

Tips to beat burnout

An expert in resiliency in the face of trauma offers ways to deal with today's challenges and stressors

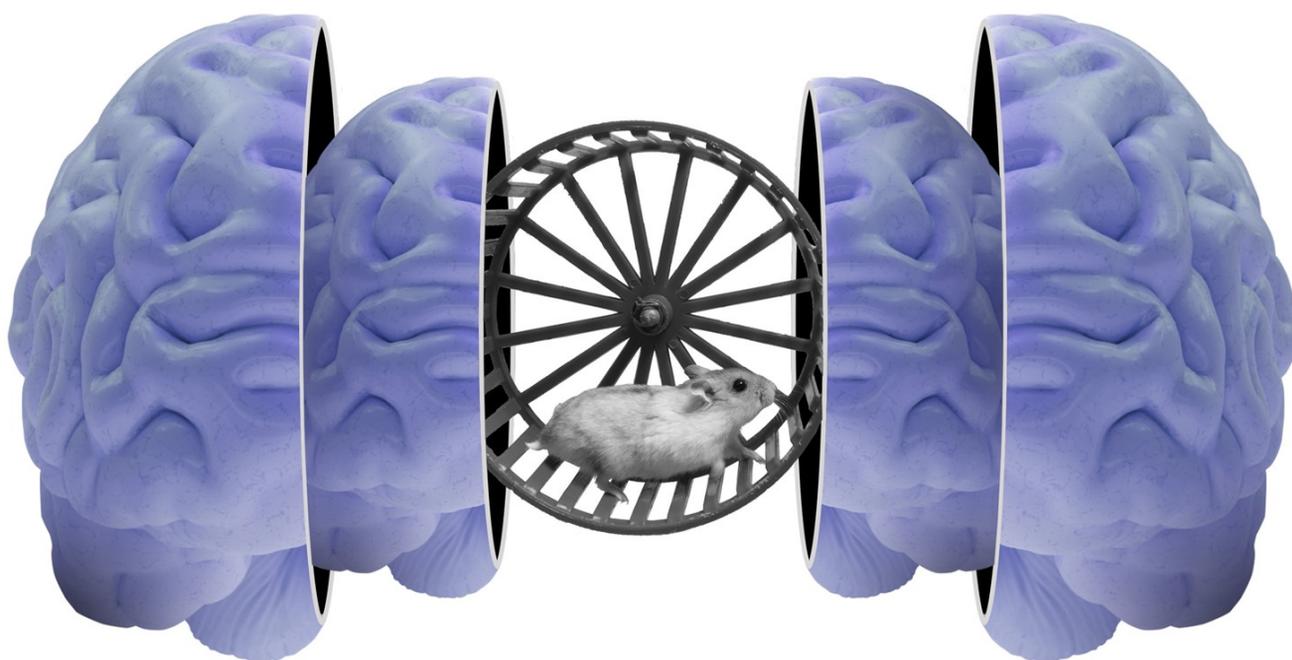


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BY ADA TSENG AND CLAIRE HANNAH COLLINS

For people with high-stress jobs — maybe you're a paramedic, social worker or anyone with challenging deadlines — there are times when your adrenaline is going, you feel alert and you're very productive.¶ But if you stay there all the time without rest, you're going to burn out, said psychologist Marlene Valter. ¶ Valter is the founder and chief executive of AnaVault, a Santa Clarita-based company that supports people with mental health challenges. It provides resiliency training for all types of demanding professions but, in particular, for peer-support specialists. These are people with lived experience with mental illness who help patients in recovery.

They tend to have a lot of trauma in their lives, Valter said. They've overcome many challenges to get healthy, and when they want to get back into the workforce, it's imperative that they can build enough resiliency so they aren't risking their own mental health.

"But even folks who are usually functioning very well who have been hit with COVID anxiety, depression and hopelessness, they too will have to think about building back up," Valter said.

Burnout can take a toll on your self-esteem, she said. You're tired. You can't concentrate. You're acting cold and callous toward people you actually care about. You wonder why you hate this job that you know you love. You start freaking out.

