



## **Burnt Out? OK, Now What?**

Are you a caregiver who feels tired of caring? Do you wish there was some way to step out of the monotony of the daily grind of chores and responsibilities? Are you finding that feelings of resentment, impatience and irritability linger just beneath the surface of your daily interactions? In those fleeting moments when you are alone, are you longing for care and soothing? Is there an inner emptiness that desperately seeks some spark of interest and meaning? Are you feeling lost, invisible, or insignificant?

In this presentation we are reaching out to you. We want you to know that you are not alone. We want to help you explore this experience and look for a path forward with the hope of some relief.

Now, are you someone that has had it with the topic of self-care? Does just the mention of this topic make you cringe a little? I don't blame you resenting the notion that some outsider who doesn't know what you are dealing with every day is suggesting that you add one more thing to that to-do list, even if it is self-care. Isn't that the problem in the first place: that you just can't add one more thing to your to-do list? So, it makes sense if you find it unbearable to hear about self-care when it feels so out of reach.

Realistically, how can you address your own need for self-care, and nurturing? How do you re-awaken the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from those seemingly monotonous daily tasks that you engage in to maintain your current responsibilities? How can you recognize and honor the significance of all that you invest to care for what matters in your life? How do you make time for comfort, relaxation, and joy when you are burnt out simply meeting your daily demands? This is what we hope to explore a little bit further today. So, you're burnt out? OK, we hear you, and we know you are not alone.

We are living in a time and in a culture where many of us struggle to find meaning, fulfillment, and balance while trying to keep pace with the demands of modern life. Not only are you grappling with these demands, but as a Veteran caregiver you also have the added demands that come with caring for an ill or injured loved one.

There may be some small consolation in knowing you aren't alone in this experience. At a minimum it confirms your experience is not unique and that maybe, because others in your position are suffering similarly, there is some understandable



reason for it. So instead of blaming yourself for not keeping up, it helps to know there is validity to your challenge.

It may be possible, if you could just unravel the path that led you to this place, to find a new route that could bring you to a better place. Maybe if you could recognize all that you are expecting of yourself and all the demands that are being expected of you, you might have greater compassion for yourself. Certainly, any struggle that is faced with a degree of kindness and compassion for yourself, is going to feel a whole lot different than when you are beating yourself and everyone else up as you go.

So, let's first start by looking at all the potential factors that have contributed to you finding yourself in this place of being depleted. Let's look at what contributes to the drain on your energy, or keeping you off balance. Let's identify what has dimmed the sparks of lightheartedness and joy. Let's explore how the responsibilities that you have invested yourself in have lost their sense of meaning and fulfillment. Let's look at the investment of time, energy, and thought you put forth on any given day to manage all you have to do.

You are not a bottomless reservoir. There are limits to your available time and energy. There is a limit to how much you can give of yourself before you begin to deplete your own emotional, physical, mental and spiritual health. You cannot draw water from an empty well.

Begin by looking at what you actually do on any given day. You have things you do each day to fulfil the responsibilities that you have. These activities are things you feel obligated to do because you have chosen certain responsibilities, and this is the sacrifice that you make to maintain these responsibilities. These responsibilities to family, work, home, require regular investment. These tasks maintain your investment in what you value and what gives meaning to your life.

The tasks required to maintain; employment, relationships with your spouse, children, parents and friends, caring for your home, cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, bill paying, caring for an ill family member, can easily become overwhelming and can easily begin to deplete you.

You know that even the very tasks that you need to engage in to take care of your own health require an investment in time and energy. It takes an investment to eat



right, prepare healthy meals, exercise, care for your need for connection, and rest. All of these can get placed to the back burner when you find you just can't keep up.

If you are finding you are tired of caring, or your duties are all drudgery, or your energy is at an all-time low or your mood is low. Maybe you are impatient and snapping or feel you don't have much to look forward to or feel excited about. This sounds like you are depleted. You are driving down the road and have just run out of gas. Everyone has their limits.

