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# **I AM EDITOR: Is This Burnout? You Aren't Alone in Asking the Question**

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(Left) Beth Godbee, Ph.D.  
(Right) Candace Epps-Robertson, Ph.D.

## Is This Burnout? You Aren't Alone in Asking the Question

**Disclosures:** We are writing, researching, and learning more about burnout because we are offering [workshops building to one-day retreats in spring 2024 and a cohort forming for fall 2024](#). EON is not endorsing this program, and we were not compensated for this article. If you're interested in learning more about the work we are doing through Heart-Head-Hands, consider joining an upcoming workshop, or [let us know that you'd like to receive more information](#). We'll reach out personally.

### “Is this burnout?”

So many of us are asking this question and wondering if what we're feeling is burnout. Is it burnout or exhaustion? Burnout or anxiety? Burnout or worker exploitation? Burnout or unreasonable expectations? Burnout or toxic workspace? Burnout or I'm 100% in caregiver mode? Burnout or over-capacity? Burnout or the world is on fire? Burnout or a breaking point? Burnout or ...?

These questions illuminate how burnout is related to all of these [both personal and shared, collective conditions](#) and so much more.

So many of us are experiencing burnout. And it's not surprising when we consider how the language of “burnout” is a shorthand for being “burned up” by systemic injustice, including the cumulation of [everyday microaggressions](#), [presumed incompetence](#), and other [characteristics of white supremacy culture](#) and systemic oppression. We regularly talk with others who are similarly cycling through exhaustion, weariness, frustration, and disappointment, if not deeper hurts. We know that [burnout is never just about burnout](#).

The two of us ([Beth](#) and [Candace](#)) have experienced burnout and know that the word itself feels tender. Burnout is so widespread that the World Health Organization recognizes burnout as an [occupational phenomenon](#) and many authors-researchers-educators articulate how it stands in for exploitive conditions we're living within (two examples include [Tricia Hersey's Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto](#) and [Gabor Maté's The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture](#)). Even though burnout is so widespread and never really/only about burnout, it still takes a lot to say “I am burned out/up.” And there are a lot of reasons for this—from cultural pressures to individually “catch” and “prevent” burnout before it occurs to the inevitable actions that can turn our lives upside down once we acknowledge this reality.

So, we offer these reflections ([part of our larger framing about burnout](#)) because we know that so many of us are in a period of recognizing and responding to burnout. We know that we've needed to read others' stories and realize that we aren't alone in the experience. We know that we've grounded our bodies by affirming *time and time again* that we haven't done anything wrong, that the conditions create the burnout, and that in actuality, we are feeling *burned* and [burned up](#). And we know that we've moved from asking "is this burnout? is it just me?" to answering "yes, it's burnout, *and* it's not just me!" These moves have happened with and alongside others.

From here, we offer three moves: (1) providing glimpses into our own experiences with burnout; (2) sharing our guiding beliefs about burnout; (3) closing with contemplative practices and resources—a guided meditation, reflection questions, and book recommendations—which we hope provide next steps.

## 1. Our Experiences with Burnout

One of the many things we've come to understand about burnout is how isolating the experience can be. We recognize that each person's experience is likely to be different. Still, we believe sharing our stories is important so that we can feel less alone, identify the complexity of how burnout shows up in relation to systemic injustice, and imagine collective interventions.

We both hold a number of personal stories of burnout. Some are shaped by our experiences in academic contexts and toxic workplaces. Some are connected to our experiences as caregivers. Many are related to our embodied experiences—racial, gendered, economic, and intersectional positioning—in the world. We find both connections in these experiences and can trace differential risks, options, and areas for unlearning.

*As you read our stories, do you notice any similarities with your own?*

### Candace's Story:

For me, burnout began when trying to manage multiple adjunct positions and flared again in graduate school as a parent with young children. The pressures of supporting the needs of family and [sustaining writing projects](#) often resulted in little time to care for myself. Burnout continued throughout the tenure track when managing complex caregiving roles for both parents and children along with the challenges of not having a locally-based support network. During my own burnout seasons, to take time to do anything other than what was on a to-do list either felt impossible because of the fatigue, or frivolous because of the demands for my time. It's hard to imagine anything when operating from a place of energy deficit. Burnout has often left me feeling isolated and hopeless.

What has helped is deep reflection and awareness that burnout is not because of my own lack or ill preparation, but because of the tenuous employment conditions many face as graduate students, the cost of housing and childcare, and the lack of aid for caregivers managing care for complex medical and mental health challenges. To move through burnout has meant recognizing that I did not get here because of my own negligence. And

through being in community with others, I can safely share my experiences and find a number of pathways for rest and support.

### **Beth's Story:**

Similarly, I have experienced burnout multiple times: during graduate school, in the midst of family crisis, and around back surgery; in the early years as a faculty member; in the lead-up to tenure; and as a small business owner striving to make this work *truly work*. Burnout has also arisen around intensive therapy, and it has offered numerous lessons, much like other surprising teachers.

I have a clear memory when I first named burnout during my faculty career. I knew that things weren't right for some time, and I was itching to make big changes. I was also so exhausted that I couldn't take action toward those changes. I spent hours filling coloring book pages and crashing after any time on campus. It took a lot of deep compassion, permission to grieve, and outrage that the conditions are what they are (which is wrong!) before I could begin asking myself: *What now? What next?*

These experiences have been part of what's brought the two of us together, and they are also part of what motivates us to learn, teach, and hold space around burnout.

