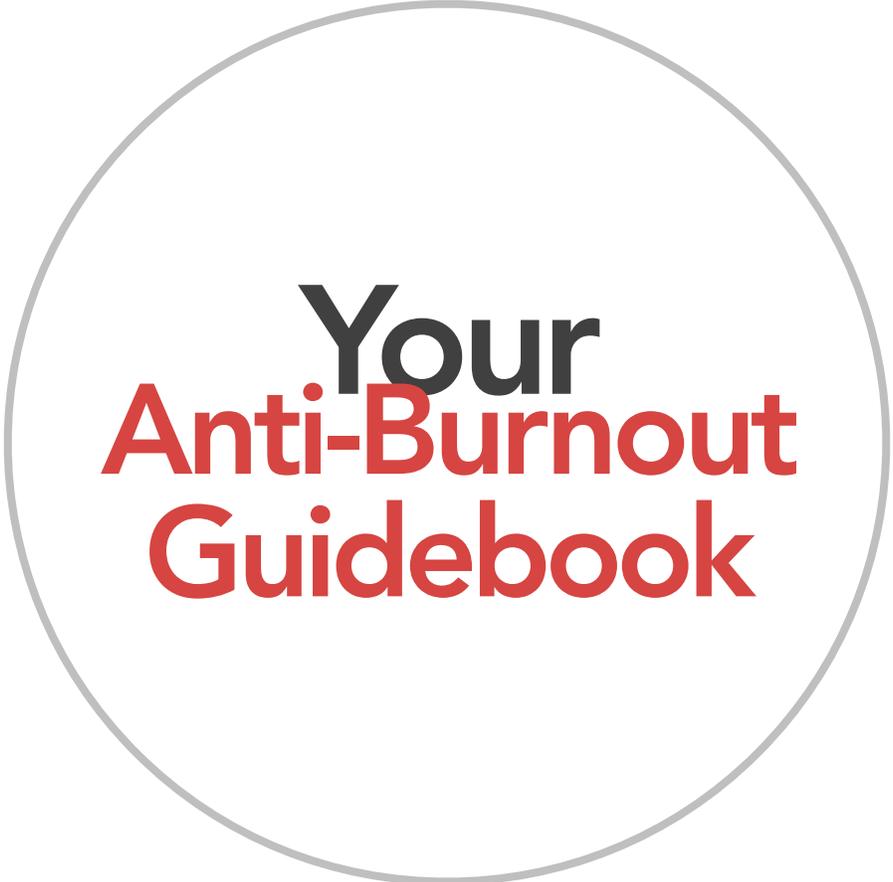*Actionable Strategies to Flameproof® Your Career and Your Life and Handle Adversity Like a Boss.*

Your

Anti-Burnout
Guidebook

Karen Worstell, MA, MS

flameprooflabs.com/guide

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Preface: A Note from the Author (2025 Edition)

When I first wrote this guide, burnout was already spreading like wildfire across high-pressure industries — especially in tech and cybersecurity. The stakes were high. The hours were long. And somewhere along the way, *overdrive* became the baseline.

I created this guide to help people like me — smart, capable, deeply committed — who were slowly burning out while trying to prove they could handle it.

Then the world changed.

The pandemic exposed what had been bubbling underneath: that burnout isn't just a personal issue. It's a **systemic crisis**, made worse by cultures that reward self-abandonment and call it ambition.

Now, five years later, the conversation around burnout has matured — but the risks are still real. That's why I'm bringing this guide back, with a few key updates and an invitation to go deeper.

This isn't just about stress management. It's about **identity, boundaries, energy, and culture**.

It's about learning how to *Flameproof*® your life — before you're engulfed.

Let's begin.

— *Karen Worstell,* 2025

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What is Burnout?

Introduction

"I'm so burned out!"   What does that really mean? This guidebook is intended to give you a means to know what what burnout is and to be self-aware so that you can take appropriate actions to choose your personalized resilience strategies that will flameproof your career and your life and help you handle adversity like a boss.

Burnout is costly in human as well as corporate impact.   Lowered self-confidence, hampered career progress, health and wellness damage, financial impact, and relational   damage are all casualties from episodes of burnout.   At a business level, turnover in the Tech industry alone is a $64B loss worldwide. Levels of disengagement are at record highs, exceeding 70%.   Burnout leads to changes in cognitive and memory skills that contribute to mistakes at work.   When people are are effected by burnout, costly mistakes and oversights happen. When it comes to protecting company assets from cybercrime, companies are just one human error away from a headline.