You might feel trapped in a corner with these responsibilities. On the one hand, you keep up with them because they are things that mean something to you, but on the other, it just seems like too much. You want to support yourself financially with your job, and care for your health and the home and family that you love, but in the day-to-day grind what is meaningful about all this seems to have gotten lost.

You know what those crazy days feel like; when you realize right before going to bed there's no milk left for the kid's breakfast, or the laundry has grown into an unruly pile and there's nothing clean to wear, or when you face a new day bleary eyed because you have been up half the night tending to an ill loved one, or when you remember that report deadline is due tomorrow, and you are going to have to stay longer at work than you expected. These are places where you come face to face with how burnt out you are.

These are the days when despite thinking you are grateful for your job, or that you love your spouse, kids, parents, or home, you just feel like running away. Too many days at that pace, and the fulfillment that comes from these roles gets lost. What remains is a feeling of drudgery.

Take some time to really think about and notice all that you do. Look at where your energy is going each day and validate for yourself all that you are doing to maintain the responsibilities that you have taken on. There is a good reason for you to feel burnt out.

There is no getting around the fact that there are sacrifices required to maintain these important and fulfilling aspects of your life. Sometimes your job is not going to be inspiring, creative, and stimulating. Sometimes it may just feel like work. Same goes with your relationships and the home you enjoy. Sometimes the joy and pleasure that



you gain from all these investments can get overshadowed by the routine or the energy you expend maintaining them.

One thing that all these important aspects of your life have in common is that they require an investment. All of these require that you expend energy on a regular basis to maintain them. Sometimes the energy you are expending to care for all these investments is not in balance with the positive nurturing fulfilling energy that seems to come back to replenish yourself.

How can you intervene to help manage overload and burn out when you do have many responsibilities? First, start with acknowledging that you are doing a lot. What you are expending is out of balance with what is being reciprocated. Your ability to be attentive to yourself can help you become aware that you need a break before you are on the brink of collapse.

Look at your responsibilities and consider if there's another way to approach them so they are less burdensome. Is there a more efficient way to approach getting things done? Sometimes people organize and plan responsibilities, so they are completing them more efficiently. Instead of going to the grocery store multiple times a week, you may plan and shop weekly for all that you need. Some make doctors appts on the same day. You may find that there is an optimal time to accomplish certain tasks, like taking some "me time" when your ill loved one is sleeping or when the kids are at school. Sometimes people find if you make a ritual of certain responsibilities, it helps to bring order, like doing the dishes right after dinner or doing the laundry or house cleaning a certain day of the week or making your bed before you start your day. These can bring a feeling of order and keep your tasks from building up.

Consider how you can get help with some of your responsibilities. Can you share or delegate some of them? Sometimes being reluctant to ask for help or not knowing who can help or where to turn for help, is what is in the way of getting some relief. It may require taking a risk of asking and brainstorming how you might get connected to help. While this can be a challenge, many times, there are solutions if you get creative. Our caregiver support line may be one place you can turn to if you want help brainstorming ideas.

Sometimes responsibilities become overwhelming and burdensome because you approach them with high expectations that you must be perfect. These unfair expectations can keep you striving for perfect results. Sometimes these high



expectations keep you from delegating to others or sharing the workload. Unreasonable expectations can keep you pushing to do more when it is time to let go.

Another contributing factor of becoming burnt out from your responsibilities is the feeling that you have no choice. Your perspective has a profound impact on how you approach your life. If you are approaching your responsibilities as if you have no choice or feel trapped by these responsibilities, this perspective is most definitely going to contribute to getting burnt out. How do you deal with feeling trapped?

Finding a way out of feeling trapped requires that you recognize that you are in charge of the decisions you make. They may be tough decisions, but they are yours alone to make and most likely based on many factors. When you review the decisions as yours, not the result of someone making them for you, then you are free to decide, "is this what I am choosing"? If you don't wish to take on this responsibility you can then free yourself to let it go. I know this sounds simple and that most responsibility decisions are based on complex and sometimes conflicting needs and values, however, the perspective that they are your choice can in fact free you from the anger and resistance that comes when feeling forced. Furthermore, owning them can also provide relief in affirming that you are doing what you believe is right for you, even if it is difficult.

