

BURNOUT PROOF

5 PROVEN FACTORS THAT INOCULATE
YOU AGAINST BURNING OUT

BY ANDREW MAY
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STRIVE : STRONGER

MAKING YOU BURNOUT PROOF

After two decades working with CEOs and many of the country's top executives, entrepreneurs, the military and elite athletes, I have had unique insight into what makes highly successful people tick. I have also had a front row seat observing what makes people tip over the edge when the desire to achieve peak performance, or the desire to just stay afloat balancing a busy life, pushes them to breaking point. There is a fine dance between pushing the body's physical and psychological resources to stretch and not snap.

Dr Tom Buckley has extensive research experience in life and death scenarios working in ICU for 30 years and is one of the world's leading researchers on stress and resilience. We began working alongside each other 17 years ago with a mutual interest and desire to bridge the gap between the science of human performance and the reality of the human experience. This led us to the

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creation of the StriveStronger Research Institute. In our fully functioning human performance lab, we have been able to examine thousands of people in real-time, to identify the components that underpin optimal human performance and wellbeing. We have also observed what happens when high performance goes off the rails.

BURNOUT IS NOT ABOUT HOURS WORKED

Burnout is a topic that is prevalent in our consulting, leadership and coaching programs.

We have worked with CEO's and entrepreneurs who work 80+ hour weeks and never burnout. Yet others have found themselves on the burnout scrapheap working 38 hours or less each week. Seeing such contrasting examples has pushed us to explore:

- What is burnout?
- Why does it happen?
- Can you take steps to avoid it?

We have identified five key factors that provide inoculation against burnout, including:

- 1. Purpose Alignment**
- 2. Active Recovery**
- 3. Restorative Sleep**
- 4. Physiological Capacity**
- 5. Social Connectedness**

We are not saying these factors 'help you reduce burnout' or 'reduce the risk of burnout.' We are making a bold declaration that if you build these 5 factors into your life you will not burn out. We have worked with top 20 ASX CEO's and executive teams, entrepreneurs running multi-million-dollar organisations, Olympic athletes and national sporting teams, the pointy end of the military and thousands of corporate workers to corroborate our position.

By Andrew May with Dr Tom Buckley.





WHAT IS BURNOUT?

At its core, burnout occurs when the demands of a job outweigh a person's ability to cope with the pressure and/or requirements of the job.

In 2019 the World Health Organisation updated the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) to include burnout as an occupational phenomenon, stating: "Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:

1. Feelings of physical and emotional energy depletion and/or chronic exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
3. Reduced personal accomplishment and professional inefficacy."

There is still robust debate around the exact definition of burnout and there is overlap between the symptoms of burnout and those of stress, exhaustion and depression. Extreme exhaustion, feeling down and reduced performance are symptoms considered to be typical for burnout, yet these can also occur in depression, but people with burnout don't always have depression. The World Health Organisation¹ does not classify burnout as an illness, but a syndrome related to chronic job stress.

Individual Burnout is an outcome of chronic depletion of an individual's coping resources resulting from prolonged exposure to work-related stress with insufficient recovery. Key characteristics are exhaustion, disconnection or alienation from work, and reduced performance. Dr Tom explains that these characteristics can all be present in stress, distress and burnout. "They are all in the same family. However, there are distinctions to be made: Burnout is typically related to work or caring roles from which there is no sense of relief. Exhaustion is a natural response to stress, but in the case of burnout it is chronic."

Psychological symptoms and distress typically relate to all areas of life, not just work and include low self-esteem, inability to concentrate, irritability with others, feelings of inefficiency, hopelessness, difficulty engaging with coworkers and low sympathy for other's needs.

The term 'burnout' was first coined in the 1970s by American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger² who used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in 'helping' professions. Doctors and nurses who sacrifice themselves for others would often end up being burned out – exhausted, listless, and unable to cope. In healthcare, burnout contributes to poor outcomes, worse patient safety and lower patient satisfaction. Nowadays, 'burnout' is not only used to describe the dark side of self-sacrifice it is much more prevalent across multiple industries and is on its way to becoming a global phenomenon.