Burnout does not happen all at once.   In high stress occupations like cyber, it happens sometimes so slowly that people don't recognize the warning signs.

Burnout is a combination of three factors: exhaustion (either physical or emotional or both), a sense of ineffectiveness, particularly at work, and cynicism which is a choice of perspective and focus.

Emotional & Physical Exhaustion

Of all the contributors to burnout, emotional exhaustion may be the most challenging.   As cyber professionals we become accustomed to "pushing through" and develop a fairly high level of tolerance for crisis level response at work.   We may be "always on" even in our personal time, especially if we have experienced a one or a series of cyber-related incidents.

When one combines the intensity of a tech or cyber career with normal life cycle events related to family, significant illness, financial stress, loneliness, isolation - the stage for emotional exhaustion is set. This is often very difficult to recognize.

Physically, we've all "hit the wall" at one time or another. Physical exhaustion is something that is easier for us to recognize.   We know we should rest - the risk of not doing so increases because we are repeatedly rewarded for putting in the extra effort, going the extra mile that often includes a schedule where we don't eat right, don't drink enough water, don't get enough sleep, and don't exercise.   We treat our physical bodies as if we could run marathon after marathon without rest, eating, or drinking because we are rewarded for doing so.

The short term impact of treating our physical bodies this way is a lowered immune system, foggy thinking, lack of energy, and irritability.

Longer term impact includes serious, even life-threatening illness, and chronic health issues or injuries.

Cynicism

The one symptom of burnout that every manager should watch for is cynicism. Cynicism is going beyond negativity - it is a persistent core belief that the intentions, motives, actions, and overtures of others are misguided, ill-intended, and poorly thought through. Cynicism is a behavior of a belief system that holds a default position that other people are incompetent, greedy, selfish, and even just plain stupid. Cynical people are very willing to share their viewpoint with others who will listen and their impact on their group and organization can be damaging even when the individual is highly competent in their own field of work.

What makes cynicism so worthy of management's attention are two things: (1) the impact on the organization and (2) the impact on the future career of the individual. Some people are prone to a cynical belief system due to their own life experiences. A competent manager or coach can generally work with individuals to help them address a cynical belief system. An organizational culture of cynicism needs to be addressed as a potential management issue. It can be an indicator that people are frustrated over a period of time that leads them to believe management either doesn't care, or is too incompetent to make things better. In either case cynicism has a significant element of illogical thinking that is unhelpful both to the individual and the organization.

Ineffectiveness

Like cynicism, ineffectiveness has both individual and an organizational aspects.

Individual ineffectiveness is a matter of choosing strategies that help with focus, setting clear priorities, sticking to plans, and asking for help when needed. Sometimes individual ineffectiveness disguises an underlying resistance to a particular job or task, and sometimes it is a form of self-sabotage. This anti-burnout guide will help you identify personal contributors to ineffectiveness.

Organizational ineffectiveness is an innovation and productivity killer but it is just as much a management opportunity. I've had the good fortune to work in companies where management recognized the gains that were possible by implementing a culture of people working together, eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy. Adopting a culture of "do it right the first time" and it's not done until it is DONE done is energizing to an organization that recognizes the benefits of having accountability, clear goals, clear roles and responsibilities, and best of all, results. Our newest program, Create Your Leading Edge℠ shares approaches and resources available for management to step up to make that difference.

You can make the difference

Burnout prevention and personal resilience are essential elements of an innovation culture. Your personal actions and state-of-being affect everyone around you. When you take charge

of your well-being, others notice and will follow.

Know Yourself

"Do you know who you are?"

The most damaging lie believed by people who burn out is that a person's self-worth and self-respect is tied to performance, not existence.

Every decision you make is driven by six universal human needs, the values you hold, and the rules you have made for those values.

Your happiness is governed by your emotions.

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If #BeAnAlly is the kevlar shield against burnout…[1]

Managing Your State is Your Antidote to Burnout

Your state is a combination of three elements:

- Where you focus your attention

- Your physical condition

- The meaning that you assign to events

Whatever you focus on, **that is what you will get more of**

[1] See Cybersecurity's Dirty Little Secret and Talent Grenade, RSA Conference 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsm21No9m4s

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Your brain is hardwired to help you filter input. The reticular formation, also called the Reticular Activating System (RAS) is a diffuse neural network that connects your spinal cord, cerebrum, and cerebellum and mediates your overall level of consciousness. All of your senses, except smell, are wired directly into the RAS, and it functions as a gatekeeper for information that comes into your conscious mind.

