



BURNT

**STRESS** ISN'T JUST IN YOUR HEAD.  
LEARN TO RECOGNISE THE PHYSICAL SIGNS OF  
BURNOUT SO YOU CAN BEAT IT BEFORE IT HAPPENS

by NATASHA JOSEPH



OUT



SPECIAL REPORT

—  
YOU MAY  
FEEL ON  
FIRE, BUT  
YOU'RE  
BURNING  
OUT.



# GUGULETHU MHLUNGU IS A CARD-CARRYING MEMBER OF #TEAMNOSLEEP.

But unlike her exhausted peers, who proudly boast on social-media sites about their all-nighters, punishing work schedules and commitment to “sleep when I’m dead”, Gugulethu wears the badge reluctantly. The 26-year-old journalist from Joburg knows that her stress-related insomnia is a sign of imminent burnout – and once she hits rock bottom, it’s very difficult to get back on her feet.

“Burnout feels like endless, worsening exhaustion and it doesn’t matter what you do, it just gets worse,” she explains. “Usually, because I’m worried about work, there’s a feeling of anxiety as well. Eventually, as it worsens, my brain feels slow – as if it’s underwater.”

If that sounds familiar, it’s because burnout is frighteningly common in our fast-and-furious world.

Research released last August by the American Institute of Stress reveals that uncontrolled stress “physically impairs” more than 77 percent of people and 73 percent suffer psychologically. At home, a survey released this year by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) suggests that burnout’s evil twin, depression, lurks around most South African water coolers. Of the more than 1 000 people SADAG interviewed, 74 percent said they had trouble concentrating and were indecisive and forgetful the last time they felt depressed – also classic burnout.

Dr Dorrian Aiken, a consultant and lecturer in the field of coaching, organisational transformation and leadership development, says that a doctor might more readily diagnose depression when assessing a patient with burnout because exhaustion and depression “come with the territory”. But, she adds: “There are physiological consequences that

doctors can test, as burnout affects body chemistry – in particular, the effectiveness of the thyroid and adrenal glands.”

Burnout in women can be caused by any number of stressors – a gruelling period at work, the demands of studying while holding down a job or trying to juggle motherhood, work and your relationship with your partner. When you’re constantly exhausted and your body is burning the candle at both ends, its energy-producing systems, like the adrenal gland, can completely break down.

## IT’S NOT ALL IN YOUR HEAD

“A popular myth is that burnout is psychological. It’s not,” says Aiken. “Although psychological factors may contribute to the onset of burnout, it’s a physical problem.

“Unceasing stress causes depletion of specific vital nutrients faster than they can be replaced by your food intake. As the body’s nutrient reserves become depleted, the energy-producing systems – the thyroid and adrenal glands – are unable to function normally.”

Gugulethu’s first experience of burnout came at the end of a stressful year – both at work and home. “There was major upheaval in my personal life and I just never got around to dealing with any of the feelings of sadness and grief,” she recalls. “I worked all the time and never rested; I slept badly – until, eventually, there was a morning when I woke up with what felt like a full-body spasm and I just couldn’t get out of bed.”

“Burnout affects every area of life,” says Aiken. “Work quality often suffers. Relationships suffer because a person loses interest in many

activities, including one’s partner. Energy must be conserved just to stay alive.”

Karyn White\*, a 34-year-old attorney in Joburg, says burnout is the status quo in her profession. “Most of us are on medication for depression, anxiety – or both.” Between stressing about billable hours and keeping on top of a range of matters, “the work-life balance is elusive at best. When you do take leave, you get flu immediately because you’re worn out,” she says.

A cocktail of exhaustion and frustration has Karyn bursting into tears at the smallest provocation and, although she knows that exercise would help, “if you work 13 to 15 hour days, when do you have time to exercise?”

## MAKE A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT – IN YOURSELF

Karyn’s burnout took a heartbreaking toll earlier this year when her partner of eight years – who was also stressed and exhausted – abruptly ended their relationship. “She said she had nothing left to give because she’d been depleted by supporting me through my burnout.”

The good news is that burnout can be conquered. The bad news is that healing yourself will take time – which is possibly the most precious commodity in the modern woman’s world. Aiken says that real long-term recovery “involves consciously rebuilding the energy system of the body”.

“Regaining health is a slow process and a person recovering from burnout should prepare themselves for the long haul: it may take anything from one to five years for complete recovery,” she says.

## BURNING OUT?

**If you’re experiencing most or all of these symptoms, visit your doctor for thyroid and adrenal-gland tests**

**1.** Ongoing physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, even after getting a “good night’s rest” or taking a break.

**2.** Difficulty sleeping and/or concentrating and/or switching off.

**3.** Lack of interest/desire to engage in activities that previously gave you enjoyment.

**4.** Change in appetite – loss or increase.

**5.** Anxiety levels moving from helpful to debilitating; panic attacks and other physical symptoms.

**6.** Increase in illness – getting colds and flu more often, stomach/digestion concerns, back pain, migraines.

**7.** Higher levels of anger and irritability – little things set you off.

**8.** Constantly feeling overwhelmed – at work, socially and emotionally.

**9.** Increased levels of dissatisfaction – with work and/or personal life. It just never feels like it’s improving.



Gugulethu knows all about quick-fix solutions that actually don't fix much. When her body shuts down so she can't work or function any more, she'll take a few days to "rest, eat well, attempt normal sleep and seek medical help if that's what's necessary". She also cuts right back on how much time she spends on social media, to give her constantly spinning brain a break. The problem is that when she gets back into her routine, self-nurturing is the first thing she lets slip – and she burns out all over again. One of the things that pushes Gugulethu – and others in her position – is her biggest critic: herself.