Another way you may find relief from managing all your responsibilities is recognizing how demanding and hard you are on yourself. Are you holding yourself to an ideal of doing it all alone or doing it perfectly? There can be relief from your high expectations and your exhaustion just by being kinder, more compassionate, and understanding of yourself. Instead of piling on the guilt and raising the expectations just consider treating yourself as someone in need of some kindness. Talk to yourself and treat yourself to the same kindness and compassion that you would give to a friend that you recognized was in need. Listen for when you have hit the limit and treat yourself with kindness and care.

Next, slowing down can bring you some relief. We cannot reinforce this enough. Slow down. Literally telling yourself to slow down can interrupt fueling your distress to the explosion point. Think about the last time you felt like exploding. Were you moving too fast? Multi-tasking is not all it's cracked up to be. It's one thing to organize tasks to get them done more efficiently, it's quite another to be frantically attempting to do multiple things at the same time. This not only results in not doing things well but also contributes to your stress. Slowing down and paying attention to what you are doing is more efficient and can provide the calm needed to do it right. The next time you find



yourself worked up just take a breath, a good deep breath, and see if it doesn't help to just slow down.

Acceptance for what is, right now, is a powerful factor contributing to preserving your energy and your composure. Focusing on the here and now moment, not fighting what is happening right now, not being lost in the past, or frantically rushing or preoccupied with the future, can bring focused attention and meaning to what you are doing right now. Holding resentments and not letting go of the past significantly interferes with your ability to attend to the significance of the present.

Along with being lost in the past, fearing or worrying about the future or waiting for the relief or happiness that may happen in the future, can also spoil your chances of finding contentment or joy in the present moment. Fantasizing about future relief that may come with the next vacation, retirement, or mortgage payoff, can rob you of the precious moments you do have now.

Being in the present results in you more whole heartedly investing in what you are doing and will also result in your ability to extract the greatest measure of meaning and satisfaction from that moment. Wallowing in the past, ruminating or being preoccupied with the future, only contributes to your unhappiness and is oftentimes a waste of time, energy, and peace of mind. Take a breath, a pause and accept what is in the present moment before reacting and rushing and see what can happen. Acceptance in the present moment can provide a calming lifeboat in troubled waters.

While the responsibilities and commitments that you invest in can at times be taxing, repetitive, and draining they also contribute to many substantial and positive feelings you have about yourself. These responsibilities do provide you with the substance of what makes your life meaningful and fulfilling. Although you may fantasize about getting away from all your responsibilities, the reality is, these commitments feed a deeper need for finding a sense of meaning and fulfillment in your life.

It is important to watch the level of energy you are expending and critical to pay attention and recognize when they have resulted in you feeling depleted. While at the same time, it is critical to recognize and honor how these meaningful commitments feed that deeper sense of personal satisfaction that comes from investing in your values and life choices. Remember if you are depleted; validate all the energy you expend, consider how you might approach them differently, delegate or ask for help, own your choices, slow down, accept what is, and return to the present moment.





We have spent some time drawing your attention to all the activities you engage in which require an expenditure of energy and effort to maintain and how to manage them. Next, let's turn our attention to the activities that you already engage in that provide you a feeling of joy, comfort, satisfaction, interest and inspiration. What activities do you love to engage in that feed your creativity, expand your knowledge, make you laugh, enhance your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing?

Now, what we would like you to consider is not just the blatantly obvious self-care, pleasurable activities like; going on vacation, a day spa retreat, shopping for a new outfit, or the special parties and celebrations that you attend. These activities are great and to be looked forward to, but they don't happen every day. What kind of moments do you have between that yearly vacation or that family wedding or holiday event, that will restore you, or bring you a moment of pleasure, on your run of the mill typical day? Think about the life-giving moments of replenishment that you can extract from a typical day.

