

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Quietly Burning Out? What To Do When Your Leadership Starts Lacking

By [London School of Economics](#), Contributor.

The Department of Management at LSE.

Follow Author

Jun 03, 2025, 11:00am EDT

Post by [Dr Katie Best](#), Visiting Fellow at the [Department of Management](#) at LSE, Head Tutor on MBA Essentials and Chief Examiner on Core Management Concepts. Dr Best is the author of upcoming book, [The Ten Toughest Leadership Problems \(and How to Solve Them\)](#) (August 2025), and Leadership Coach and Consultant at [KatieBest Associates](#).



Today's most committed leaders are often deeply helpful, hyper-responsible, and always ready to step up. But that very strength can become a trap

GETTY

Most leaders don't realise they're burnt out—because they're still high-functioning. They're answering emails, running meetings, and hitting deadlines. But under the surface, their energy, creativity, and confidence are quietly eroding.

What burnout really looks like

I used to think burnout looked like someone who's at home, signed off work with stress. But I've realised more recently that burnout doesn't just live its life away from work, it lives its life at the office, sending one more email, making another tough decision, and keeping going, seemingly endlessly — surviving, but certainly not thriving.

This might sound at odds with how we typically imagine burnout, but it's entirely in line with the go-to definition from the [World Health Organization](#): *a state of chronic workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed, marked by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced effectiveness.*

In my upcoming book [The Ten Toughest Leadership Problems \(and How to Solve Them\)](#), I talk about how overloaded leaders often try to fix burnout with better productivity tools — when the real solution lies in changing the way they lead. Whether that means delegating, narrowing focus, or letting go of unrealistic expectations, the shift has to be strategic, not reactive.

Why traditional productivity fixes backfire

Today's most committed leaders are often deeply helpful, hyper-responsible, and always ready to step up. But that very strength can become a trap—keeping them constantly on alert, always anticipating the next high-stakes decision or crisis, unable to switch off.

The problem? When we're depleted, we often can't see it. We normalize the stress—tell ourselves this is just what leadership looks like. Or if we do notice we're struggling, we deny it. Surely a good night's sleep or a productivity hack will fix it? But when you're at this point, it's not just a time management issue.

Rather, it's a role design issue, a personal standards issue, or others' expectations being unrealistic. And depending on which of those it is, you need a plan to help you fix it.

If the issue lies in the job...

When the workload inherent to the job is too great, it's time to look at what needs taking away. If you are doing work meant for two people, or in a job that assumes 60 hours a week from the outset, something needs to change. If the load is genuinely unmanageable, you should consider solutions such as redistributing tasks, hiring support, or renegotiating deliverables. Share the problem with others, such as HR, your seniors and peers, so that work can be started on what must be done.

If the issue lies in your mindset...

If you're setting your own standards too high, it's time to choose what you can afford to drop. I call this 'strategic failure'. By that, I mean that high-functioning leaders are clear on what they're willing to fail at or let slide in order to protect what matters most. Make peace with strategic failure with the unimportant things to protect success in the critical ones. Also: work isn't everything. People who reach the end of their lives and are asked their regrets don't typically (if ever) say, 'well, I just wish I'd worked harder. I didn't achieve inbox zero enough of the time.'

If the issue lies in others' expectations...

When others expect too much, it's time to reset the narrative. That might mean clearer boundaries, more transparent capacity-setting, or simply letting others see that you're human—not a machine. The strongest leaders don't absorb every ask—they model sustainable performance for their teams.

Resetting your leadership energy starts with recognising that you're not lazy, disorganised, or underperforming — you're overloaded. And the solution isn't to "power through." It's to make strategic choices about what gets your time, your energy, and your attention.

The ultimate consequences of burnout can be serious – if a leader fails to spot a critical error, loses a key client, or makes a bad financial decision, burnout starts to have significant and far-reaching consequences. And this is without considering the serious health risks which burnout, left untreated, can bring.

The strongest leaders aren't the ones who absorb it all. They're the ones who lead differently — who model focus, clarity, and enough space to think. Not just for themselves, but for the people who are watching.

Follow Dr Katie Best on [LinkedIn](#).

Follow LSE's Department of Management on [LinkedIn](#). Check out [our website](#).

Burnout

3 Types of Burnout, and How to Overcome Them

by [Melody Wilding](#)

August 22, 2022



HBR Staff/ulimi/Getty Images

Summary.

