EXHAUSTED

An A–Z for the Weary

ANNA KATHARINA
SCHAFFNER

Profile Books

Contents

Introduction

Do you feel tired and exhausted all or much of the time? Are you living to work, rather than working to live? Have your to-do lists and responsibilities become an unmanageable burden, filling you with dread? Are you feeling disengaged and demotivated? Perhaps you find yourself constantly questioning your accomplishments and skills, adding inner noise to outer stressors? If so, then this book is for you. It brings together insights, both old and new, into the causes of and cures for our collective exhaustion, and will, I hope, inspire you to find new ways to overcome that state and to revitalise yourself. For exhaustion threatens the very core of our being: if we feel lacking in energy, strength and time, we switch into a zombie-like survival mode. We become alienated from our emotions and desires and lose sight of what really matters to us and what makes us happy.

First of all, know that you are not alone. For the bleary-eyed are legion. Exhaustion in general, and its modern-day offspring burnout more specifically, are among the most prevalent ills of our age. Because work tends to dominate most of our lives and thoughts, and also because almost everything can feel like work these days, burnout has become the most talked-about exhaustion-syndrome of our times. A recent report by the American Psychological

Association found that burnout and stress are at an all-time high across professions, having been significantly heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic.[1] I, too, used to be exhausted all the time. My mind had turned to ash, my life seemed flat and dull and work felt interminable. Although I had a permanent job at the university in theory, the threat of redundancy had been hanging over my head for half a decade. While our student numbers steadily shrank each year, my anxiety and stress levels increased. I spent a lot of time worrying about what I could do instead, and I could think of very little. In addition, the fear of losing our jobs created a toxic culture at work, which, combined with feelings of helplessness, loss of purpose and fear of unemployment, is of course a perfect recipe for burnout. I came to know that state intimately.

Strictly speaking, burnout is an occupational malaise – a state of exhaustion caused by chronic stress at work. Research has shown that, in the vast majority of cases, the causes of burnout are not our faulty coping mechanisms – as the happiness industry wishes to make us believe – but are deeply rooted in our working environments.[2] The top five reasons for burnout are unfair treatment at work, unmanageable workloads, lack of role clarity, poor communication and support, and unreasonable time pressures.[3] We can also burn out because we feel we lack control and agency, or because we experience a clash of values.[4] Burnout is often related to violations of our dignity at work, and to a feeling that we are not valued. Most of us do not suffer burnout on account of our bad stress management skills, but because the structures in which we are embedded are making us ill.

Yet what happens to us at work is rarely the only cause of our exhaustion. The deeper origins of chronic or recurring exhaustion tend to be more complex, involving both outer and inner factors that may not be limited to the world of work. Sometimes, we can be our own bad bosses, having internalised injurious attitudes to work. Our current burnout culture is rooted in deeper and older beliefs about time and productivity, which affect us even if we are not working for others.

We may also be depleted because we use up too much of our energy in internal psychological warfare – battles between different parts of ourselves with conflicting aims and values. That was definitely true in my case. I was exhausted by an unkind voice in my head, constantly questioning everything I achieved, dragging my accomplishments into the mud. That hounding inner voice is in fact very common. It has many names – internal critic, cruel superego, inner demon, saboteur, judge and negative self-talk. Whatever we prefer to call it, the good news is that there are strategies for reducing our inner critic's draining impact, and finding ways to project our energy outwards, towards the people and projects we care about. Ultimately, that is what overcoming exhaustion is all about: replenishing and freeing up our energy so that we can consciously choose how to use it.

I have always been interested in psychology, especially in our shadows – the less conscious parts of our psyches, our individual and collective blind spots. Partly to make sense of my own chronic exhaustion, and as part of my continued work as a cultural historian, I wrote a book

on exhaustion's long history.[5] I was interested in tracing our current beliefs about energy, time, work and productivity back to their origins. More recently, I published a book on the ancient art of self-improvement – much of which revolves around strategies for directing our energies outwards, rather than being passive victims of our unconscious patterns and fears.[6] While I love the deep history of psychology, I also grew ever more interested in its living practice. I dabbled in psychoanalysis for a while and then trained as a coach. Eventually, I started my own coaching practice and specialised in helping the exhausted. Much in the tradition of the wounded healer, we tend to want to teach what we ourselves have to learn. In this *A–Z*, I share with you my own favourite reflections on exhaustion – ranging from ancient wisdom, theological treatises and philosophical and literary works to insights from my own coaching practice and the latest scientific research on stress and burnout.

