

# Beyond the Surface: Understanding and Addressing Burnout Through a Psychodynamic Lens

Tatiana Zdyb, Ph.D.\*

Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Audacity Health Inc., Canada

## \*Corresponding Author

Tatiana Zdyb, Ph.D. Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Audacity Health Inc., Canada.

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## Abstract

*This paper offers a psychodynamic conceptualization of burnout, moving beyond purely symptomatic descriptions to explore the deeper unconscious processes at play. Burnout, often characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, is typically understood through cognitive-behavioral and socio-organizational frameworks. While valuable, these perspectives may overlook the internal conflicts, defensive strategies, and early relational dynamics that contribute to an individual's vulnerability to burnout. Drawing on object relations theory, ego psychology, and self-psychology, this paper posits that burnout can be understood as a failure of psychic regulation, stemming from unresolved intrapsychic tensions. The paper will elaborate on how maladaptive coping mechanisms, the internalization of demanding super-ego ideals, and the repetitive enactment of early relational patterns can precipitate and perpetuate the burnout syndrome, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of this pervasive modern affliction.*

**Keywords:** Burnout, Psychodynamic, Job Dissatisfaction

## 1. Conceptualizing Burnout

Burnout, once dismissed as mere stress or fatigue, is now widely recognized as a distinct syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. While cognitive-behavioral and organizational perspectives offer valuable insights into its causes and remedies, a deeper understanding emerges when we consider the psychodynamic dimensions. This approach delves into the unconscious conflicts, early relational patterns, and ego defenses that can predispose individuals to burnout, offering a more holistic and often more profound path to recovery and prevention.

Burnout is defined by the WHO “as a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; (emotional exhaustion)
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; (depersonalization) and
- reduced professional efficacy (accomplishment)”

Consistent with this The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a leading research instrument in the field, defines burnout as a

psychological syndrome comprising three dimensions:

- *Emotional Exhaustion:* Feelings of being overextended and depleted of emotional resources.
- *Depersonalization:* A cynical or detached response to others, often seen in human services professions.
- *Reduced Personal Accomplishment:* The feeling of ineffectiveness and a lack of achievement in one's work.

## 2. Unconscious Conflicts and Early Experiences: Unveiling the Unconscious Roots of Exhaustion

From a psychodynamic viewpoint, burnout is not simply a reaction to excessive external demands but can be a manifestation of unresolved internal struggles. Early childhood experiences, particularly those related to attachment and the formation of self-esteem, play a crucial role. Individuals who grew up in environments where their emotional needs were consistently unmet, or where love and approval were conditional upon achievement, may develop a deep-seated need for external validation. This can manifest as an insatiable drive to perform, to be indispensable, or to constantly prove one's worth, often at the expense of their own well-being.

For example, a person who felt unseen or unvalued unless they were "perfect" or "achieving" in their youth might unconsciously

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replicate this dynamic in their professional life. They may take on excessive responsibilities, struggle to delegate, or find it impossible to say no, driven by an unconscious fear of rejection or inadequacy. The relentless pursuit of external success becomes a defense against underlying feelings of emptiness or worthlessness. When this defense mechanism is constantly activated without sufficient internal resources or external support, emotional exhaustion inevitably sets in.

This article explores burnout through a psychodynamic lens. This perspective invites us to delve deeper than the surface symptoms and consider the unconscious factors, early life experiences, and internal conflicts that may contribute to this condition. It moves beyond the typical self-care solutions and explores how our individual histories, defense mechanisms, and relational patterns can play a significant role in the development and experience of burnout. This deeper understanding can inform more effective and lasting approaches to treatment and prevention.

My aim is to offer you a new framework for understanding burnout—one that acknowledges the complexity of the human psyche and provides a richer understanding of this pervasive issue.

### 3. Psychodynamic Conceptualizations

Psychodynamic theory, most famously associated with Sigmund Freud, in simple terms states that our unconscious mind plays a huge role in shaping our behavior, feelings, and personality. Consider that there's a part of your mind that you're aware of (for example what you are thinking right now), but there's a much bigger part hidden beneath the surface that you do not directly have direct awareness of. This hidden part holds things like past experiences, especially from childhood, and unresolved conflicts. Psychodynamic theory suggests that these unconscious thoughts and feelings can influence what we do and how we feel, even if we don't realize it. It also emphasizes how early childhood experiences can have a lasting impact on our adult lives.