To an apparently significant degree, according to experts, you directly affect what comes into your consciousness by determining the things on which you choose to focus. Your RAS always lets through the things that are very important: threats to your safety, for example, or your name being called. What you believe to be important, what you value, and to a large extent how you believe the world operates, programs the RAS to let that information through and filter out other less important signals.

This is the science behind many popular self-development programs that teach people how to get more of what they want in life by "manifesting" or "name it and claim it" strategies.

The thing people experience as the most difficult aspect of this is **focusing on what they want** rather than what they *don't* want. This is the difference between:
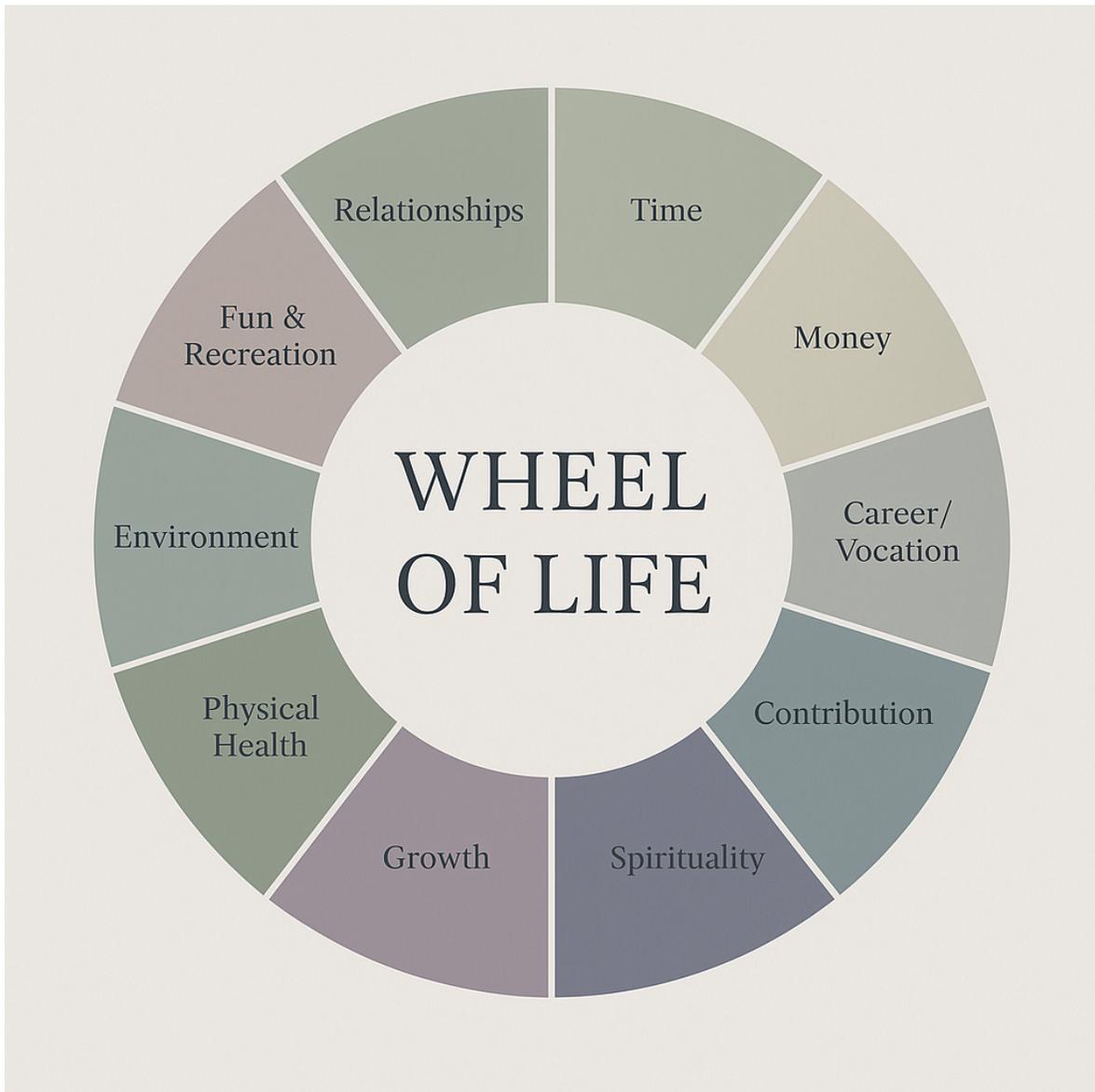
"I will create incredible experiences and memories to enjoy with my family."

vs

"I will stop yelling at my kids."