We may be forgiven for thinking of our own time as the age of exhaustion par excellence – defined, as it is, by an all-pervasive cultural overvaluation of work, highly addictive information and communication technologies and the endless psycho-social pressures of neo-liberal capitalism. Recently we have seen an unprecedented rise in depression, chronic stress and burnout in the workplace. Lockdown-related home-working has not helped. Work seems to have infiltrated all aspects of our lives. What is more, increasingly, we see our whole lives through the lens of work: we tend to think of ever more processes as effortful labour – including our relationships with partners, friends and our

children, our health and fitness and our psychological and spiritual development. We often feel we must excel in and 'work on' all of these areas, and this choice of words is telling. The psychoanalyst Josh Cohen writes: 'Working, understood as both labour and functionality, is now the imperative of our time.'[7]

Cohen describes burnout as a 'small apocalypse of the soul' – an inner inferno that can also constitute a moment of rebellion against the injunction to work at all times.[8] By contrast, rather than viewing it as a temporary crisis, the journalist Anne Helen Petersen argues that burnout is the foundational condition for millennials today. In a 2019 BuzzFeed article that went viral, she illuminates the structural economic causes of the current burnout epidemic amongst her generation.[9] Burnout occurs, Petersen writes, 'when the distance between the ideal and the possible lived reality becomes too much to bear'.[10] The social contract is broken: education is no longer a safe pathway to social mobility and stable middle-class employment. Millennials are the first generation in modern times that is financially worse off than their parents. All the stories on which they were brought up – that hard work always pays, that the best succeed in a meritocratic free market, that all will be well if only they find jobs they love – have imploded.

It is true that we seem to live in particularly dark and fast-moving times. There are several serious crises that threaten the way of life we are used to – climate change, war, pandemics, economic uncertainty and growing political polarisation are chief amongst them. Yet exhaustion is in fact a ubiquitous and timeless phenomenon. It features

at the centre of a range of past and current syndromes, including not just burnout but also melancholia, acedia, neurasthenia and depression. Writers and thinkers across the ages have claimed to be exhausted and look back nostalgically to periods in the past that they imagine as less wearying. Reflections on the limited nature of our energies, and the internal and external causes that may deplete them, can be traced all the way back to ancient China.

The critic Frank Kermode writes:

> We think of our own crisis as pre-eminent, more worrying, more interesting than other crises. … It is commonplace to talk about our historical situation as uniquely terrible and in a way privileged, a cardinal point in time. But can it really be so? It seems doubtful that our crisis … is one of the important differences between us and our predecessors. Many of them felt as we do. If the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them.[11]

Although our ancestors may have used different images and metaphors to describe the experience, I found it immensely comforting to learn that we are not the only ones to have struggled with exhaustion. People in many historical periods and across cultures have wrestled with exhaustion, speculated about its origins and devised cures and therapies for overcoming it. The good news is that we still have much to learn from the ancients, and from other cultures.

What changes through history is not the experience of exhaustion as such, but rather the metaphors we use to

describe it and the stories we tell to explain its causes. Theories of exhaustion, moreover, are also powerful barometers for dominant cultural anxieties and aspirations. They often concentrate on very specific cultural discontents. In our age, for example, the focus tends to be on addictive tech, the psychological effects of relentless growth imperatives and worries about our ever more porous work–life balance. But in the past, people were concerned about the adverse effects of brain work, evil noon-day demons, lukewarm religious faith, too spicy diets, overexciting novels, gory news stories, motor cars, female emancipation and the insidious impact of the planet Saturn.

Lastly, different theories of exhaustion can also yield insights into how we think about our agency and willpower. Do we pin our exhaustion predominantly to inner or outer causes? Do we think of exhaustion as mainly a mind, body or a broader cultural phenomenon? Do we believe that we can influence the things that deplete us, or do we see ourselves as victims of vampiric forces that are beyond our control? The stories we tell about our exhaustion matter, for they shape our experience of it and the actions we take to counter it.