There are a number of psychodynamic theorists and clinicians, this article provides an overview of how Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Carl Jung may have conceptualized burnout.

If Freud were alive today, he might describe burnout through the lens of his psychoanalytic theories, focusing on the interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind, and the impact of the ego, id, and superego. Freud might see burnout as a manifestation of several interconnected psychological processes:

- **Ego Depletion and Psychic Energy:** He might describe burnout as a state of ego depletion, where the ego, responsible for mediating between the primal drives of the id and the moralistic demands of the superego and the external world, becomes overwhelmed and exhausted. The constant need to manage these conflicting pressures and maintain defenses would drain psychic energy (libido), leading to feelings of exhaustion and a reduced capacity to cope with stress.
- **Unresolved Conflicts and Repression:** Freud might also

explore whether burnout is linked to unresolved unconscious conflicts. For example, an individual driven by a strong, perhaps unconscious, need for achievement or to please others (rooted in early experiences) might push themselves relentlessly. When this drive clashes with the limitations of reality or the individual's own capacity, it could lead to internal conflict. The resulting need to repress feelings of frustration, inadequacy, or resentment could contribute to the emotional exhaustion characteristic of burnout.

- **Narcissistic Wounding:** Freud's theories on narcissism could also be relevant. He might suggest that burnout could arise when an individual's idealized self-image (ego ideal) is threatened by the inability to meet their own high standards or the demands of their work. This could lead to feelings of failure and a depletion of self-esteem, contributing to the "reduced personal accomplishment" aspect of burnout.
- **Defense Mechanisms:** He might analyze the defense mechanisms employed by individuals experiencing burnout. For instance, depersonalization (a sense of detachment) could be seen as a defense mechanism to protect the ego from overwhelming emotional distress. Cynicism might be a form of displacement or reaction formation against feelings of helplessness or disillusionment.

In essence, Freud would likely delve into the inner world of the individual experiencing burnout, seeking the unconscious roots of their exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy. He would probably emphasize the importance of bringing these unconscious conflicts and dynamics into conscious awareness through something akin to psychoanalysis to understand and address the underlying causes of burnout.

- **Psychoanalysis/Talk Therapy:** The cornerstone of Freud's approach. Through regular sessions, the individual would be encouraged to talk freely about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts. This process, known as free association, aims to bring unconscious material to the surface. By exploring these hidden conflicts, the individual can gain insight into the psychological roots of their burnout. (do free association exercise)
- **Dream Analysis:** Freud considered dreams the "royal road to the unconscious." He would likely encourage us to pay attention to our dreams and bring them to therapy for interpretation. Dreams, in his view, often express unconscious wishes, fears, and conflicts in symbolic form. Understanding these symbols could provide valuable clues about the internal pressures contributing to burnout.
- **Identifying Defense Mechanisms:** Freud believed that the ego employs defense mechanisms to protect itself from anxiety. In the context of burnout, someone might be using denial ("I'm just a bit tired, it's fine"), repression (unconsciously pushing down feelings of overwhelm), or intellectualization (talking about work in an overly detached way). Bringing these defenses to light would be crucial to understanding what the individual is trying to avoid or manage.
- **Exploring Early Experiences:** Freud's theories heavily emphasized the impact of early childhood experiences on

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adult personality and psychological well-being. He might explore past relationships and significant life events to see if any unresolved issues are contributing to current patterns of overwork or emotional depletion.

**Working Through Transference:** In therapy, patients often unconsciously transfer feelings and patterns of relating from past relationships onto the therapist. Analyzing this transference can provide insights into the individual's relational patterns and how they might be contributing to difficulties in setting boundaries or managing stress in their work life. In the workplace, an employee might unconsciously transfer feelings towards a demanding parent onto their supervisor, leading to an exaggerated sense of fear or a compulsive need to please, regardless of the supervisor's actual demeanor. This can lead to an unhealthy dynamic where the employee constantly overextends themselves to gain approval that is unconsciously tied to past relational patterns.

