get a new boss.

Your thoughts and your brain don't disappear because you change your circumstance, or the circumstance happens to change. Those thoughts are still in your brain. Maybe at first when that change happens, they aren't as loud, but they are there. And even when they're quieter you still believe them and they're still impacting you. And then as time goes on they get louder, and louder, and louder, creating stress, and anxiety, and overwhelm, and all the other emotions.

To change your emotional experience, you have to change your thoughts. To change your experience of going into the stress cycle you have to change your thoughts, no matter the circumstance. This is why people who spend their whole career believing they have too much to do and can't get

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it done, and are constantly complaining about it their whole career, and exhausted, and overwhelmed, and telling themselves, I can't wait till retirement because it'll be so much better, guess what happens?

They get into retirement, and they feel great the first three months. They're on a high. They're traveling, they're having a great time, they started a new hobby. Then after three months they start complaining. They start saying they have to do much to do at home, I can't get it all done. They might even tell you, "I don't know what happened, I have more time than ever, but it seems like all this work's piling up, all these home chores, all these projects. I don't know how to get it all done."

Because their thoughts are still the same, that's why. They still have the burnout mindset even though they're retired. Listen, those of you who are really resisting this, you can continue to believe burnout is caused by things outside of you. What you think is always your choice, you have final say on that. And you can continue to believe if you just get the right job, or the right boss, or get paid more money, or they hire more staff, or get the work life balance just right then you won't be burned out. That is your choice.

But I want you to really answer honestly. How long have you been believing that? And during that time period has that belief served you? Has this approach worked? Now, some of you might say, "Yeah. Yeah, things have gotten a little better." I want to be very, very clear here. Even if some things, some changes, and circumstances have made it a little bit easier. Your burnout going from a 10, the worst one a one to ten scale, one being be the best and you're not burned out and 10 being you feel like shit all the time, you're completely burned out.

Your burnout going from a 10 to a five is not eliminating your burnout. We think if we get to a place where we just don't feel as shitty, where we aren't as exhausted, we're a little overwhelmed but not as bad as before, then we've solved it. And then we use that as evidence that the circumstance

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changing is what creates or solves for burnout. No. Eliminating burnout is not going from a 10 to a five. It is getting to zero. The only way to eliminate burnout and get to zero is to change your thoughts.

You all, I am about to pound on this table, but I know my podcast producer would not like that. But that's how strongly I feel. Burnout is not a required human condition. Burnout is not just a part of life you're supposed to experience sometimes. No. Yes, we are supposed to experience some level of acute stress because it has kept us alive evolutionarily speaking. And yes, we experience negative emotions as a part of life, that's unavoidable.

But burnout is not a part of life. Burnout is not the same as acute stress that keeps us alive evolutionarily. Burnout is not the same as experiencing negative emotions in kind of a balanced even amount as we're supposed to as humans. Burnout is not a part of human life. It's not supposed to be a part of our condition as the human species. Burnout is not only preventable, it literally serves no purpose and doesn't need to exist for anyone. It serves no useful purpose. It's not a part of life. It's not intended to be.

It's not about going from burnout level 10 to five. It's about eliminating it and going to zero and never getting on that scale again. It's really important, you all, it's not the same as saying, "I'll never experience some level of stress, or I'll never experience negative emotion." No. Burnout is completely different. Burnout is being stuck in your stress cycle over and over, and over, and over again and not getting out. You do not have to have that experience.

We were designed to have a stress cycle and complete the stress cycle, and get out of the stress cycle. And we were designed to have some negative emotions but not be stuck in them, and move through them, and then experience positive emotions, and then move back into them. Burnout

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unnecessary. And if you believe that burnout is an outcome of your circumstances you will never truly eliminate it. But if you recognize that burnout is an outcome of your thinking then you never have to experience burnout again because you can change the way in which you think.

You can change your thought patterns, your belief habits, what you focus on, what you tell yourself, what you decide to believe. Does that mean I don't believe policies, and organizations, and leaders need to change? No. Of course I believe those things need to change. But guess what, how do we change those things? How do we change norms? How do we change policies? How do we change organizations? People have to change. Policies are created by people's thoughts. Structures are promoted by people's thoughts. Norms are created by people's thoughts.