Organisational Burnout is cultural and occurs when an organisation is in a paralysed state which it can no longer positively change on its own. This is multifactorial with common triggers including constant change and transformation, reorganisation, workforce inadequacies or increasing complexities and difficulties dealing with them.

Organisational culture is the shared values, attitudes and practices that characterise an organisation. It includes behaviours that are accepted, and not accepted. When it comes to burnout, leaders inadvertently contribute to increased risk through their own behaviour and the way they reward employees. Publicly recognising employees working long hours can send messages that to be successful, you must work long hours; sending emails on weekends or annual leave sends signals to employees that even on their personal time, they are expected to work. While this whitepaper focuses on individual burnout, it is imperative organisations look at cultural factors attributing to burnout and excessive fatigue.



WHY IS BURNOUT BOOMING?

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated burnout among Australia's workforce. Every week we are contacted by senior leaders or an organisation asking to support them/their team to manage workload, reduce fatigue and fight the risk of burning out. And remember the pandemic came on the back of a fast-paced digital revolution, drought, floods, bushfires and an economic downturn. For many businesses and leaders, there has been no downtime, no ebb and no flow. Just constant bombardment from one event to the next.

COVID-19 is a unique environmental stressor and for some people there can appear to be no respite. The mental health consequences are yet to be fully determined, due to the multiple factors impacting us during the pandemic. These can be divided into primary impacts of the virus itself such as fear and anxiety, and for those who experienced the virus potentially even post-traumatic stress³. There are also secondary impacts including a profound change to daily life, social distancing, unemployment, or loss of financial security.

Anxiety, trauma, and clinical depression are emerging in research studies as big challenges in the fallout of this pandemic. These psychological factors, combined with ongoing questions about how our workplaces will function moving forward, can all play a big part in causing fatigue and increases the risks associated with burnout. Once you reach that point of exhausting yourself, your health, your productivity, your happiness, your quality of life all plummet, so it's important to think about early mitigation.

STICKING TO A NATURAL RHYTHM OF LIFE

The various lockdowns on top of the perpetual connectivity of technology, have disrupted the rhythms we work and live to. This means it is harder to get the downtime and relief from the pressure and pace of our lives. Many people are working more, having less time off, and are physically isolated from their colleagues.

“ *Lockdowns on top of the perpetual connectivity of technology, have disrupted the rhythms we work and live to.* ”

Additional anxiety from the pandemic and the subsequent agitation to our personal and working lives has, in many ways, created a perfect storm for burnout.

Much as we sometimes forget, our biology is not designed the same as machines. Humans work to the same rhythms of nature as other living creatures. We are governed by day and night, the rise and fall of tides, the four seasons, the rhythm of our internal body clock and the pulsing beat of our heart.

Inherent in each of these rhythms is an expansion and contraction, a rise and fall, energy and idleness. Even the rhythms of the working week and the weekend, the various ebbs in the flow of a working year (school holidays, public holidays, end of financial year, the post-deadline lull) give us the change of pace required to slow down and restore ourselves.

BURNOUT GOES GLOBAL

Research around the world confirms what we are seeing on the ground in Australia: our natural rhythms have dissipated, and burnout is a growing concern. 'Pandemic burnout' is a real phenomenon with up to half of all workers reporting feeling burned out, up almost 10% from pre-COVID times.⁴ It is of little surprise that lockdowns over the past 18 months have been the straw to break the camel's back for so many people, with working longer hours and the inability to unplug from work key factors contributing to pandemic burnout.

After a busy year including a stock market debut and the pressures associated with a global pandemic, the dating app Bumble recently gave all staff a week off work. The company's offices closed, with all 700 employees on paid leave to deal with what one executive called "our collective burnout".