Research shows that people don't burn out in the exact same way or for the exact same reasons. Because of this, it's important to identify the type of burnout that you may be facing. You may even be dealing with a mix of one or two of these types at the same time. In this article, the author describes three types of burnout — overload, under-challenged, and neglect — and provides readers with signs to watch out for, and tips on how to overcome each type.

Take a moment to bring to mind a person who's burned out. You're likely picturing someone who is overbooked and overwhelmed, drowning in multiple demands and competing priorities.

But, burnout is far more nuanced than simply being busy and tired.

For years, it was believed that everyone reacted to chronic workplace stress in the same way. But [research has revealed](#) that burnout manifests itself in different ways depending on a person's work environment as well as their internal resources, including dedication to their job and coping mechanisms.

Let's take a closer look at [the three types of burnout](#) and how you can overcome each one.

Overload Burnout

Overload burnout occurs when you work harder and more frantically to achieve success, often to the detriment of your health and personal life. This is the type of burnout that most people are familiar with, and it's also the most common.

Overload burnout typically affects highly dedicated employees who feel obligated to work at an unsustainable pace. As a result, they drive themselves to the point of physical and mental exhaustion.

Professionals with overload burnout tend to cope by venting their emotions to others (i.e. complaining about how tired and overwhelmed they are). This subtype is also quick to jump into problem-solving mode, creating more work and responsibility for themselves, which only exacerbates their stress.

Signs to watch out for:

- You overlook your own needs or personal life to fulfill work demands
- You invest more than is healthy in your commitment to your career or ambitions
- You endanger your well-being to achieve your goals

How to address it:

Researchers note that the way out of overload burnout is two-fold. First, it's important to develop stronger emotion regulation skills, such as naming and processing your emotions and reframing negative self-talk. For instance, you could reframe the belief that you need to work all the time to be successful to "enjoying my life helps me become more successful." After all, resting is not a reward for success. It's a prerequisite for performance.

Second, it's crucial to separate your self-worth from your work. "Consequently, by learning to keep a certain distance from work..." researchers Jesús Montero-Marín and Javier García-Campayo write, "individuals could avoid excessive involvement and prevent burnout."

Strive to diversify your identity — to create self-complexity — by investing in different areas of your life beyond work. You might decide to devote time to your role as a spouse, parent, or friend. During the pandemic, one of my clients restored an old identity by renewing his pilot's license. Volunteering with the Civil Air Patrol proved to be a healthy forcing function to get away from his computer, while also contributing to his sense of well-being.

Under-Challenged Burnout

You might be surprised to find out that burnout can result from doing too little. Under-challenged burnout could be considered the opposite of the overload subtype. It occurs when you're bored and not stimulated by your job, which leads to a lack of motivation. People with under-challenged burnout may feel underappreciated and become frustrated because their role lacks learning opportunities, room for growth, or meaningful connection with co-workers and leadership.

Workers who feel their tasks are monotonous and unfulfilling tend to lose passion and become cynical and lethargic. They cope with the stress of being under-challenged through avoidance — distraction, dissociation, or thought suppression (i.e. ordering themselves to "Stop thinking about that").

Signs to watch out for:

- You would like to work on assignments and tasks that are more challenging
- You feel your job does not offer you opportunities to develop your abilities
- You feel that your current role is hampering your ability to advance and develop your talents

How to address it:

When you're demoralized, it can be hard to care about much of anything. Lower the stakes by simply exploring your curiosities. Set a goal to learn a new skill in the next 30 days to kickstart your motivation. Start small and don't overwhelm yourself. Perhaps you spend an hour or two a week learning to code or devote 20 minutes a day practicing a new language.

Making strides towards something that feels fun and meaningful to you creates a flywheel of momentum that can lift you out of a funk. Even if the skill isn't directly related to your job, you'll likely find that the positive energy spills over to reinvigorate your passion for your work — or that it inspires your career to move in a new direction.

Neglect burnout

The final type of burnout is the worn-out subtype. This is also called neglect burnout, because it can result from feeling helpless in the face of challenges. Neglect burnout occurs when you aren't given enough structure, direction, or guidance in the workplace. You may find it difficult to keep up with demands or otherwise feel unable to meet expectations. Over time, this can make you feel incompetent, frustrated, and uncertain.

The worn-out worker copes through learned helplessness, which occurs when a person feels unable to find solutions to difficult situations — even when ones are available. In other words, people with learned helplessness tend to feel incapable of making any positive difference in their circumstances. In other words, when things at work don't turn out as they should, those with neglect burnout become passive and stop trying.

