

Season 3, Episode 8
Running on Empty: A Practical Conversation about Burnout

Intro Voiceover: Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

Megan Bergfeld: Hello everyone, and welcome back to the Healthier You podcast. I am Megan Bergfeld, one of the counselors in Vanderbilt's Employee Assistance Program. Today we are joined by a returning guest, my colleague and friend Julie Burton, who is another counselor in EAP. Welcome back, Julie.

We're going to talk about burnout today, which is a concept that many of our listeners have likely heard about or experienced themselves in some way. It's a very common thing that people come to EAP to report and get help for. Even mental health professionals like us are not immune to burnout. So Julie, to start us off, what is burnout, and how does it differ from being just stressed out?

Julie Burton: When I think about the differences, stress happens. We all experience stress. But when we experience stress for a prolonged period of time without adequate recovery, and our nervous system stays activated for a long period of time, this is when we experience burnout.

In healthcare, naturally, it can be a stressful place to work. Some stress is good, but high levels of stress without the opportunity to recover causes us to get depleted and fizzle out. When we go from normal stress to burnout, we often experience emotional exhaustion that will sometimes erode the things that give us purpose and take away from our ability to have compassion and energy. What once felt like something we enjoyed and that we loved doing feels more like we're just in survival mode.

MB: It's not a fun place to sit. What are some common warning signs that we're heading for burnout?

JB: In my sessions with people, and often when I'm just acknowledging them in myself, I call them cues. There are cognitive cues, behavioral cues, psychological cues, and physical cues.

Some of those things would be trouble concentrating; we get that brain fog, and racing thoughts. Behaviorally, you may become more irritable or withdrawn. I often get more tearful and feel more dysregulated. Physically, we hold that stress in our bodies and often times we'll feel it in our shoulders. People sometimes grind their teeth. Our stomachs can feel uneasy.

It's important to recognize those cues, recognize when we're experiencing those things. Oftentimes, as caretakers, we're like sponges. We hold, we absorb, but then we get full and we need to wring out our sponge. In our office, I know we refer to this as feeling like we're a pressure cooker, or our insides are like a shaken bottle of soda. We need to get some of that pressure off; we're full. Our pop-off valve is about to explode.

For me, I'm typically able to regulate pretty well. But if I go to pump gas and the card reader isn't working, and my level of frustration with the card reader is a seven out of ten instead of a two out of ten (which it normally would be), this is my cue. This is my cue that I'm holding a lot of things inside that I need to uncork or let some pressure off because this is not something that would normally happen to me.

MB: I think this shows up for me, interpersonally, in my relationships with folks. If I'm emotionally exhausted, particularly from work, and then I try to go home and be a daughter, a mom, a partner, all those things, I have less capacity to do that. I'm a bit crankier with the people in my life. That's a sign for me, that relational sign, that I'm not feeling good.

JB: Absolutely.

MB: How do we get to this place? What causes this?

JB: There are two buckets of causes for burnout: the external contributors, external drivers, and those internal drivers.

The external things are more institutional things that we often don't have a lot of control over. Those tight schedules that we're all working under, staffing issues, high patient census, high levels of acuity. I think the healthcare culture in general is requiring more with less; less resources, fewer staff. And, that causes a lot of emotional strain.

There are also internal drivers, and I think this is where we have more agency over changing. Those things that make us really good at what we do can often be those things that end up working against us and leaving us depleted; if we are people pleasers, or over achievers, or we have unrealistic expectations of ourselves. Those are things that we often think we don't have control over, but we actually do. I think it's important to acknowledge

the voice saying, “I should have been able to handle this,” or “I could have done this differently,” or “I wish I had changed this or that,” and be more gracious and gentle with ourselves.

MB: Those internal drivers can really influence how we view ourselves, how we view our work, and how we view the world. The more we recognize when those are showing up, the more control we have over those burnout feelings over time. On that note, how do we support ourselves if we think we're at risk of burnout, or we have recognized that we're already there? What do we do? How do we recover from this?

JB: Awareness, just knowing my tank is empty, or I’m feeling more irritable, or have less emotional capacity, is one of the first things that’s important.

Then, giving ourselves compassion. It’s important to give ourselves permission to rest or maybe slow down. Athletes do this better than anyone. They know they can't win the race or compete at their best level if they have not stopped and refueled themselves. They build in rest days. They build in lighter practice days.

It’s important that we treat work as a marathon and not a sprint. The culture of healthcare is not going to change. The demands are going to continue to be what they are, so the part that’s important is trying to find agency with what we can control, prioritizing our needs, setting boundaries without guilt, and giving ourselves that rest that is so important.

MB: That's so true. Do you have any last tips for managing burnout or just a practical suggestion for folks who might be experiencing this going from work to home? What can they do?

JB: I often give this out. It’s what I call a decompression exercise. It's a four-step exercise.

First, I encourage people at the end of their shift or the end of their workday to ask, “Who or what am I carrying home with me today?” Then, “Is there anything I can actually do about this tonight, this weekend, or while I'm on vacation?”

Typically, the answer is no. This is just a recognition that I don’t need to take this with me. And, if not, I need to leave this here until I return. I think it’s okay to just conceptualize packing it up, putting it in a box, putting it in a drawer, and leaving it. Leaving it in the office until you get there tomorrow or after the weekend.

The fourth step is to ask, “What did I do today that mattered?” Oftentimes that internal, negative narrative that we have makes us walk away from our workdays looking at the things we didn’t do well or that we should have done better. This concept of asking yourself, “What did I do today that mattered?” rewrites that script and rewrites that narrative that allows us to acknowledge those things that we’re doing well.

MB: I love that. Julie, this has been very helpful. I appreciate you sharing your expertise on it. Thank you for joining me today.

JB: Thank you. And I think it's important to remember that we don't get to change the demands placed on us, but we can change the demands we place on ourselves.

MB: Listeners, thank you for tuning in to this episode. If this hits home for you, if you're feeling burned out, if you think you're getting a little crispier than normal, please consider contacting the EAP office to schedule your no-cost, confidential appointment with one of our counselors. We can be reached at 615-936-1327.

Until next time, take care.

Voiceover: Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness. If you are a Vanderbilt University Medical Center faculty or staff member, you can earn credit on your go for the Gold Wellness Actions log by listening to two podcasts. Simply click the go for the gold link in the show notes below to record your participation, and stay tuned for future episodes.