Essentially, Freud would advocate for a deep, introspective process aimed at uncovering the unconscious psychological factors fueling the burnout. The goal would be to achieve greater self-awareness and work through underlying conflicts to alleviate the symptoms and foster a more balanced psychological state.

Alfred Adler, like Carl Jung, was a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society founded by Freud. He might see burnout as arising from several interconnected factors:

- **A Lack of Social Interest:** Burnout could indicate a turning inward, where the individual becomes overly focused on personal achievement or the demands of work to the detriment of their connection with others and contribution to the common good. A lack of genuine social interest can lead to isolation and feeling unsupported, exacerbating burnout.
- **A Faulty Striving for Significance:** Adler believed people strive for significance. However, this striving can become unhealthy if it's based on a need to prove superiority or avoid feelings of inferiority. Burnout might occur when someone relentlessly pushes themselves to achieve an unrealistic sense of significance, neglecting their well-being in the process. This could be fueled by underlying feelings of inadequacy they are trying to compensate for.
- **A Dysfunctional Lifestyle:** Adler emphasized the concept of "lifestyle," the individual's unique way of approaching life, developed early on. A lifestyle characterized by perfectionism, a need to please, or a fear of failure could predispose someone to burnout by leading to overwork and neglecting personal needs.
- **Discouragement:** Adler saw discouragement as a primary obstacle to healthy functioning. Burnout could be a manifestation of feeling deeply discouraged, perhaps feeling that one's efforts are not making a meaningful difference or that one is unable to meet the demands placed upon them.
- **Lifestyle Assessment:** Exploring early recollections, family dynamics, and the individual's basic convictions to identify

patterns and mistaken goals that might be contributing to the burnout. This helps bring unconscious patterns into awareness.

- **Encouragement:** Providing genuine encouragement to counteract feelings of discouragement and build self-confidence. The therapist would focus on the individual's strengths and efforts rather than just outcomes. (mention positive qualities diary)
- **Developing Social Interest:** Helping the individual reconnect with others and find meaning in contributing to the welfare of the community. This could involve activities that foster a sense of belonging and purpose beyond work.
- **Identifying and Challenging Mistaken Beliefs:** Examining and challenging any unrealistic expectations, perfectionistic tendencies, or beliefs about self-worth that are driving the individual to overwork.
- **Setting Realistic Goals:** Working collaboratively to establish achievable and meaningful goals that align with a healthier lifestyle, balancing work with personal needs and social connections.
- **Acting "As If":** Encouraging the individual to experiment with new, healthier behaviors – acting "as if" they are already more balanced and less driven by the pressures that led to burnout.
- **Creating Insight:** Helping the individual gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of their behaviors and how these might be unintentionally contributing to their burnout.

In essence, Adler would likely see burnout as a sign that the individual's striving for significance has become misdirected, leading to a lack of social connectedness and a neglect of their overall well-being. Recovery would involve reorienting this striving towards more socially constructive goals and developing a healthier lifestyle based on courage, connection, and a sense of belonging.

From a Jungian perspective, burnout can be conceptualized as a state of psychic exhaustion resulting from a significant imbalance within the psyche. This imbalance often arises when an individual becomes overly identified with one aspect of themselves (often the persona, the social mask related to work or societal expectations) at the expense of other vital parts, including the shadow, the anima/animus, and the deeper Self.

Jung might see burnout as:

- **Over-identification with the Persona:** Individuals experiencing burnout may have become too attached to their professional role or external image, neglecting their inner needs and authentic Self. This can lead to a depletion of psychic energy as the ego strains to maintain this one-sided identity.
- **Neglect of the Shadow:** The "shadow" encompasses the disowned or repressed aspects of ourselves. If these aspects are consistently ignored to maintain a certain professional facade, the psychic tension can build, contributing to exhaustion. Burnout could be a sign that the shadow is demanding recognition and integration.
- **Imbalance of Anima/Animus:** Jung recognized the presence

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of both masculine (animus) and feminine (anima) energies in everyone. Burnout might occur when one of these is excessively emphasized at the expense of the other. For example, over-focus on action and productivity (animus) without sufficient attention to receptivity and self-care (anima).