Valter said that the people who are the most vulnerable to burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are the ones who are big-hearted and really want to help their community.

"The last thing we need are detached people," she said. "So how do we save our most wonderfully warm-hearted, empathetic people? That's who we want in these jobs. So how do we preserve them?"

Valter walks us through the six steps to resilience taught in AnaVault's training.

SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation — the ability to manage your emotions and behavior even in the face of trauma — is the foundation of resilience, Valter said.

When we sense danger, the brain activates our sympathetic nervous system, triggering a fight-or-flight response; other parts of our brain shut down so we can cope with the stress in front of us.

"It's kind of like zebras out on the grassy plains," Valter said. "They're grazing. It's beautiful, warm, relaxing, and they really relax their bodies. Then they see a lion — danger — and they take off immediately."

As soon as the danger is gone, zebras will go back and relax again, she said. And the human equivalent of that is the way the parasympathetic nervous system shifts our bodies back into relaxation mode when we sense we're no longer in danger.

"The difference between animals and humans," she continued, "is when we have that lion show up in our lives, we might take off or we might fight, but then we link memories and emotions and thoughts to that danger. So when we see something similar, we have learned to think that is a dangerous thing."

Sometimes the new danger is real. Other times, we might be reacting to a past trauma. So the first step is teaching people how to not be impulsive and reactive.

"If you're always stressed and upset and feeling like it's dangerous, the part of the brain that shuts down is your judgment, creativity and systematic decision-making," said Valter.

Sure, you can do some yoga or listen to music for half an hour, but often we don't have time for that. Valter suggested getting in the habit of taking five to 10 seconds to scan from the top of your head to your toes and relax all the muscles in your body, she said.

Many people think that the part of meditation that helps relax the body is the breathing part, she said, but it's the relaxing of the muscles. And you can do that throughout the day, 50 times a day.

"Now when you're facing a stressor, a deadline, a difficult boss or co-worker or family member, you can take five seconds to relax and face the trauma and forever change the wiring of your brain," said Valter. "This gets you off of an old hamster wheel of anxiety."

INTENTION

Figure out your purpose. Valter describes this step as brain research and spirituality coming together.

"It's about the person being free to choose the life they want to live, rather than a life that past ghosts and traumas have patterned them to live," she said. "It's up to you to make your code and make your choices, but be thoughtful about it."

And then if you're acting in a way that's against your intention and your code, that's when you know to stop, relax and think about who you want to be in this situation.

COGNITIVE REFRAMING AND PERCEPTION CHANGE

The third step is rethinking how you have been looking at certain things in your life — opening yourself up toward a less rigid, more flexible perception of the world.

"You can only change what you have control of," Valter said. "You can't change what you don't have control of."

It's not that you shouldn't still advocate for change, she said, but if you do, it needs to be with intention and passion.

SUPPORT

Find your support team, the people who inspire you to be your best and who will give you feedback when you're not being your best, Valter said.

"It doesn't have to be the people you work with or your family," she said. "There's a group for everybody. ... Find the people who care about you, who make you feel free to be yourself."

GRIT

"As you get passionate, but then the realities of the world come in, you have to keep doing the work over and over and run into stressors that you didn't expect," Valter said.

It's important to build grit, so that in these challenging moments, you can relax and figure it out.

SELF-CARE

You need to exercise, pay attention to your diet and sleep — the basics.

But Valter said it's just as important to learn how to practice self-care quickly in the moment when you get triggered by something stressful.

“It's about facing traumas with relaxation instead of tensions,” she said.

Rest looks different for different people, and rest doesn't necessarily look like doing nothing, she said.

Distractions — whatever gets you in that relaxation mode — are good for your mental health. One of the biggest causes of burnout is repetition, she said. So it's helpful to turn your focus toward something you can lose time in and get sent to another place for a while.

“Even if it's just for a few minutes, the more that becomes a daily routine, where you include these little distractions and happinesses, it makes the work so much easier.”

In the end, Valter said it's not about living a non-stressful life.

“If you want to be challenged, go for it,” she said. “Just add these parts into your daily routine and you will be OK.”