In this *A–Z* you will therefore not only find reflections on the latest psychological research on stress and burnout, but also encounter the thoughts of listless monks, weary melancholics, Renaissance alchemists and overstimulated neurasthenics. You will meet fictional figures such as Bartleby, Dante and Oblomov – all of whom are guides with precious wisdom to share. I strongly believe that to overcome our own exhaustion, we need mixed mental arts

– both old and new perspectives, drawn from science, literature, philosophy and psychology. For new is not always better. Often, it is the timeless ancient models that hold the key to our present-day challenges. After all, our species has struggled with exhaustion since the beginning of time.

The writer Jonathan Malesic argues that burnout is a cultural rather than individual problem.[12] It is in fact both. The roots of our exhaustion are often anchored in deeper cultural beliefs, which, in turn, shape our individual behaviours. This *A–Z* is a self-help book, but one that seeks to explore our shared cultural assumptions around work, exhaustion and productivity. We have underestimated the healing power of philosophical reflections and historical and sociological insights for far too long. They have to become active curative ingredients in our attempts to tackle our exhaustion, and can help us to see our problems from a different perspective. Shifts in perspective, both subtle and large, can propel us out of our paralysis and enable us to take action. Not everything is our personal responsibility, and nor are many of the dilemmas with which we wrestle unique to us. Many of the factors that cause our exhaustion are structural and cultural in nature. What is more, some of the beliefs that are making us ill are not just the product of recent neo-liberal efficiency enhancement drives. They are much older than we think, their roots reaching far back in time.

The essayist, poet and activist Audre Lorde writes: 'There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives.'[13] This is also true of our exhaustion – it has multiple and complex causes, both inner

and outer in nature. I exclude from my discussion cases of exhaustion that are the result of clearly identifiable medical conditions. Exhaustion that is not obviously traceable to one singular cause, however, requires a transdisciplinary and systemic approach that doesn't just focus on outer or inner factors but explores the ways in which they intersect. A fast-growing number of researchers are now analysing the ways in which social and cultural forces shape our mental well-being.[14] I believe that they also have to feature much more prominently in our self-help literature.

As a culture, we fetishise productivity and efficiency to such an extent that this overvaluation has dramatically backfired and is making an increasing number of us ill. 'Our bodies and minds are overworked by more than work', Josh Cohen writes. 'They are subject to a culture that relates to every moment as an opportunity to produce or consume.'[15] Most of us are so burnt out because we are entangled in what are essentially very damaging assumptions about time and how to use it. These beliefs have become so normalised that we think of them simply as natural, as the way things are. The American writer David Foster Wallace beautifully captures what such naturalised ideology may feel like:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'[16]

My hope for this book is that it will help you to see more clearly the water in which we all swim and that makes us so very tired.

This guide comprises a series of exhaustion-themed mini-essays that cover topics such as capitalism, energy, joy, life-cost, rest, time, perfectionism and work. It invites you to learn both from cutting-edge research and from history and ancient wisdom. You can dip in and out of this *A–Z* at your leisure and start with whichever topic calls you first. The order in which you read the entries does not matter. Because I know that your energies are likely to be limited, all entries are short. I recommend that you read no more than one a day. That way, the ideas you will encounter can properly sink in and slowly seed new perspectives. Over the course of a month or so, they will gradually change your perception of your own exhaustion. Most importantly, they will alter how you feel about it. For all true transformation must result in changes to the structure of our feelings. Knowledge that lives just in the head is useless. The German writer Goethe observed that 'Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.' For that reason, you will also encounter practical advice to help you take concrete steps towards restoring your state of vitality.

This book would not have been possible without my wonderful coaching clients – all the exhausted writers, academics, activists, painters, doctors, founders, soldiers, lawyers, managers and CEOs with whom I have had the privilege to work over the years. I have learned so much from all of you. Theory is one thing, but lived experience

and how to deal with it in all its maddening messiness and surprising beauty is quite another. You know who you are – thank you for sharing your struggles, wisdom and insights.