Focus

Below is a wheel of life that reflects the essential domains of living that are necessary for a fulfilled and balanced life. Rate each domain on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = non-existent, 10 = *everything* you want it to be.)

Are any of those areas less than a 10?

Choose ONE of them today and write your compelling goal that will activate your RAS into raising every single thing it sees that could help you accomplish your vision into PRIORITY 1 status.

Write your goal statement here as if it is *already happening*:

Some things for you to check:

Is this focused on what you WANT vis what you don't want?   Make sure each statement is presented in the positive.

Is it compelling enough for your RAS to see this as PRIORITY?

If needed, revise your statement and write it here:

Spending time on reaching goals that are important to you is an antidote to burnout.   How will you schedule time each day and week to ensure that this compelling priority is nurtured?

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Your Primary Question

Changing your primary question could change your life

This is my favorite anti-burnout hack.

You reinforce the filters for your RAS by the language you use. Why? How you choose to frame statements and questions reflects deeply held beliefs about yourself and the world around you. Managing the way you say things, along with what you focus on, will either elevate you or depress you.   This often is reflected in the questions we ask.

An example from my own experience:

My primary question was: "What can I fix today?" reflected my underlying belief that things around me were broken. It told my RAS to look for "broken". As a result, my world seemed overloaded with broken things! This was useful in the short term, but contributed to burnout in the long term. If you've ever worked for a boss who always seemed to see what was wrong and missed what was going well, you know what I mean.

And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, "This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!" And each day, it's up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, "No. This is what's important."
    – Iain Thomas –
livelifehappy.com

Alternate questions that reflect a huge shift include:

"How can I observe and appreciate all that is going well around me?"

What is your old primary question?   Write it here.

Do you want a new primary question? Write it here.

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Prevent Acedia

A very old word and a very current problem.

Burnout and depression in cybersecurity? Maybe. Or maybe it is something the ancient desert fathers warned us against: a common human condition called acedia (*aka* sloth.)

The ancients considered it to be one of the most dangerous of the seven deadly sins because of the despair and absolute disdain for life that it produced in a human being. It is not about laziness. It is about self-numbing, detachment, loss of interest in life - many of the feelings we have when we describe burnout. This is acedia: listlessness, joylessness. It shows up as resisting being deeply engaged and present, withholding one's energy from *carpe diem* and simply going through the motions of the day. Disengagement is one of the biggest issues we have in the Tech workforce overall (over 70% of the workforce is disengaged, with the numbers rising), and it is a matter of acedia. We have a workforce that is pulling back and self-protecting rather than leaping wholeheartedly into the productive endeavor of creating and innovating with gusto.

This is a perpetual cycle because acedia results from a loss of meaningful action.   The good news is, intentional and meaningful action breaks the cycle and sets you free.

In addition to choosing where you place your focus, choose a meaningful action that you can do each day.

> 1.Recognize that meaningful action that feeds your soul and starts your day off right is more than a good idea - it sets the tone for your entire day. This is not a "swallow the frog" kind of action; rather, it is action that feeds you in all the dimensions that matter to you. For example, my day starts best when I can watch the sunrise. It is a time for me to give thanks for a new day, to recognize the gift of life and time, to count blessings, and experience the visual beauty of this world. I walk the Bluffs near my home at sunrise, with the music of morning

Do not assume. It makes an ass of u and me. - Jerry Belson

Turn it and turn it and turn it. For everything is in it. - Ben Bag Bag ca 10 CE

A successful person is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks that other people have thrown at her. - David Brinkley

I have not failed - I have discovered 10,000 ways that did not work. - Thomas Edison

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prayers in my earphones, and give my body much needed physical exercise. It is my gift to me.