Signs to watch out for:

- You stop trying when work situations don't go as planned
- You give up in response to obstacles or setbacks you face at work
- You feel demoralized when you get up in the morning and have to face another day at work

How to address it:

Find ways to regain a sense of agency over your role. Try creating a to-don't list. What can you get off your plate by outsourcing, delegating, or delaying? Look for obligations you need to [say "no"](#) to all together and hone the skill of [setting stronger boundaries](#). A great place to start is by identifying situations where you feel an intense sense of resentment. This is an emotional signal that you need to put healthier limits in place.

Likewise, consider talking to your boss about your workload. You could explain how you're currently spending your time and ask, "Are my priorities consistent with yours? What would you like me to change?" Or, "If we could take Project A off of my plate, then I'd have more time to focus on our team's strategic priorities and ultimately deliver on the key goals we've evaluated against." Your manager will likely be thrilled you're thinking about the big picture and taking initiative.

Most importantly, focus on what you can control. Outside of office hours, be bullish about self-care. Create routines and rituals that ground you, such as a daily walk or journaling practice. When you feel helpless about changing tides at work, some semblance of predictability is essential.

Because people don't burn out in the exact same way or for the exact same reasons, it's important to identify the type of burnout that you may be facing. You may even be dealing with a mix of one or two of these types at the same time. Determining where you're at makes it easier to find targeted solutions to solve the specific challenges ahead of you.

Melody Wilding is an executive coach, human behavior professor, and author of [Managing Up: How to Get What You Need from the People in Charge](#). Download a free chapter [here](#).

Leading Is Emotionally Draining. Here's How to Recover.

by [Dina Denham Smith](#)

July 11, 2025



HBR Staff Using AI

Summary. Emotional depletion is a real and significant tax of modern leadership. Recovery is no longer a luxury. Instead, it's a leadership imperative, critical for protecting your well-being and sustaining your capacity to lead over the long haul. Three proven practices can help you process your emotions and replenish your energy after a challenging stretch: reflect, reframe, and restore. These steps don't just help you reset in the short term; they also help you build the emotional muscle to handle future challenges with more steadiness and strength. Because your team doesn't just need you today—they need you to last.

You have to lay off a team member, deliver hard feedback in a tense meeting, or end the day absorbing the resignation of a top performer. No crisis. Just another Tuesday.

Each of these moments is emotionally taxing on its own. But taken together—and set against a backdrop of performance pressures, shifting workplace norms, and the unrelenting emotional labor of guiding and supporting teams through crises and global turmoil—they quietly add up.

Newly released [Gallup data](#) reflects this toll. In 2024, global employee engagement declined for only the second time in over a decade. Unlike the first drop in 2020, however, the drop wasn't driven by frontline workers. Instead, it was entirely due to declining engagement among managers. In a March 2025 [survey](#) by Modern Health, 77% of managers reported that their role was more challenging now than ever before.

Understandably, leaders focus on managing others through challenging moments. Faced with external expectations and a genuine desire to show up for their teams, they direct their attention and energy outward: guiding, steadying, and responding. But with that external focus and the nonstop pressure for results, it's easy for leaders to overlook a crucial step: processing their own emotional experience. Pressing on feels efficient, even the only choice to stay afloat amid all the demands on your time. Indeed, it can feel nearly impossible to process your emotions when you're in the thick of it at work. But over time, just powering through weighty situations without pausing to process your experience can come at a steep cost to your [health](#), [effectiveness as a leader](#), and [relationships](#).

Emotional depletion is a real and significant tax of modern leadership. Recovery is no longer a luxury. Instead, it's a leadership imperative, critical for protecting your well-being and sustaining your capacity to lead over the long haul. After a challenging event or period, use these three proven practices to process your emotions and replenish your energy.

Reflect: Don't just move on—make meaning.

While revisiting weighty times may sound undesirable, taking the time to reflect on them is key to moving forward. When we ignore or suppress our emotions, they don't disappear—they accumulate in the

background, resurfacing later as increased [stress, reactivity, and health issues](#). Reflection helps us process and metabolize what we've experienced so that we don't unintentionally carry it around. Carve out a few minutes after a challenging moment or day, and ask yourself:

- What am I feeling?
- Where do I feel it in my body?
- What are my emotions trying to tell me?
- What do they reveal about what matters to me?

Acknowledge and [accept your feelings without judgment](#). All emotions—even the unpleasant ones like frustration, sadness, or anxiety—offer valuable insights into our values, needs, and limits. Judging and resisting them only escalates the feeling and increases your reactivity.