A is for Acceptance

When we find ourselves slowed and weakened by exhaustion, the first step is to accept that we can't keep on doing what has brought us to this point. Exhaustion is a warning sign, both from the body and the mind. It is an injunction to pause and to seek rest. If we are truly burnt out, we may find ourselves unable to concentrate or even to engage in any work-related tasks at all. Our body is saying no, refusing to function until we have addressed the underlying issues. By breaking down, it seeks to protect us from further injury and wishes to communicate something. But what exactly is our exhaustion trying to tell us?

It may well be truths that are hard to hear. When we have given our all, and more, to professions for which we have trained and which have been the focus of all our striving and passion, it can be deeply threatening to imagine a future that entails doing something else. It may also be near-impossible for us to envisage how we could live and work differently, or how we might begin the arduous task of establishing more solid personal boundaries, which can entail conflict for which we have neither the appetite nor the energy. We may not even be prepared to admit that we aren't really coping with the many demands on our time and attention, and strive instead to keep going, no matter at what cost. We might also have to take a sober,

unflinching look at our coping strategies, which may well be exacerbating our problems. 'What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?' the philosopher Bayo Akomolafe asks.[1] Perhaps we are leaning too hard on alcohol, work, shopping or comfort eating to manage the chronic stressors in our lives. We may have turned into procrastinators or avoiders, or else succumbed to feelings of bitterness and resentment.

Whatever our exhaustion is trying to tell us, the starting point on our journey back to vitality must be to accept that there is a problem. Next, we need to decide which parts of our circumstances are and which are not under our control, and then focus our remaining energy on what we can control. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus sums this up neatly: 'Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.'[2] In other words, what tends to be within our control is our inner life, our judgements, our reactions and how we treat others, while most other things, including what people think of us, are not. This insight alone is a hard pill to swallow, for most of us like to assume that we have much more agency and control over our lives than we do.

If the causes of our exhaustion are mainly internal, such as an overactive inner critic or a tendency to catastrophise, we can benefit from seeing a therapist or a coach, or seek to train our hearts and minds on our own. The Buddhist psychologist Tara Brach understands radical acceptance as learning to recognise what is true in the present moment

and cultivating mindfulness and compassion. Radical acceptance is about being fully aware of what is happening within our bodies and minds at any given moment, without judging or seeking to control it. It entails feeling sorrow and pain without resisting it, and regarding what is happening with an open and loving heart. Brach writes:

> Radical Acceptance reverses our habit of living at war with experiences that are unfamiliar, frightening or intense. It is the necessary antidote to years of neglecting ourselves, years of judging and treating ourselves harshly, years of rejecting this moment's experience. Radical Acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our life as it is.[3]

But if the causes of our exhaustion are external, the matter becomes more complex. While many of us will be affected by both inner and outer stressors, it is highly likely that a large part of our exhaustion is rooted in work-related matters. These include unmanageable task loads, unreasonable deadlines and a lack of autonomy and appreciation. We may suffer continuous moral injury in jobs we cannot leave for financial reasons. We may also be sick of people telling us to strengthen our resilience, to breathe deeply and to establish firmer boundaries between our work and our home life. But what, then, are we to do when we cannot realistically change the external causes of our exhaustion?

Audre Lorde writes: 'Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me.' Practising radical

acceptance of what we can't change is not defeatism. Instead, it is a wise decision that allows us to direct our energy towards what is within our control, rather than pointlessly wasting it by fretting over that which we can't change. It is, in other words, an energy-saving technique. Energy is, of course, in very short supply when we are exhausted, so energy conservation is essential. In addition, acceptance will allow us to feel more at peace with ourselves and our circumstances.

Radical acceptance entails acknowledging both our inner and our outer realities. Let's start with the former. Self-acceptance means accepting the good and the bad, including our most undesirable traits and habits. It is only when we fully own our darker parts that we can begin to change in a meaningful way. The psychologist Carl Rogers observes the 'curious paradox' that 'when I accept myself as I am, then I change'.[4] One of the founding fathers of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Albert Ellis, was famously dismissive of the concept of self-esteem. Self-esteem, he felt, is always reliant on achievement and external approval and is linked to conceptions of success-bound value and worth. Instead, Ellis urges us to practise unconditional self-acceptance – warts and all. Self-acceptance, in Ellis's view, entails a fundamental and unshakeable respect for our personhood, whether or not we perform well, and whether or not other people approve of us and our behaviours. 'Unconditional acceptance', he argues, 'means liking yourself, others, and the world when you are not getting what you want and in spite of your getting what you don't want.'[5] Ellis urges us fully to accept ourselves as 'valuable

and enjoyable humans' regardless of whether we are successful and productive and whether others approve of or love us.[6] That is, of course, much easier said than done. And it is hardest to practise self-acceptance when we are on our knees, unable to perform as we used to, feeling helpless and broken. But these moments are also a true litmus test.