2. Choose your routine and make it first in your day. Will you have to get up early? Probably. The first action of your day is to get up an hour early, not hit the snooze button, and begin your morning's chosen actions.   Voila!   You have accomplished something for yourself already!

3. As part of your routine, spend 15 minutes at the beginning of your day identifying the core things you need to take ACTION on that will move the needle forward on things about which you care deeply.   Family, health, finances, love, contribution to others, personal growth, career are all categories into which you can identify the key outcome or goal you want. Make it a point every day to take action on those personal and professional goals. No matter how small, taking action is the important element and over time you will see massive results.

> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things.*
>
> ~Paul of Tarsus ca 62 CE

What meaningful action will you begin?

When (date and time) will you do this?

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Six Human Needs

Quick Reference Guide

Six Human Needs Psychology, developed by Chloe Madanes PhD and Tony Robbins, is one of the most useful tools in our toolkit. I cover it in our extended workshops and off-sites. It is provided here for you to self-assess—how might these needs show up in your life?

CERTAINTY

The need for stability, predictability, safety, and comfort.
Code Words: comfort, security, safety, stability, grounded, solid, predictability, protection, guarantee, proof, evidence

VARIETY

Need to "mix it up", crisis management, change, mood swings, entertainment, exploration.
Code Words: fear, thrills, instability, change, entertainment, suspense,

SIGNIFICANCE

The need to feel special and recognized.
Code words: pride, importance, standards, achievement, performance, perfection, evaluation, discipline, competition, respect, rejection, success

LOVE/ CONNECTION

The need to feel connected and that you belong.
Code Words: togetherness, passion, unity, warmth, belonging, tenderness, desire

GROWTH

The need to learn and expand your abilities.
Code Words: developing, learning, self-improvement, studying, understanding

CONTRIBUTION

The need to give to others without expecting anything back.
Code words: giving, sharing, helping, supporting, guiding, teaching, making a difference

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Cynicism

"Cynicism masquerades as wisdom but it is the furthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness: a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt or disappoint us."

~Stephen Colbert

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A primary indicator of Burnout.

"A cynic will choose to doubt, disbelieve, or discredit, even when there is no logical reason to do so." ~ Paulo Coelho[2]

Cynicism torches human potential and it spreads in an organization as quickly as a California wildfire, turning productivity, creativity, and innovation to ashes.

A cynical manager magnifies the burn like a Santa Ana wind. From a human and organizational perspective, addressing cynicism has to be a priority.

• Become aware and acknowledge this behavior

• Focus on what you want, not what you don't want. The opposite of cynicism is optimism. Set your intention to choose optimism.

• If you find yourself focusing on faults, what is broken, and shortcomings, choose to focus on what is working well, on catching people doing things right, on positive attributes of others.

Questions for you to consider:

Can you be a good problem solver without slipping into cynicism?

cyn·i·cism

/ˈsinəˌsizəm/

noun

1.

an inclination to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest; skepticism.

What would it take for you to choose optimism as a foundational practice?

---

[2] paulocoelhoblog.com

Your

Your Belief Matters 100%

The question is, do you believe you can make it better?

Use the space below to write your letter to yourself about what you are going to do so that three years from today, you will say this current crisis is the best thing that ever happened to me.

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Epilogue: The Warning We Didn't Know We'd Need

When I first created this guide, it was for a cybersecurity audience who lived under constant pressure – alert fatigue, nonstop incidents, and a pace of work that rewarded burnout like it was a badge of honor.

I distributed it at the RSA Conference in early 2020.

Just two weeks later, the world shut down.

Suddenly, burnout wasn't just an industry hazard. It was a **global condition**. Zoom marathons replaced hallway conversations. Work hours blurred into sleep hours. Caregivers, leaders, and teams were asked to do more with less…and pretend they were fine.

This guide was created before the pandemic but proved essential during and after. The cost of ignoring burnout became impossible to hide, not just physically but also emotionally, relationally, and professionally. So I kept going.

I turned this guide into a program called the Flameproof Reset Series℠.

Now, I have the opportunity to help people reclaim their energy, perspective, and purpose before they burn out completely.

If you're reading this now, it's not too late.
Burnout is not a life sentence.
It's a **system warning**.
And this time, you get to listen early – not in crisis.

Welcome to Flameproof®.

We'll be launching more resources for you in late Summer 2025.

– *Karen Worstell, MA, MS*

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