At StriveStronger, we are seeing an increased incidence of psychological fatigue and decreased levels of engagement (two early indicators of burnout) in the executive assessment and consulting part of our business. It is not just the persistent uncertainty, anxiety and stress many people have experienced⁵ as a result of these back-to-back events but, in the case of the pandemic, other factors are heightening the risk of burnout:

- Many organisations have called on employees to 'do more with less' for prolonged periods⁶
- Multiple lockdowns continue across Australia and the rest of the world, meaning people are unable to plan properly nor see an end in sight
- Previously established clear boundaries between work and home that had allowed us to work in syncopation with our natural rhythms and switch off and recover effectively, have been bulldozed with the global shift to working from home (WFH) and working from anywhere (WFA)
- Back-to-back video conferences are twice as cognitively demanding as face-to-face meetings (you know this after a full day sitting down staring at your screen)
- The inability to go on holidays or travel has meant many people are not taking proper breaks and missing the wellbeing benefits.

THE BURNOUT CONTINUUM

At the individual level, burnout is not a dichotomous phenomenon, meaning it can exist along a continuum from minor symptoms like less energy and occasionally being under stress to suffering from physical and emotional exhaustion, which if not addressed can result in feeling completely burned out. Likewise physical fatigue and/or exhaustion can trigger emotional exhaustion, and mental fatigue can result in physiological expression, such as depleted energy, poor quality sleep, raised blood sugar, raised heart rate and blood pressure and expression of known stress-related diseases.

Physical Fatigue

Physical fatigue is muscular fatigue/failure, caused by the type, intensity and volume of exercise (or physical labor/activity) and is determined by mitochondrial density, capillarisation, muscle fibre composition, proton accumulation, depletion of glycogen stores in muscle and neuromuscular characteristics. In other words, physical fatigue is a physiological limitation process of energy generation to meet needs.

Mental Fatigue

Mental fatigue is a change in psychophysiological state. Sports science refers to mental fatigue as reduced alertness, reaction time and effectiveness – all of which manifest in the form of sub-optimal performance. Mental fatigue can be caused by inadequate sleep, inconsistencies in circadian rhythm (body clock), poor motivation and a number of psychosocial factors. The outcomes of physical and mental however are similar, explains Dr Tom.

“*In burnout, the ability to adapt and appropriately respond reduces.*”

“The inputs and outputs don't match and exceed our ability to cope. Some people still appear to function and just keep going while feeling overwhelmed and 'fried' inside, while others struggle to get out of bed and can't find joy. Both are legitimate experiences. It's a continuum,” he stresses.

Either way, burnout is linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes, including coronary artery disease, hypertension, depression, and anxiety, as well as altered behaviours such as sleep disturbances, increased alcohol and drug use⁷. While many people do seek relief from the stress and pressure through drugs and alcohol, they can cause more problems than they solve.

BURNOUT PROOFING

Burnout reduces productivity and is an indicator of cultural deterioration, so it is critical to focus on proactive strategies. Let's look at the 5 factors that inoculate you against burnout in more detail.



PURPOSE ALIGNMENT

Alignment of purpose with personal values and associating meaning with work has strong links to improving satisfaction with life.

Over the years at Strive Stronger we have noticed very few people can clearly articulate why they do what they do. 'How' we do our job involves processes, procedures and ways of working, and 'what' we do is the actual job or industry we work in. But 'why' goes deeper – to what motivates and inspires us. One of the key reasons people find it difficult trying to articulate their personal purpose is we get stuck on the 'how' and the 'what'.