Consider writing down your responses to these questions. Writing creates space between you and your emotions, allowing you to identify meaning and purposeful next steps. Furthermore, [research](#) has shown that writing about your feelings for just 20 minutes a day over three days can improve both mental and physical health, reduce anxiety, and even boost job performance. If writing isn't your cup of tea, try leaving yourself a voice memo instead. What matters most is giving your thoughts and true feelings space to surface without editing or filtering.

Alternatively, share your experience and challenges with a trusted peer or other sounding board. Social support not only helps us make sense of and process difficult events but also enhances our resilience to stress, protects us from burnout, and promotes our mental and physical well-being. Leadership is often a lonely experience, and having trusted peers, mentors, and other supports can be a powerful source of connection and clarity.

Reflection doesn't require a lot of time. It just takes the discipline to pause amid the busyness. Even a few intentional minutes can help you build the [self-awareness](#), [emotional intelligence](#), and resilience essential for effective leadership in today's complex and challenging world.

Reframe: Shift the narrative.

Reappraising emotionally taxing experiences can also speed recovery by [reducing our distress](#) and [freeing up our cognitive resources](#). Reframing doesn't mean you're ignoring the difficulty of a situation; instead, it's about shifting your perspective to find new meaning or possibility.

For example, after successfully leading a major turnaround, my client Jacob was blindsided by a reorg that reassigned his team and left his role uncertain. Understandably, he was both frustrated and stressed. But over time, Jacob began to see the situation differently: as a chance to recharge after an intense chapter, and an opportunity to stretch into something new. By finding a silver lining, Jacob shifted his emotional state and was able to show up with more steadiness and optimism, while the organizational changes and his new role solidified.

On the backside of a tough event, consider asking:

- What are the possible silver linings in this situation?
- What are the potential long-term benefits despite the short-term costs?
- How can I grow from it, or use it to build something better in the future?

When you change the story, you change your experience—and you gain access to new energy, insight, and direction.

Sometimes, however, it's not just the situation that needs reframing; it's how you see yourself in relation to it. Many emotionally intense leadership moments involve performing “[necessary evils](#),” making decisions or taking actions that cause discomfort or harm to others, such as delivering tough feedback, letting someone go, restructuring a change-fatigued team, or implementing layoffs. Even when these actions are necessary for the greater good, they can leave leaders feeling anxious, guilty, and questioning their self-image as a fair and moral person.

In these moments, self-compassion is a critical tool. It doesn't mean lowering your standards or avoiding responsibility. In fact, research shows self-compassion improves leadership, increasing [emotional intelligence](#), [composure under pressure](#), and [resilience](#). Further, it enhances our psychological well-being and [increases the compassion we show to others](#).

Practicing self-compassion simply means treating yourself as you would a friend: acknowledging the challenge, recognizing anyone in your position might feel the same way, and responding with kindness instead of criticism.

After hard moments, ask yourself: What would I say to a colleague struggling with this same situation? Then extend that same support inward. This quiet act of self-kindness will help you feel better, recover faster, and lead more effectively.

Restore: Replenish your emotional reserves.

When we push through emotionally difficult events without pausing to recover, we slowly drain our emotional and physical reserves. Over time, this can lead to [emotional exhaustion](#) and damage our mood, health, and effectiveness. Just like athletes need rest after an intense game, professionals must replenish after emotionally demanding situations at work.

Without replenishment, the risk of burnout and long-term health issues climbs. Ironically, the more depleted you become, the less likely you are to engage in the very behaviors that would help. This is known as the [recovery paradox](#): when you need a break the most, you're least likely to take one.

Critically, recovering isn't just about taking time off. It's about engaging in the *right* kinds of experiences. [Research](#) highlights four that are particularly effective:

- **Detachment**, or giving your mind a true break. Resist checking email after hours and avoid replaying the workday in your head.
- **Relaxation**, or building in moments like taking a walk without your phone, listening to a calming playlist, or spending quiet time outdoors.
- **Mastery**, or doing something that challenges you in a positive way. Try a new recipe, pick up a hobby, or learn something unrelated to your role.
- **Control**, or protecting pockets of time where *you* choose what to do, even if it's just saying no to one more commitment.

If you think you don't have time to relax, or worry that it might seem selfish, think again. [Research](#) shows that when leaders spend time on hobbies, relaxation, or other enjoyable activities after work, both they and their teams feel and perform better the next day.

Intentionally investing in recovering after an emotionally demanding stretch isn't just helpful; it's essential to leading today. Reflecting, reframing, and restoring don't just help you reset in the short term; they also help you build the emotional muscle to handle future challenges with more steadiness and strength. Because your team doesn't just need you today—they need you to last.