*What are some of the experiences you feel are important to narrate for your story? We invite you to write stories of burnout and then to ask: what are these stories alerting me to? What might they offer as teachings?*

## **2. Our Guiding Beliefs about Burnout**

As we process our experiences with burnout, we know that burnout is much more than individual. It is always related to conditions of oppression: being *burned up*—used up, taken for granted, overworked, devalued, exploited, enraged, and inflamed. It can also hold many lessons for us, signaling long-held patterns to unlearn. Moving through burnout can involve reconnecting with ourselves and living with more awareness, intentionality, and inner knowing. And these personal changes are only part of the story. *Micro-* interventions happen alongside the need for *meso-* (family, department, group) and *macro-* (systemic, institutional) change. Navigating burnout, therefore, can point us in multiple directions, toward multiple pathways.

### ***What are our guiding beliefs for navigating pathways through burnout?***

- Burnout can happen during many phases/stages of one's life.
- Burnout is not (NOT!) a sign of failure, laziness, or lack.
- Burnout can impact all facets of life—from work and home life to relationships with family, friends, and ourselves.
- Burnout is a multi-faceted experience: emotional, embodied, intellectual, relational, economic, and spiritual.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating burnout.
- Navigating burnout invites self-work and intervention into systemic injustice.

- The pathways through burnout can take us in many directions, calling for many sorts of small and BIG changes.
- Pathways through burnout arise best when journeyed together in community.

*Our guiding beliefs shape the ways we navigate burnout. What beliefs do you hold about burnout? And how are those beliefs guiding the ways you relate to the experience?*

### 3. Contemplative Practices and Resources: A Few Next Steps

As you can likely imagine, our experiences and beliefs have taught us (Beth and Candace) that it helps to be in community. Though burnout can feel like such an isolating experience, it doesn't have to be.

Throughout this article, we have posed questions that we hope may be seeds for next steps. We find that it helps to slow down, to pause for reflection, and to get more curious about what we are experiencing *and why*. We want to close, therefore, by offering a few more contemplative practices and resources, which we hope support you in asking and answering “is this burnout?”

To begin, guided meditations can help with grounding and listening to intuition and embodied wisdom. In this past blog post, “[Contemplative Practices for Setting Intentions and Welcoming the New Year](#),” Beth shares a 23-minute yoga nidra practice. We both appreciate practices that tune us into our body. You might listen to this or another guided meditation before journaling.

Next, we invite you to spend some time with [journaling as a contemplative practice](#). You could use any of the questions throughout this article. Or consider what your future self might want you to know. Imagine yourself in the future—a few months or a year or a few years from now. This future self is a wiser, older you who has been where you are and learned from the experience. They now have some distance from the turbulence of everyday life. What would your future self want you to know? Feel free to jot insights or write a longer response in letter form.

Finally, consider what sources—books, podcasts, [museum exhibits](#)—might provide inspiration. When we are burned out/up, then we need extra fuel to reignite and build our fires. Some of these sources might help us name and interpret what we're experiencing now, and some of them might be far afield but [lift our spirits—like a BTS playlist does for Candace](#). Here are four of our favorite books for understanding and re-orienting ourselves during burnout:

- [Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto by Tricia Hersey](#), Founder of [The Nap Ministry](#) (Hachette Book Group, 2022)
- [Homecoming: Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self by Thema Bryant](#) (Penguin Random House, 2022) and the related [Homecoming Podcast](#)

- [\*Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself\* by Nedra Glover Tawwab](#) (Penguin Random House, 2021)
- [\*Wintering: The Power of Rest During Difficult Times\* by Katherine May](#) (Penguin Random House, 2020)

*May this be a beginning. Can you imagine letting go of anything keeping you from reigniting or being ablaze? What would you want to call in to feed imaginative play, processing, and pathways through burnout?*

## Bios:

This article is co-authored by [Beth Godbee, Ph.D.](#) and [Candace Epps-Robertson, Ph.D.](#)

[Beth Godbee, Ph.D.](#) is a public educator, writer, and coach (previously tenured professor) with commitments to social, racial, and environmental justice. Beth left a faculty position in 2018 after years of burnout and has written about her experiences with both career discernment and burnout in [\*Inside Higher Ed\*](#). Like Candace, Beth brings experience with and commitments to contemplative writing, meditation, and intuitive + embodied decision-making.

[Candace Epps-Robertson, Ph.D.](#) is a writer and educator who has also been a caregiver for most of her working life. [\*She's contended with various stages of burnout\*](#) on the tenure track as a writer, teacher, and caregiver for aging parents with terminal conditions. Her commitment to helping others manage burnout is grounded in mindfulness practices, experiencing writing as a practice of self-discovery, and believing in the power of shared stories and experiences for transformation.

## Want to know more?

If you would like to connect with others similarly navigating burnout, we invite you to [upcoming workshops on practices for navigating burnout](#). In each workshop, small groups come together to play, plan, and practice. We begin with a welcome and introductions. Then we share three practices for navigating burnout: (1) a somatic/grounding practice, (2) a ritual/art practice, and (3) a contemplative writing practice. We close with time for group conversation and Q&A.