- Disconnection from the Self: The "Self" is the archetype of wholeness and the guiding principle of individuation. Burnout can signify a disconnection from this deeper center, leading to a loss of meaning and purpose beyond external achievements.
- Recovery, from a Jungian standpoint, would involve a journey towards greater psychic integration and wholeness (individuation). This might include:
- Shadow Work: Exploring and integrating the disowned aspects of oneself. This could involve acknowledging vulnerabilities, setting healthier boundaries, and recognizing the limitations of the persona.
- Attending to Dreams and Symbols: Jung saw dreams as messages from the unconscious. Paying attention to dream imagery during burnout could reveal underlying imbalances and pathways toward healing.
- Active Imagination: Engaging in a dialogue with the unconscious through imagery and fantasy can help to understand and integrate different aspects of the psyche.
- Reconnecting with the Self: Finding activities and practices that nourish the soul and bring a sense of deeper meaning beyond work. This could involve creative expression, spending time in nature, or spiritual practices.
- Balancing Inner Polarities: Consciously working to integrate the anima/animus, finding a healthier balance between action and receptivity, logic and emotion.
- Therapy: Jungian analysis can provide a space to explore these unconscious dynamics, work with dreams and symbols, and facilitate the process of individuation. The therapist acts as a guide in the individual's journey toward wholeness.

In summary, Jung would see burnout as a call from the deeper psyche to re-evaluate one's life and move towards a more authentic and balanced existence, integrating all aspects of the Self rather than being solely defined by external roles.

#### 4. Comparison to Contemporary Approaches to Burnout

There are a number of excellent self-help resources for understanding, recovering from and preventing burnout. For example: Sophie Cliff's (2025) *The Hustle Cure emphasizes* [1]:

- Practical strategies including but not limited to focusing on actionable steps to reduce workload, prioritizing well-being, setting boundaries, and potentially re-evaluate one's relationship with productivity and achievement.
- Mindfulness and self-care: Incorporating practices like mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and prioritizing self-care activities to manage stress and restore energy.
- Shifting mindset: Encouraging a move away from the glorification of busyness and towards a more balanced and sustainable approach to work and life.

While addressing the symptoms of burnout is helpful and important, without necessarily tackling the root causes in the unconscious, we may find ourselves stuck in a cycle of burnout and recovery. While Cliff's approach might advocate for practical changes in workload, the deeper processing characteristic of psychodynamic counselling identifies and addresses the underlying psychological drives (e.g., unconscious need for approval, fear of failure) contributing to burnout.

Freud, Adler and Jung would emphasize that burnout often stems from internal psychological conflicts, not just external pressures. Simply reducing workload or practicing self-care might offer temporary relief, but lasting recovery requires understanding and working through these internal dynamics.

Emily and Amelia Nagoskis' (2020) *Burnout* provides another example of a modern model. In it the Nagoski sisters advocate for and educate about [2]:

- Completing the Stress Cycle: They argue that burnout isn't just about the stressors themselves, but about the body's physiological stress response getting stuck. Recovery involves actively completing this cycle through physical activity, positive social interaction, affection, and creative expression.
- Societal Factors: They highlight how societal expectations and pressures, particularly for women, contribute significantly to burnout.
- Emotional Processing: They underscore the importance of allowing ourselves to feel our emotions fully to move through them and prevent getting stuck in a state of exhaustion.

While their primary focus was the psyche, Freud, Adler and Jung would not necessarily dismiss the importance of the body. They might see completing the stress cycle through physical activity, etc., as a way for the ego to discharge pent-up psychic energy that arises from unresolved conflicts or the constant management of internal pressures.

Freud's concept of the superego, representing internalized societal and parental expectations, aligns with the Nagoskis' and Cliff's emphasis on societal factors. They might argue that these external pressures become internalized, leading to a harsh superego that constantly demands more, contributing to ego depletion and burnout.

