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DARLING

the art of being a woman



BURN it OUT

In my mid-20s, I worked in fundraising for a major American orchestra. The tech boom had gone bust in San Francisco, where I lived, so I felt grateful for a steady, well-paying job. My employers were kind and caring, and I supported the organization's mission. Still, it failed to engage me at a deeper level and after just two years, I couldn't sit through *one more* meeting, tolerate *one more* request from my boss, or see the purpose in much of anything required of me. No new human resources initiative could restore my faith; no vacation could recharge me. It felt like an illness. My symptoms? Lethargy, eye-rolling, mild depression, irritability, gastrointestinal pain and countless wasted hours on the internet.

We're all familiar with the term "burnout," borrowed from the aerospace industry to describe when a jet runs out of fuel. Jets crash without fuel, as do employees without passion—and many employers observe that women are crashing harder and sooner than men.

WHY ARE WE ALL SO DEPLETED, AND WHAT CAN WE DO TO REPLACE WHAT'S BEEN LOST?

"The most common cause of burnout is work-related stress," says Geiska Velasquez, a career coach who entered her field after burning out in a previous position. "Temporary stress is best treated through self-care, a concept that women don't practice with enough regularity or attention." While most of us experience temporary stress, she says, if left unaddressed, the condition can become chronic as a result of emotional exhaustion, a toxic work environment, and a lack of personal connection to the work.

When people experience professional burnout, their productivity nosedives, which explains why some companies offer employee engagement programs with more vacation time, greater autonomy, and connection to the purpose and results of the company's mission. While these efforts on employees' behalf can be effective in boosting performance, most women aren't lucky enough to work for companies with engagement programs. What's more, those programs don't address the individual style of every employee.

In my situation, I never saw that it was up to me to take responsibility for blazing my own trail out of temporary burnout before it became chronic. If I could go back in time to when I still had a quarter tank of fuel before burning out, what would I have done differently?

SPEAK TRUTH. I'm very familiar with the persistent internal voice that tells women to do more, give more, be better, have more, help everyone, be strong ... and look stunning. I expect myself to be kind and authentic, selfless and self-aware, ambitious and grounded, nurturing and aggressive. I've also often expected the impossible from my employers. I've spoken unfairly to coworkers about our boss and listened to them complain too. But whenever I do, the resentment is impossible to shake. Disrespecting leadership is like poison: it's toxic to me, my colleagues and the organization. Of course, staying mum has been more challenging under bad leadership, but I've found that when the seal is broken on bad-mouthing those in authority among my peers, toxicity is the inevitable outcome.

Several years ago, a therapist ordered me never to say the word "should" again, either about myself or anyone else. The effect has been miraculous. Instead of believing I should be more, more, more, I deepen my concentration and remember *I am enough. I do enough. I have enough.* This simple mantra serves to reconnect me with the truth of the life I'm living, even when I don't at first believe it. Furthermore, it helps me to remember that those around me are enough too.

Choose reality. As everyone's line between work time and home time blurs, so increases our burnout potential. It doesn't help that we're all addicted to our inboxes. Research shows that checking email lights up the same parts of our

brain as the pleasures of sex, food and drugs. I admit to experiencing email-craving; unlocking my phone sometimes feels like playing a slot machine. It also leaves me feeling just as empty.

Building wider margins into my life for true interactions and experiences offers a slower but much more satisfying pleasure than checking email ever could. One small way I commit to this is by refusing to touch any device for 30 minutes after waking or before falling asleep. Instead, I read, exercise, journal, meditate or daydream. When I follow through on my commitment, I'm closer to my senses, and therefore to true pleasure, whether that manifests in the scent of fresh bread or the vibrant yellow color of a falling leaf; I'm more curious, alert, relaxed and slightly more ready to take on even the most daunting task or personality.

Live backward. Some seasons of life raise the question: *Where is this all going?* When work is my everything and passion starts to ebb, fear about my direction is never far behind. To see my way toward a richer, more multifaceted life, I've started to ask myself: *Who would I like to be when I'm on my deathbed?* This might sound morbid but it's a great exercise in coming home to my truest self. I ask questions like: *What sorts of contributions do I want to have made to the world? Who do I want by my bedside, and what do I want them to be able to say?* When I write the answers down and make one small move in their direction, I'm surprised the refreshment that just a little bit of focus can bring to my present circumstances.

Still, I have to remember that while this reverse engineering is helpful and grounding, no amount of scheming can control life's unexpected twists and turns. In this respect, Julia Child is my hero. One of our nation's most revered cooks didn't learn the skill until she was 37 years old. Life is short, yes, but it's also long and surprising.

ASK FOR MORE. More than half of women in the workplace have a second job: motherhood. For my part, I often feel like I'm failing at both my career and my parenting—a situation most men don't deal with, yet they consistently ask for raises more than women do.

"If a woman is working harder than she needs to and not getting rewarded for it, that's a recipe for burnout in a hurry," says Velasquez. She cites compensation as the third highest motivator for employee engagement, which means making money isn't the only reason we work, but it's still a major influence on our commitment. The truth is, most of our bosses have no idea how much we do. Without whining, can we be frank about our workload and ask for what we're worth? Pay scale is just one way we value our talents and time, but it's an important one.

USE YOUR GIFTS. I know from experience that the happy haze of a raise or promotion wears off after six months. There's more to employee engagement than just money. In fact, I've found that when I use and am appreciated for my talents, I'm willing to work for *less* money. And that's just what Velasquez says: The number one motivator at work is the opportunity to use our unique gifts (number two is a good employee-employer relationship).

Looking back on my time at the orchestra, I wish I'd identified what I loved about my job and asked my boss for more. I enjoyed meeting with patrons one on one but detested event management; I was energized by copywriting in the privacy of my cubicle, but dreaded large meetings. Had I asked for more of what I liked and less of what I disliked, there may have been a way for me to find more meaning in my work. When we remove the lens of burnout and see our workplace as a temporary learning environment where we can test and prove our gifts and abilities, we are often surprised by what we're good at and what we enjoy.