Being human, taking risks and having skin in the game also entails that we will make errors and not always feel good. We will get hurt and we won't always succeed, even if we try our best. While we can direct and control our effort most of the time, we cannot control the outcomes of our striving. There are many obstacles out there, some of which are structural in nature, as well as competing agendas and desires. We can't change our past or predict our future. But if we let go of our 'woulds', 'coulds' and 'shoulds', we may be better able to tap more into an 'it is what it is' mindset.

It is also true that it can be harder than we think to know what is good or bad for us, as the Daoist parable of the farmer demonstrates. That farmer is a paragon of gracious acceptance. Crucially, he accepts both what seems initially positive and negative with equanimity, refusing to make rash judgements. In fact, he refuses to make any judgements at all:

> Once upon a time in ancient China there was a farmer who owned a horse. 'You are so lucky!' his neighbours told him. 'You have a horse that can pull the cart for you.'
>
> 'Maybe', the farmer replied.
>
> One day he forgot to close his gate and the horse

ran off. 'Poor you! This is terrible news!' his neighbours cried. 'Such bad luck!'

'Maybe', the farmer replied.

A couple of days later the horse returned, bringing with it six wild horses. 'How wonderful! You are the luckiest person ever', his neighbours told him. 'Now you are rich!'

'Maybe', the farmer replied.

The following week the farmer's son tried to break in one of the wild horses. It kicked out and broke his leg. 'Oh no!' the neighbours cried, 'such misfortune, all over again!'

'Maybe', the farmer replied.

The next day the Emperor's soldiers came to the village and took away all the young men to fight in the war. The farmer's son was left behind. 'You are so lucky!' his neighbours cried.

'Maybe', the farmer replied.[7]

The farmer wisely yields to whatever fate presents him with, neither rejoicing nor despairing over his circumstances. He offers no resistance to what happens to him because he knows that external events are beyond our control and will keep changing. What is more, we simply cannot know what will turn out to have been good or bad events in our lives.

Accepting what is, and letting go of what we think should be, is an essential pillar of Daoism. In its central text, the *Tao te ching* (c. fourth century BCE), the philosopher Lao-tzu advocates a mindset based on acceptance

that is truly radical. In Daoism, acceptance centres on the idea of offering no resistance to the natural order of things. It is a form of yielding and going with the flow. Lao-tzu promotes a sophisticated form of submitting our will to cosmic forces by accepting what is and loosening our attachments to specific outcomes. He invites us to adopt a mindset of radical reconciliation with whatever life throws at us – not least because everything is in flux.

What we judge to be bad one moment may prove to have been good for us in the longer run. This is true of our state of exhaustion, too. For our exhaustion may compel us to listen to our body. It may lead us to change our lives, protect us from future harm, or else simply to give ourselves up to a period of rest and reflection.

B is for Burnout

The term 'burnout' emerged in the 1970s in the US. It quickly became a popular metaphor for mental and physical exhaustion caused by chronic stressors in the workplace. At first, burnout was thought to affect mainly people in helper professions – social workers, teachers, psychotherapists, counsellors, carers and nurses. People working in health and education tend to be driven by altruistic rather than materialist motives. And the higher our expectations, and the more we associate our professions with purpose and meaning, the greater our despair and suffering when reality bites. Being burnt out, thus understood, means we have become martyrs to our own high ideals. The writer Jonathan Malesic defines burnout as the experience of being pulled between expectations and reality at work. We burn out, he argues, not because we are exhausted but because our hearts are broken. Our love for work went unrequited – it did not love us back. And nor did it bring us the dignity, purpose and recognition for which we hoped. Burnout, he writes, is 'an ailment of the soul. We burn out in large part because we believe work is the sure path to social, moral, and spiritual flourishing.'[1]

The American social psychologist Christina Maslach provided the first tools for measuring burnout in the 1980s and also formulated its standard definition: 'Burnout

is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind.'[2] The symptoms of 'depersonalisation' can include a cynical, callous or indifferent attitude towards the people with whom we work – be they patients, students, customers, colleagues or clients.