The Nagoskis' focus on feeling emotions resonates with the Freudian idea that repressed emotions can lead to psychological distress. Freud would likely see burnout, in part, as a consequence of the ego's efforts to repress overwhelming or unacceptable feelings related to stress, inadequacy, or resentment. He would advocate for bringing these feelings into conscious awareness through therapy.

Combining short-term solutions for burnout with psychodynamic interventions offers a powerful approach, addressing both immediate symptoms and the deeper, often unconscious, factors contributing to its development and maintenance.

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## 5. In Summary

Behavioral and conscious shifts towards a healthier work-life balance and uncovering and resolving unconscious psychological conflicts aren't mutually exclusive. Addressing practical aspects of burnout can provide some relief, making it more manageable to then delve into deeper psychological exploration.

Exploring how psychodynamic theory can enrich our understanding of burnout includes:

- **Unconscious Conflicts:** How unresolved past conflicts and early childhood experiences can manifest in current work-related stress and burnout.
- **Defense Mechanisms:** The role of defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, projection, splitting) in coping with workplace stressors and their potential contribution to burnout.
- **Object Relations:** How difficulties in interpersonal relationships, particularly authority figures or colleagues, can fuel burnout.
- **Narcissism and Idealization:** The link between unrealistic expectations, the need for external validation, and the vulnerability to burnout.
- **The impact of organizational systems and dynamics on individual experiences of burnout.**

## 6. Overcoming and Preventing Burnout

Moving beyond symptom management involves self-reflection and gaining insight into one's unconscious motivations, conflicts and patterns of relating through such. A psychodynamic approach to treating burnout involves helping individuals gain insight into these unconscious processes. This often includes:

- **Exploring Early Life Experiences:** Understanding how early attachment patterns, family dynamics, and experiences of validation or invalidation have shaped current coping mechanisms and self-worth.
- **Identifying and Working Through Defenses:** Helping individuals become aware of their ego defenses and gradually develop healthier ways of managing anxiety and conflict. This might involve learning to acknowledge and express difficult emotions rather than repressing them, or challenging the need for constant external validation.
- **Analyzing Transference and Countertransference:** Bringing conscious awareness to how past relationships influence current workplace interactions, allowing for more adaptive responses. For example, an employee might realize they are projecting their need for parental approval onto their boss, and begin to differentiate between their past and present realities.
- **Strengthening the Ego and Self-Compassion:** Building internal resources and fostering self-compassion, so that self-worth is derived from within rather than solely from external achievements. This involves developing a more realistic and accepting view of oneself, including limitations and imperfections.
- **Setting Healthy Boundaries:** As individuals gain insight into their unconscious drives, they are better equipped to establish and maintain healthy boundaries in their professional and

personal lives, protecting themselves from excessive demands.

Additionally, some reflective journaling prompts, framed from Freudian, Adlerian and Jungian perspectives, can help to understand the dynamics underlying the experience of burnout:

### 6.1. Freudian Perspective

These prompts aim to tap into unconscious conflicts, ego depletion, and the interplay of the id, ego, and superego in relation to burnout.

1. Think about a time you felt most intensely burned out. What unconscious desires or impulses (id) might have been driving you to the point of exhaustion? Were you trying to achieve something beyond your realistic capacity?
2. Reflect on your inner "critic" (superego) related to your work or responsibilities. What demands does it place on you? How might these demands be contributing to feelings of overwhelm and burnout?
3. Consider situations where you felt you had to be "strong" or "in control." How might the effort of maintaining these defenses (ego) have contributed to your feeling drained?
4. Describe any recurring dreams or fantasies you've had during periods of burnout. What emotions or themes were present? Could these offer clues to underlying unconscious conflicts?
5. Think about early experiences with authority figures or expectations placed upon you as a child. Are there any parallels between those experiences and the pressures you feel now that might be contributing to burnout?
6. When you feel burned out, what defense mechanisms do you notice yourself using (e.g., denial, intellectualization, withdrawal)? How might these be both protecting you and hindering your recovery?