What would happen if you began to pay close attention to these daily moments? Part of the problem of becoming depleted comes from not really noticing or relishing the small moments that feed your body, mind and spirit. Take a moment right now to consider all the activities that you engage in that bring you a feeling of happiness or comfort. What activities do you engage in that while you are doing them, or after you have completed them, you feel a sense of satisfaction or contentment? Think about the many small, maybe seemingly mundane things you do every day that provide something of benefit to you. They could be activities or projects that take a significant amount of time, or they could be things that bring a momentary spark of pleasure. Each person is going to have their own unique moments and personal activities that contribute to their wellbeing.

What is on your list of activities that bring you joy, comfort and satisfaction? Look for them in your interactions with others, your moments of quiet reflection, a job or work well done, nurturing and caring for your physical wellbeing, observations or appreciation for nature, listening to music or appreciation for the arts, learning, reading or creating something.

You may find these moments for example sitting down with your spouse at the end of the day and just talking, curling up to a good book before bed, looking out the window and daydreaming, soaking in a hot tub, petting your dog or cat, cooking a nice



meal, a moment of reflection or meditation, sending out a birthday card, making a call to a friend, planning your garden for the spring, watching your kids' soccer game, arranging flowers for the table, taking a class, taking a walk, sitting on the front porch, putting on some music, watching your favorite TV show, sipping your morning coffee or tea, listening to your kids, building a fire. Listen to yourself, pay attention and decipher with recognition the things that you do already that fill you up.

There was a great research study that was exploring burn out in working parents that was done by an expert in time management studies. He was trying to sort out if it was true that these working parents had no time for self-care. He had them document minute by minute activities in their day.

We often hear this understandable concern with caregivers as well, that there is no time. Was this a perception or a fact? Now certainly no one is going to deny that the demands placed on caregivers, or working parents, don't truly result in a struggle to keep up with this fast-paced culture. What might this time study reveal? What was really fascinating and equally startling to one of the participants was when the time study researcher was tracking her actual daily activities, he noted the time she spent sitting at the side of the road after her car broke down, waiting for a tow truck, on the way to dropping off her daughter, as self-care. She was furious and stated, "why are you considering that self-care?" He stated that while she waited for the tow truck, sitting on the side of the road, she engaged in an enjoyable conversation with her daughter and that was included in her self-care.

At first glance her reaction was, this is unfair, but she went on to realize that it was a fair assessment as this moment of satisfaction and pleasure with her daughter simply went under her radar of self-care. In a way, she didn't really recognize or fully appreciate how this small break contributed positively to her wellbeing that day. It fed her emotionally, despite this moment occurring in the context of a frustrating interruption to her efforts to bring her daughter to dance class and get back to work.

This study helped to make the point that part of the problem is that people aren't really paying attention to these small moments each day and because you are not noticing them, you may not be extracting all that you can from them. The important take home message is to pay attention, notice the moments of nurturing, pleasure, comfort, satisfaction, fulfillment that do happen. They do happen every day, but maybe you just don't give them the recognition they deserve and as a result you don't extract the emotional fuel from them that they can provide.





Notice and appreciate all that you currently experience that feeds your body, mind and spirit. Whatever feels like a moment of comfort, a nurturing reprieve from the daily demands, a spark of creativity, learning, or social connection as this is the fuel that feeds and restores your energy, and your investment and desire for living.

While our digital age has brought many advancements and benefits, pay attention to how much social media, smart phones and TV time may be sucking up an inordinate amount of your time and rendering you passive and mindless. Sometimes you just need to unplug and seek the substance that feeds your soul, not just provides a distraction. Just pay attention to what it feels like to invest your time and to what people and places provide something of substance in return.

To reiterate, a piece of the answer to the issue of self-care isn't about doing more, it is really about beginning to pay closer attention and reaping the rewards of what you are already engaging in. Pay attention to what you already do that brings you that moment of joy, satisfaction, pleasure and fulfillment.

Look to all the potential avenues that may enlarge your capacity, frequency and diversity of activities that have the potential to restore and sustain you each day. Look to your relationships, to nature, caring for your health and comforting your body. Expose yourself to music and the arts. Engage yourself in the challenge and satisfaction of learning. Savor moments of quiet reflection and meditation. These are the places where your energy is restored and where you can build each day upon your resilience.