In the late 1980s and 90s, burnout was gradually recognised as a serious occupational health condition that can occur in any sector. It was subsequently defined more broadly as 'a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform'.[3] Alternatively, we can also look at burnout as a process, the gradual erosion of a positive state of mind. Burnout thus understood is a state in which our engagement wanes, in which 'energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness'.[4]

The key symptoms of burnout are exhaustion in the form of a deep kind of fatigue that isn't curable by resting. This state tends to be accompanied by a very negative assessment of the value of our work, and resentment of the people with whom we work and the organisations in which we are embedded. When we are burnt out, we may also experience brain fog and an inability to concentrate. We may suffer from insomnia or restlessness, we may drink too much, be prone to procrastinating and engage in endless displacement activities. We often become increasingly unable to do the work we are expected to do, and may feel a great sense of shame about our inability to perform as

we used to. In cases of very serious burnout, we may even suffer a full-scale nervous breakdown and suddenly become completely unable to function at work and perhaps also in other areas of our lives.

Today, everyone is talking about burnout. This is partly because the popular consensus on what burnout is has become ever looser. It is a welcoming metaphor, allowing people to project all kinds of agendas onto the term. Recently, burnout statistics have gone through the roof.[5] What is going on? Why has burnout become so ubiquitous? Are we really more exhausted and depleted than ever before, or do we just talk about it more?

As mentioned in the introduction, Anne Helen Petersen draws attention to the complex structural conditions of burnout amongst millennials, showing that the dream of endless generational social mobility has come to a halt and that many of the work- and self-realization myths millennials were fed have turned to ash. Education and getting a college degree are no longer a route to a stable middle-class existence. Permanent employment with pensions and benefits and fairly compensated work is harder to secure than ever, as more and more jobs are outsourced to freelancers and associates. They battle with high student debts, unaffordable rents and limited opportunities. Millennials live in a state of permanent precarity, a feeling that everything they have ever worked for could just disappear. They have internalised very damaging attitudes to work and rest, basically feeling that they should be working all the time. All of this demands a high psychological toll. 'The burnout condition is more than just addiction to work', Petersen writes:

> It's an alienation from the self, and from desire. If you subtract your ability to work, who are you? Is there a self left to excavate? Do you know what you like and don't like when there's no one there to watch, and no exhaustion to force you to choose the path of least resistance? Do you know how to move without always moving forward?[7]

There is no doubt that the twenty-first-century world of work entails unique psycho-social and economic stressors. Many of them are perfidious. The demands of neo-liberal competition and the growth imperative, which is based on maximising profit and optimising resource extraction at all costs, come at a price. As do email and social media, which make some things easier and many others much harder – and our constant availability means it is much more difficult to escape the things that cause us distress. While our attention spans have shrunk, our loneliness levels have increased. Because we are constantly connected and reachable, the boundaries between work and leisure have become more porous than ever, with work constantly bleeding into our mental, digital and physical spaces. Moreover, most of the tech we use at work and at home is designed to make us addicted to it, and new technology in particular has had a significant negative impact on our mental health. Finally, economic uncertainty and the threat of climate change, as well as pandemics and war, have made many of us feel very anxious. We are constantly exposed to upsetting news, and yet have very few practical means of taking action on the key issues of our

day. Although our ancestors, too, struggled with exhaustion, there can be no doubt that we live in particularly fast-changing, complex and worrying times.