Simon Sinek, author of the best-selling book *Start With Why*, says that 'fulfilment is a right and not a privilege. Every single person on this planet is entitled to feel fulfilled by the work they do, to wake up feeling inspired to go to work and to feel safe when they return home knowing they have contributed to something larger than themselves. Fulfilment isn't another word for happiness. Happiness is temporary, fulfilment lasts. Fulfilment is deeper and comes when our job connects directly to our 'why'.'⁹

Purpose Enhances Wellbeing

As a demonstration of how important purpose is to our wellbeing, young people with purpose have a 15% lower risk of death than those who responded that their lives are aimless.¹⁰

Purpose Helps You Live Longer

A sense of purpose trumps age, gender, fitness levels and emotional wellbeing when it comes to longevity.¹⁰

Purpose Helps You Bounce Back Faster, Helping Prevent Burnout

People reporting higher levels of sense of life purpose have more positive feelings, lower negative feelings and lower physical symptoms on stressful days compared to those with a low sense of life purpose.¹¹ This is a key factor to minimising burnout risk.

UNDERSTANDING 'WHY' BECOMES EMBEDDED IN YOUR BRAIN

Asking 'why' connects to your limbic system, one of the oldest and most primitive parts of our brain that controls emotions. Having a sense of purpose creates additional neurons and connections within our brain, or what neuroscientists call 'cognitive reserve'.¹²

Cognitive reserve refers to the way some people can improvise and think laterally to complete tasks. Essentially, it involves stimulating and engaging more of your brain and helps explain why two people with similar pathological brain ageing changes can exhibit very different levels of brain functioning.¹³ This comes with a range of cognitive benefits and enables resilience, essentially buffering against burnout.

CREATING MEANING FROM WORK

Engaging our brains through pursuing work that stimulates us and fulfils us helps to protect against the physical deterioration of our brain. This neural plasticity helps us function better in the face of stress, giving access to a greater reserve when life demands more of us. While these changes on a neural level provide more capacity to cope with challenges, having meaningful work aligned to your purpose does the same on another level. People who perceive their work as meaningful and satisfying report less anxiety and stress.¹⁴ Meaning is considered to be a core component of good mental health and well-being. Meaning is one of the key mental resources for optimal functioning of various physiological systems, which “in turn modulate our immune and neuroendocrine response to challenges.”¹⁵

When you ask yourself “Beyond earning money, why am I working? Why am I here?” and you have a clear answer, you not only feel better about yourself and your life, you generate a kind of force field that protects

“ *Beyond earning money,
why am I working?
Why am I here?* ”

you from some of the harsher effects of stress. Specific to preventing burnout, understanding why you are doing what you do is vital. A sense of purpose can help in indirect ways too. It can help you to prioritise, to delegate, to say ‘no’ and to make time for the aspects of your role that refresh your spirit. Finding your sense of purpose is the essential first step to building connections with people, community and nature – a foundation to preventing burnout.

5 TIPS FOR PURPOSE ALIGNMENT

- 1 **Articulate Your Purpose.** Invest the time to understand your ‘why?’ [Watch this video for more details.](#)
- 2 **At Your Best.** Think about when you lose track of time or when you are in flow. What is common amongst these activities? How can you include these activities in your week?
- 3 **Meaning at Work.** How does your current role provide meaning other than a pay cheque each month? How does work contribute to your wellbeing, finances, relationships, learning and development, sense of belonging, etc?
- 4 **Supplementing.** If work and purpose don’t feel aligned or if work is not providing lots of meaning, where can you supplement in other areas of your life? A hobby, sport, education, community involvement, etc. Nurturing your soul helps readjust mindset and attitude.
- 5 **Do the Hard Work.** Investing the time and effort to clearly understand your purpose can take months of coaching and reflecting; but once you have a clear personal.





ACTIVE RECOVERY

Physical relaxation and switching off psychologically are key to sustaining energy levels, reducing fatigue, nurturing creativity, and enhancing emotional intelligence.

Recovery benefits the body and brain, creating physical and psychological detachment from the stresses of your working day. Recovery expels stress hormones from the body and soothes us from Gamma (problem-solving and concentration) and Beta brainwaves (a busy, active mind) to Alpha (restful and reflective) and eventually Delta (sleeping and dreaming). As this happens, your brain's electrical activity in the form of brainwaves is slowing down. If it feels like active recovery is cooling down an overheated system, that's because it is.