Along with the activities that you engage in it is important to consider where, when and with whom you experience that warm feeling of connection. Oftentimes, caregivers relate they are isolated. Social isolation and not feeling connected to others can wear at your resilience. Your connection to others can provide the sustenance and support you need to feel that you matter.

These don't have to be those profound experiences of connection. Take notice of appreciating those moments of; holding your loved one's hand when they are upset, calling a friend to chat, looking at a passing stranger and smiling, sharing a hug, or writing a note or text to someone you haven't spoken to in a while. The point is to connect when you can and how you can. Take note of what it feels like in the moment, both what you give and receive in return.



Paying attention to those that drain your energy and those that contribute to it may help you clarify who to spend time with and when. It may help you clarify if someone needs a limit set or is taking advantage of your good graces. Take some time also to think about and identify who you spend time with that benefits your wellbeing. Notice the people that are caring, interesting, supportive, or fun. Who are those people that fill you up, that know you well, that make you laugh, that appreciate you? Who are those people that are currently in your life that you admire, learn from, relate to, and enjoy? Seek them out.

Finally, one way to manage your feelings of being burnt out is to look at your attitude and your perspective. Have you found that your thinking and self-talk has become a nonstop internal dialogue of negativity? Noticing negativity in your complaining, blaming, angry, resentful, bitter thoughts, can help bring your attention to your unhappiness but this can also prompt you to take that recognition as a cue that it's time to make a change in your attitude.

Owning your choices and cutting out the draining noise of negative self-talk isn't about denying your distress, it is about cutting out the toxic fog that is clouding your perspective. Notice it so you can be alerted to an unresolved upset but quit fueling that negativity. Do something about it, take some action to resolve your upset, or come to some acceptance of whatever it is that you are fighting against and then stop fueling that dialogue. Reminding yourself to cut out the negative self-talk takes practice.

Oftentimes in this flurry of negative self-talk you may find that you have lost sight of what you are grateful for. When things look bleak take a moment to reflect on all that you have to be grateful for. This isn't meant to have you diminish or deny your distress or your struggles. Reflecting with gratitude is simply an exercise that turns your attention to highlighting the positive aspects of your relationships and the daily gifts of living that you currently enjoy. There is perspective that you can gain from reflecting on all that you have to be grateful for. Reflecting on the gifts of living can lift your heart when it is feeling low and bring your attention to the beauty and fulfillment that is right at your doorstep.

Your outlook and attitude can change and brighten if you look for those little opportunities each day to be grateful. What might happen if you started or ended your day with a moment of remembering what you are thankful for? What might happen if you took that extra effort to thank someone or appreciate someone close to you? What



happens if you commit to just one act each day of kindness, appreciation, generosity, or patience with anyone you may encounter? Holding a door for someone, smiling and greeting a passer-by, sending a thank you note, or letting your loved one know how much they mean to you. These are the building blocks that contribute to a happy and meaningful life. Any such small acts of this nature will not only lift you up, but will over time, contribute to your recognition that you enjoy a fulfilling life.

We have explored several strategies that may help you understand how you have come to this place of being burnt out and looked at many avenues you may explore to find your way out of this state. What does help when you are at the end of your rope?

First notice or recognize where your energy is going. Validate all that you are doing, give up on perfection and having to do it all alone, and remember you do have choices. Sometimes your approach to your duties can bring relief so consider being kinder to yourself, slowing down and trying to live in the moment with some acceptance.

Notice the many brief moments on any given day that give you a moment of restoration or pleasure. It's not about doing more self-care; its appreciating what is already there. Pay attention to what feeds your heart and soul and let those moments sink in and restore you. Seek out those life-giving simple moments in your daily life. Look for them in your relationships, in the work you do, in the commitments that you keep, in the beauty of the world around you. Foster this sense of resilience in moments of reflection and gratitude and in the daily acts of kindness and appreciation that you share.

Burnt out? We understand, and we hope that some of these strategies can help to lighten the burden you carry and provide a beacon of light as you travel the path ahead.