### 6.2. Adlerian Perspective

These prompts focus on social interest, striving for significance, lifestyle, and feelings of discouragement related to burnout.

1. How does your current experience of burnout affect your connections with others (family, friends, community)? Do you feel more isolated or less interested in social interaction? How might this relate to your sense of social interest?
2. Reflect on what "success" or "significance" means to you in your work or responsibilities. Are you striving for this in a way that feels healthy and sustainable, or does it feel like a constant need to prove your worth?
3. Think about your overall "lifestyle" – your habits, routines, and priorities. How might aspects of your lifestyle be contributing to feelings of burnout? Are you neglecting your needs for rest, connection, or enjoyment?
4. Describe moments when you've felt particularly discouraged in your work or responsibilities. What were the circumstances, and how did those feelings impact your motivation and energy levels?
5. Consider your early family dynamics and the roles you played. Are there any patterns from your upbringing that might influence how you approach work and responsibility now, potentially contributing to burnout?

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Choose the prompts that resonate most with you and allow yourself time to reflect honestly on your experiences.

### 6.3. Jungian Perspective

1. When you feel burned out, what aspects of yourself do you tend to neglect or suppress? Consider your less dominant qualities or desires – your "shadow." How might acknowledging these hidden parts contribute to a greater sense of wholeness and prevent burnout?
2. Reflect on the symbols or recurring images that come to mind when you think about your burnout. Do any archetypal figures (e.g., the exhausted hero, the sacrificing mother, the overwhelmed worker) resonate with your experience? What might these symbols be telling you about the deeper patterns at play?
3. Consider what your "Self" – your inherent potential for wholeness – might be urging you towards during this time of burnout. What small steps towards greater authenticity or balance feel intuitively right, even if they seem difficult?
4. Burnout can sometimes feel like a forced pause or a crisis. How might this experience be part of your personal journey of "individuation" – the process of becoming a more whole and integrated individual? What might you be learning about your limits and needs?
5. Think about the aspects of your work or responsibilities that feel most draining. Could these be connected to an over-identification with one aspect of your personality (e.g., the "achiever") at the expense of others? How might you integrate other parts of yourself into your approach?
6. What "energy leaks" do you notice when you're experiencing burnout? Are you giving too much to certain roles or expectations at the expense of your own inner resources? What might your inner wisdom (the Self) suggest you need to replenish?
7. Reflect on moments when you felt truly aligned and energized in your life. What qualities or activities were present? How might you reintegrate those aspects into your current life to move away from burnout and towards greater wholeness?

Remember to approach these prompts with openness and allow your thoughts and feelings to emerge without judgment.

### 7. In Conclusion

Modern approaches to understanding burnout offer valuable tools for managing the symptoms of burnout, particularly productivity archetype, the stuck stress cycle, unique demands faced by women and those in helping roles. Additionally, understanding the aforementioned unconscious dynamics can help individuals and organizations recognize how past experiences and relational patterns are being re-enacted in the present, contributing to cycles of overwork and exhaustion.

My experience both personally and professionally has taught me that complete recovery also necessitates exploring the underlying unconscious conflicts and the impact of the internalized demands of the superego that contribute to the individual's vulnerability to burnout in the first place. Thus, I encourage a deeper psychodynamic exploration to complement the more action-oriented approach.

While external factors like workload and organizational culture are undeniable contributors to burnout, a psychodynamic perspective reveals the intricate interplay of unconscious conflicts, early experiences, and ego defenses. By exploring these deeper, often hidden, dimensions, individuals can gain profound insights into their vulnerability to burnout and develop more sustainable ways of engaging with their work and their lives. This approach moves beyond symptom management to address the root causes, offering a path not just to recovery, but to greater self-awareness, resilience, and a more integrated sense of self. Understanding burnout through a psychodynamic lens empowers individuals to break free from self-defeating patterns and cultivate a healthier, more fulfilling relationship with their professional selves.

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1. Cliff, S. (2025). *The Hustle Cure*. Blue Star Press.
2. Nagoski, A. & Nagoski, E. (2020). *Burnout: The secret to unlocking the stress cycle*. Ballantine Books.

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