And yet, strange as it might seem, burnout is a diagnosis that also has positive connotations – like the 'fashionable diseases' of the past, melancholia and neurasthenia, a nineteenth-century forerunner of burnout that was based on the notion of nervous weakness. Melancholia was firmly aligned with creativity, scholarship and genius, while neurasthenia was associated with brain work, sensitivity and an artistic constitution. Burnout is, in part at least, a similarly heroic diagnosis, worn by some as a badge of honour. Being burnt out signifies that we have given everything, and more, to work. The burnt out literally take work deadly seriously. They are in constant demand, highly important and extremely conscientious. They care. They take on responsibility – more than they can carry. They always help out. They are not shirkers. They are not losers. In fact, research suggests that a very large percentage of the burnt out are former winners and high-flyers.[8]

This does not mean that I wish to diminish the suffering we feel when we burn out. Nor is being in that state in any way a cakewalk. It is not. For many of my clients, burnout is an existential threat, forcing them completely to re-evaluate their lives, and often to abandon the careers for which they spent years preparing. What makes burnout so dangerous is that it traps us in a no-man's land where we can neither work nor allow ourselves to rest. Many of us feel tremendous shame and guilt about burning out – very much the opposite of feeling heroic. My point is

simply that burnout is a diagnosis that comes with some cultural validation and even status. It bears, for example, less stigma than depression and other mental health conditions. And this is the case because our culture validates work, and working hard, and, to a certain extent at least, looks kindly on those who are wounded in the battlefield of work. Being burnt out also means to be a victim of the values of our age. And there is some solace and community to be found in that.

But what can we actually do when we are burnt out? How can we heal? I continue to be struck by the paradox that looms so large at the heart of the debates: the happiness industry pushes individual coping strategies, while research shows that in the vast majority of cases, it is our working environments that are making us sick. The burnout researchers Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter identify six main factors causing burnout in organisations: excessive workload, insufficient autonomy, inadequate rewards, breakdown of community, mismatch of values and unfairness.[9] When we experience any of these at work, we are much more likely to burn out. A growing number of healthcare professionals argue that burnout should be reconceived as 'moral injury', that it is a result of unbridgeable value clashes, ethical dilemmas and continuous violations of our dignity at work.[10]

The World Health Organization clearly defines burnout as an occupational health condition, not a mental health issue. But even the WHO's definition of burnout is troubled by what I call the 'burnout paradox': 'Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic

workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.'[11] This sounds accusatory, putting the onus on the sufferer, blaming, in essence, the burnt out for their bad stress management skills. What might 'successful management' of chronic stress even look like? There is an undeniable tension between conceptions of the role of external structures and personal agency. What can we really do, then, to counteract occupational burnout, other than leaving our jobs or radically reforming our workplaces – both of which are not realistic options in most cases? It is, first and foremost, the organisations that cause their staff to burn out that need coaching and training, not their burnt out employees.

When in the grips of burnout, then, we need to be very discerning about what is and what isn't our personal responsibility. Part of what makes burnout so intractable and difficult to treat is precisely that it is mostly a result of structural forces. But that insight alone can be healing: by recognising the social factors of burnout that aren't our fault, rather than seeing it as an inherent failure of our own (or as a badge of honour), we can begin to take back some power for ourselves.

‘It is always a delight to read Anna Katharina Schaffner. Humans have been exhausted forever, and Schaffner knows better than anyone the centuries of philosophy, psychology, art and literature that people have created to name and overcome their weariness. There are no short-cuts to healing from burnout. But reading *Exhausted* is like having a brilliant, compassionate and good-humoured guide showing you there is a way forward’
Jonathan Malesic, author of *The End of Burnout*

Anna Katharina Schaffner is a cultural historian and burnout coach, and is the author of *The Art of Self-Improvement: Ten Timeless Truths*, and a novel, *The Truth About Julia*. She has written for the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Guardian* and *Psychology Today*. Her research has featured on BBC Radio 4 and in *Vogue*, the *Atlantic*, *National Geographic* and *Philosophie Magazine*.

Praise for *Exhausted*:

'Satisfying … engaging … useful'
Times Literary Supplement

'Offers advice and guidance on how to address fatigue and exhaustion'
Sunday Post

'In *Exhausted*, Anna Katharina Schaffner delivers a compelling dive into the intricacies of our collective fatigue, blending ancient wisdom with contemporary research. This book is not just a reflection on the pervasive burnout culture but a beacon of hope, offering a practical roadmap to recovery. Schaffner's eloquent prose and compassionate outlook make this a must-read for anyone grappling with the pressures of modern life'
Anne-Laure Le Cunff, author of *Tiny Experiments*

'Schaffner is insightful, charming and visionary, both in her description of ailment and her selection of cures. As ever, the answer to everything can be found in a book'
Susan Elderkin, co-author of *The Novel Cure*