That's what has to change first. And it starts with you and your burnout mindset. Organizations, governments, policies, do they promote burnout? Yeah, I'm not denying that. A promotion of burnout could be a boss denying your vacation request. But it doesn't mean it causes your burnout. You still decide whether to lean into that promotion and say, "Fuck it, there's nothing I can do. I'll just be stressed forever", or not. And figure out another way to get rest.

And that promotion whether it's your boss denying your vacation request or something else, is still an outcome of other people's own thoughts from their own burnout mindset. Any of the circumstances in which you believe promote burnout only exists because other people with a burnout mindset have taken actions to promote burnout, to create that promotion of burnout. Your boss who isn't advocating to hire more staff, they are taking this action out of their own burnout mindset. Maybe they're telling themselves, they don't have time to train more staff, or they don't have the money.

Your organization who isn't prioritizing reducing workloads that's an outcome of their leadership's burnout mindset. Maybe they're saying, "Well,

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all this work has to get done, we can't take any of it away." Or maybe they're saying, "Well, we can't say no to our funders." All these beliefs are just thoughts out of a burnout mindset, they are no facts. And you can face those promotions of burnout with your own burnout mindset but if you do that, what are you going to get? Burnout.

Or you can face those promotions of burnout without a burnout mindset, with a confident mindset, with an empowered mindset, with a I have my own fucking back mindset, with a rest mindset. Which do you think is going to get you the result you want even if nothing outside of you changes? So, some of you might be asking, "Well, what about structural oppression and bias?" Structural oppression exists because of people's thoughts, people who have thoughts that drove their actions to create that.

Discrimination is driven by a bias. Discrimination is an action driven by bias. Bias is just a fancy word for a thought. Do some people encounter more promotions of burnout in the world circumstantially and less promotions of rest than others? Yeah, for sure, we're not denying that. Whether that is because of discrimination and bias based on their gender, or their race, or their income, or their body size, or their age or anything else.

Do some people encounter fewer promotions of burnout? Yeah. Maybe that's because of privilege, or access, or their race, or their gender, whatever it may be. Yes, absolutely, we're not denying that. But everyone has a choice to have a burnout mindset or not and that matters when you face those promotions of burnout, those circumstances. It doesn't matter how many you face, you still have the choice to encounter those circumstances with a burnout mindset or with a different mindset.

You can choose to face that barrier with different thoughts that create different results for you. That is where your power lies. When you face circumstances your power lies in what you decide to think, feel, and do.

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Where you can decide to think, I can figure this out, instead of, I can't do this. Or believe, I am my own authority rather than, I can't do anything about this. Where you choose to think, I'm in charge of my time rather than they are giving me too much work. You have complete control over whether or not you are burned out.

You have complete control over eliminating your burnout because it is a result of your thinking, of the set of thoughts you have, that you believe are true. And you can disrupt those beliefs and believe something else, and change your experience. Where do you start? So first you have to start if you are in burnout with disrupting your current stress cycle you are stuck in. And I'm not going to go into detail, I talk a lot about this in the first module of the Burnout Recovery course. So, if you're interested go check that out, go in much more detail.

But right now, you are stuck in the biological, physiological response of your stress cycle. And then as well as the emotional response. The first thing you have to do before you can really change your thinking is reduce that activation in your nervous system, reduce your response so that your nervous system and brain calms down, and where your mind and body believe you're safe. And then you can do some of this work in changing your beliefs and catching onto your brain.

So, if you want to know more about that, you can sign up for the Burnout Recovery course completely free, a very short video. The whole first session is on that and teach you exactly how to do this and why. And some of the background on it and all that. So go to mckoolcoaching.com/courses. Of course, we'll link in the show notes. But this is where you have to start is understanding that the experience of burnout is an outcome of what you are thinking all day. And that eliminating burnout is a 100% in your control.

You don't have to wait for anyone or anything outside of you to change. Your thoughts have to change. What you think when you face challenges

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have to change. What you believe when you face promotions of burnout have to change. That's how you eliminate burnout. And literally once you do, never ever have to experience it again because you'll know exactly how to prevent it and exactly what to do to ensure you never ever experience that again.

Alright, you all, so with that I'll leave you for the week. I love you. Have a great week. Get some rest. Say yes to rest. Say no to burnout. You all know the drill. Bye everyone.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.