VITAL RESTORATIVE FUNCTIONS OF REST AND RECOVERY

There are two aspects to recovery: the physical and the psychological. Biological responses to external and internal environmental cues are controlled by the body's autonomic (or self-regulating) nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is responsible for alertness and wakefulness, as well as our ability to respond to stress. The SNS is often termed the 'fight or flight' response. The main role of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) is to conserve energy. It does this by slowing the heart rate, particularly when we are resting or sleeping. The PNS is referred to as 'rest and digest'.

Active recovery activities help to psychologically detach from work or other pressures. Psychological detachment means not constantly working or thinking about job-related issues, problems or opportunities after work. It means leaving the workplace behind – mentally and physically. This has become increasingly difficult as technology permeates every waking moment of our lives.

Active recovery (doing stuff), as opposed to passive recovery (doing nothing), involves engaging in low intensity physical activities. Active recovery should be seen more as a form of detachment or play, rather than physical training or an exercise stressor. Examples include:

- Walk in nature
- Swim in pool or ocean
- Easy bike ride
- Play a sport
- Light stretching, yoga or Tai Chi
- Sauna or contrast shower
- Listen to or play music
- Do some gardening or cooking
- Try a guided meditation/ mindfulness exercise
- Practice diaphragmatic breathing
- Epsom salt bath
- Creative activities including painting, baking or knitting

ALCOHOL & SCREEN TIME: A RECIPE FOR PREPARED RECOVERY

When you drink alcohol and watch TV or are glued to digital devices to 'unwind', this has the opposite effect of recovery. While television can feel like it provides an escape, it is designed to stimulate attention, meaning the brain is being bandied from alpha to beta and back again.¹⁶ Not relaxing from your brain's perspective. Add alcohol into the equation – and instead of slowing down and going into recovery mode, brainwaves are taken on a rollercoaster ride and physiologically it stimulates the SNS. Drinking more than 1 or 2 standard alcohol drinks before bed competes with the sleep maintenance influence of increased delta activity" (i.e. alcohol impacts your brains ability to relax into a deep sleep)¹⁷ This means even though you may fall asleep faster, you struggle to stay asleep. This disruption inhibits rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, a time where we dream and consolidate memory.¹⁸ The alcohol and screen time cocktail puts some people into a physiological stress state for well over half of their sleep time.

“ *Daily alcohol and screen time does little for physical or psychological recovery.*

Alcohol and screen time creates a troubling trifecta where the sleep you have is not restorative, you have difficulty staying asleep and are likely to sleep for a shorter total period. There are also knock-on effects to functioning the next day. As far as burnout goes, daily alcohol and screen time does little for physical or psychological recovery. For enjoyment they are fine, but they are not the tools to help you reset.

ACTIVE PLAY

Play is so important to our physical and psychological wellbeing. The slowing of your brain waves at the end of the day turns down the dial on anxiety, irritation and stress and ultimately allows your body and brain to restore and buffer against burnout.

Active play promotes increases in hormones (such as dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin, also known as the love hormone), associated with pleasure and joy as well as promoting higher heart rate variability (a measure of ability to switch on the parasympathetic recovery system), which itself has been shown to increase mental resilience to stress and better coping in response to stress.

Play Deprivation

The outcomes of play deprivation are similar to sleep deprivation – fatigue, poor memory, reduced creativity, poor decision-making, lack of recovery, hormone imbalance, increased visceral fat, reduced growth hormone and increased levels of irritability. Adults who have forgotten how to play become 'rigid, narrow in their thinking, brittle in their response to stress, and much less open to handling the curve balls life throws us'.¹⁹

5 TIPS FOR ACTIVE RECOVERY

- 1 Transition Time.** Create rituals at the end of each working day to transition from work to home. This can include activities from the list above, or add your own activities that help your body and brain disconnect from work and transition to your personal life.
- 2 Daily Sunshine.** Vitamin D is essential for mitochondrial function and cell health, so get outdoors more often. Aim to spend 30 minutes each day in nature, ideally in sunlight to get maximum immune-boosting and mental wellbeing benefits
- 3 Grounding.** Spend time each week walking in bare feet to get a host of anti-burnout benefits including.
- 4 Laughter, Fun and Play.** Build joy and play into your schedule, especially in weeks of constant back-to-back video conferences and meetings. Watch a comedy, call a friend, go to the park with children, family or friends
- 6 30 Minute Rule.** Ditch the digital devices for the first 30 minutes of every day, have screen-free time for 30 minutes in the middle of the day (stack this with sunshine and nature) and switch devices off 30 minutes before bed.