Talya Ressel, a Cape Town-based social worker – and mother of two – with her own private practice, says that today's women are "expected by others – but mainly by ourselves – to juggle it all to perfection".

"We're expected to have fulfilling and demanding careers, be constantly trying to prove ourselves and reach specific targets quicker than ever before," she says. "At the same time, we're trying to be hands-on mothers and homemakers, trying to prove you can 'have it all'. We then need to expertly document these experiences through Facebook and other social media, in order to show the world how well we're doing. Predominantly the worst culprit of creating and perpetuating these unmanageable expectations are women themselves. And we're not managing. We're burning ourselves out trying to do it all."

## FINDING SILENCE IN THE NOISE

Ressel decided to embark on a mindfulness course that's exactly the sort of thing she recommends to her clients. "It's been so valuable, personally, because it's given me tools to quieten things down internally. It was exhausting trying to overthink and overanalyse everything. It's also allowed me to see the importance of prioritising care for myself – and how that ultimately benefits everyone around me."

## DODGE THE BULLET

**Dr Sherrie Bourg-Carter, author of *High-Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout*, offers her advice:**

### SCHEDULE SOLITUDE.

Literally. Mark off time in your calendar for spending time with yourself. Any time that you can spend alone with yourself to reboot, meditate, focus, relax, create, produce and/or think deeply is the greatest gift you can give yourself.

### LEARN TO SAY "NO".

Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should do it. Each time you add a new commitment or responsibility to your plate, you're adding stress to your life.

### SHRED THE SUPERWOMAN SCRIPT.

Many high-achieving women go through life thinking they can do everything, but it's important to stay grounded. Perfection is not a realistic goal. Sometimes, good enough is exactly that.

### RECHARGE YOUR WAY.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to burnout. The best way to find what will reduce your stress is to make a list of all the things you enjoy, things you wish you had time to do, but never seem able to find it; then find ways to add them to your life.

She also emphasises how important it is to be kinder to yourself. "Honestly consider the expectations that you are trying to fulfil. Are they manageable? Who is setting those expectations? Would you expect that of someone else?"

If you're not even sure how to start this process of self-kindness and care, don't be afraid to reach out to professionals. "Therapy can be a really helpful space to explore which areas in your life are causing high stress and to develop new coping tools," says Ressel.

"Boundaries between work and leisure are an ongoing process. I'm constantly working at saying 'no', which is important for self-care because ultimately my health is my responsibility," says Gugulethu. She's also learning to say no without feeling guilty: "Saying it, forgetting about it and then doing something non-work-related like sleeping in, going for breakfast, a movie, a massage."

Ressel supports this approach, suggesting that you schedule time each day to "eat healthily, do some light exercise and to rest". And, as you would with a work appointment, for example, "set the time and stick to it!"

At work, Gugulethu is trying to improve her delegation skills: "I'm constantly learning how to not do everything." Communicating honestly about what's reasonable – so that "I don't create an expectation that's unsustainable in the long-term" – is helping her slowly step out of the shadow of burnout.

So what's her advice to others in the burnout boat? Simple: "If it's difficult to manage everything, chances are you're over-extended and well on your way to burnout. Be deliberate with your time. If you must, look at each day or week and be as deliberate about rest and self-care as you would be about your work." ■



## YOUR BODY ON... CHRONIC STRESS

**What happens as you approach the point of burnout**

### Your brain

The hypothalamus in your brain sends a signal to your adrenal glands to produce stress hormones. These neural pathways can trigger long-term changes in your brain's structure and function – think mental disorders, anxiety and learning difficulties.

### Your liver

When cortisol and epinephrine are released, the liver produces more glucose, which would supply you with the energy for "fight or flight" in an emergency. If you're not using all the energy, that extra blood sugar can lead to type-2 diabetes.

### Your gut

Think of it this way: your body's secreting all those stress chemicals but there's no immediate threat, so it stores fat around your internal organs to protect them from future risk. Translation: you're going to gain weight.

### Your muscles

After a while, a process called proteolysis weakens your muscles – it breaks down proteins, so simple tasks, like lifting shopping bags, become harder. This happens when your cortisol levels stay high over a long time.

### Your bones

Your body's freaking out so it loses its potassium – the stuff that stops other acids from sucking your calcium. In return, your bones struggle to absorb the milky mineral. If this goes on for much longer, you could end up with osteoporosis.

### Your thyroid

An imbalance in your levels of cortisol means your thyroid could be either underactive or overactive. Underactive means unexplained weight gain and constipation; overactive means weight loss and irregular heartbeat.

### Your skin

You've just woken up from a horrid night's sleep and there it is – a big, stubborn pimple. It could be all that cortisol – it increases your skin's oil production. Depigmented white spots on your skin can also be a result of chronic stress.

– Michelle October

