



## Can burnout actually be good for you?

BY HEATHER HUDSON

Health and wellness consultant Jenny Dempsey believes it can. In fact, she credits burnout for leading her to make some of her best, most life-changing decisions.

“Burnout is a slap in the face that tells you you’re doing something that’s not on the right path for you. It’s your body’s way of shaking you into looking at what’s not working in your life,” she said.

As a “semi-retired people pleaser,” she knows a bit about this. Dempsey is the customer experience manager for [NumberBarn](#), a telecom startup. She’s also a customer support and experience consultant on the side—and runs [Jenny Dempsey Wellness](#). (Her specialty is self-care and wellbeing for customer service leaders and agents.)

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With all that going on, you’d think she’d be ripe for burnout. Turns out,

it's the opposite. She thrives on the variety and industry of managing the businesses she loves. Burnout for her would be a career that had her sitting idle for much of the time.

“The definition and signs of burnout are completely bio-individual. It's never going to be the same for me as it is for anyone else,” she said. “In fact, it might be different for each of us at different life stages.”

## **Burnout and customer service**

The customer service field is rife with ways to burn out. From spending your days saying yes to leaders to delighting customers to mentoring colleagues, it's easy to sweep your own well-being under the rug as you rush to help others, says Dempsey.

“I've been working in customer service since 2005 and I've experienced burnout myself and seen it happen to many others. It's a natural symptom of putting others' needs ahead of our own.”

Unlike many wellness consultants, she welcomes the telltale signs of burnout in her body: daily stomach aches, sleep anxiety attacks, even pimples. She's come to understand that if she doesn't make a change, they will only continue and worsen.

“My perspective is different than most because I think burnout is not something we want to prevent. It's uncomfortable and never any fun but that is the point. It's a signal that it's time to pay attention to what we're feeling and address it,” she said.

## **5 ways to manage burnout**

Dempsey recommends embracing burnout and taking action to move forward in five distinct ways:

### **1. Acknowledge it**

Most of us know, on some level, when we're pushing ourselves too hard—or heading in a direction that isn't right for us. Dempsey says you'll recognize the signs of burnout in yourself, whether it's extreme fatigue, headaches, insomnia, pain, loss of appetite, or other symptoms that tend to appear when we're at our most stressed. The trick is acknowledging them.

“If you're experiencing physical symptoms and they're the same things that have come up in the past during stressful times, it's helpful to simply acknowledge what's bothering you and give yourself space to feel your feelings.”

This is a difficult step for many people who may choose to shop, eat, drink, or find other ways to try to block the pain.

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## **2. Communicate it**

Once you’ve named the source of your burnout, Dempsey recommends sharing it. “You might look at getting a therapist or having a difficult conversation with a boss, friend, or family member. Some people like to journal about it because it makes them feel like they’re talking to a friend. It doesn’t matter how you do it, just get it out of your head.”

Her clients often say that when they’ve expressed that they’re experiencing burnout, it becomes real and they’re able to look at ways of relieving the problem.

## **3. Celebrate it**

It might feel unnatural to do a dance because you feel absolutely ravaged, but Dempsey says it’s an important step to overcoming burnout.

“Celebrate that frazzled feeling because when you’re aware of it, you can start to do something about it. It’s a gift that helps us make a change rather than go along with our lives, accepting the things that make us unhappy and feel unfulfilled.”

## **4. Wave a magic wand**

“One thing I do with coaching clients is ask, ‘If you could wave a magic wand and change anything in your life, what would you change?’” said Dempsey.

The answers never fail to be illuminating. The task allows people to take the focus off the problem and consider the ideal circumstances they could create in their life if they could. When they’ve finished imagining a better reality, they can compare it with the current one and look for ways to shift from one to the other.

## **5. Make a tiny change**

When you’re in active burnout, it’s daunting to think about big changes like quitting your job, leaving your partner, or moving across the country. The key to guiding yourself to a better pathway is baby steps, says Dempsey.

She advises looking for the tiniest of actions that you can take to move

yourself away from the things that are burning you out.

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“Someone I worked with was so overwhelmed and frustrated with wearing so many hats in their company. The tiniest thing they could change was delegating one task to another person who could benefit from learning it,” she said.

“That one task led to more delegating and from there we started to reframe what delegating looked like and how it would help them while also supporting others and their learning. In time, they were like, ‘This isn’t so bad. I’m doing my job and not 10,000 other tasks and I’m no longer angry and fried.’ Everything changed from one tiny action.”

## **Avoiding burnout**

Given her stance on celebrating burnout, it may come as no surprise that Dempsey is not the expert on preventing it. “I typically avoid the word prevention. In my mind, it sets false expectations. Instead, I coach people on staying tuned into their feelings so they can catch it early.”

She likens this approach to taking Vitamin C to prevent colds. “You can take as much Vitamin C as you want, but if you’re around a child with the sniffles, chances are, you’re going to get sick. Burnout is similar. Being aware of what’s bothering us is the Vitamin C. But we can accept and understand how to take care of ourselves if we get the cold—or go into full-blown burnout. It’s all part of being human,” she said. “I look at burnout as a tool that’s going to inspire us to move forward.”