RESTORATIVE SLEEP

Quality restorative sleep is vital to recovery, hormone balance, brain function and memory.

Sleep is a form of true passive recovery. It is indisputable that sufficient, restorative sleep plays a critical role in maintaining physical and psychological wellbeing.²⁰⁻²³ Sleep allows the body's cells to repair and rejuvenate. Many of the restorative functions in the body – including muscle growth, tissue repair, protein synthesis, and growth hormone release – occur mostly, or in some cases only, during sleep. Without adequate sleep the body doesn't recover properly, resulting in short-term reductions in cognitive processing, memory and skill acquisition, and increased risk of fatigue, burnout and illness.

After thousands of overnight client Stress Recovery Assessments measuring physiological recovery, we can unequivocally report that alcohol severely disrupts sleep, delaying the onset of true recovery, sometimes obliterating any real physiological recovery (PNS) overnight. Following pre-sleep screen exposure, like reading on an iPad or smartphone, we see profound physiological effects⁸. Screen time keeps the brain active with blue light overstimulating the visual system, pulling the brain right out of alpha (early sleep phase) and into beta – the brainwave signature of being awake and alert. The consequences of poor or not enough sleep include reduced concentration and cognitive processing capacity, poor memory, decreased physical activity and increased weight, decreased productivity, greater stress and emotional strain, increased tension in personal relationships and greater susceptibility to a range of illnesses.²⁴ In essence – sleep deprivation is making us larger, less intelligent, and less connected.

Sleep Deprivation

Sleep deprivation is just a fancy way of saying 'you are not getting enough sleep!' The symptoms of sleep deprivation in adults include:

- **Constant yawning**
- **The tendency to doze off when not active for a while (like when watching TV)**
- **Grogginess when waking in the morning**
- **Sleepy grogginess experienced throughout the day (sleep inertia)**
- **Poor concentration and mood changes (irritability)**
- **Decreased concentration, memory, learning, and reaction times**
- **Adverse effects on wellbeing, productivity and safety**
- **Increased risk of injury and death from road and workplace accidents**
- **A range of health problems including hypertension, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.**

The brain is affected more than just cognitively after a restless night, with emotions and social interactions affected as well. Sleep deprivation hinders activity in the prefrontal lobe of the brain, an area associated with emotions and complex thinking, resulting in poor people skills. People react better to both negative and positive events with more sleep. After a night of shorter sleep, people react more emotionally to stressful events and experience less joy from positive events the next day.²⁵ Without sleep the emotional centres of the brain dramatically overreact to negative experiences.

This is because the prefrontal lobe, an area responsible for emotional control, shuts down following sleep deprivation. Without sleep the brain reverts to a more primitive pattern of activity, unable to put emotional experiences into context or produce controlled, appropriate responses. This has important implications for reducing burnout risk as being unable to maintain positive emotions in the face of stress puts us more at risk of higher inflammation and suffering from chronic diseases (e.g. heart disease, diabetes) and even an earlier death.²⁶

Our experience shows people tend to sacrifice sleep to get more work done. Sleep is so crucial that even slight sleep deprivation or interrupted sleep impacts memory, judgment and mood state. Insufficient sleep time and poor quality sleep are associated with low stress resilience and non-adaptive coping whereas consistent quality sleep creates a buffer against ongoing daily life stressors and risk of burnout.²⁷

REFRESHING THE BRAIN

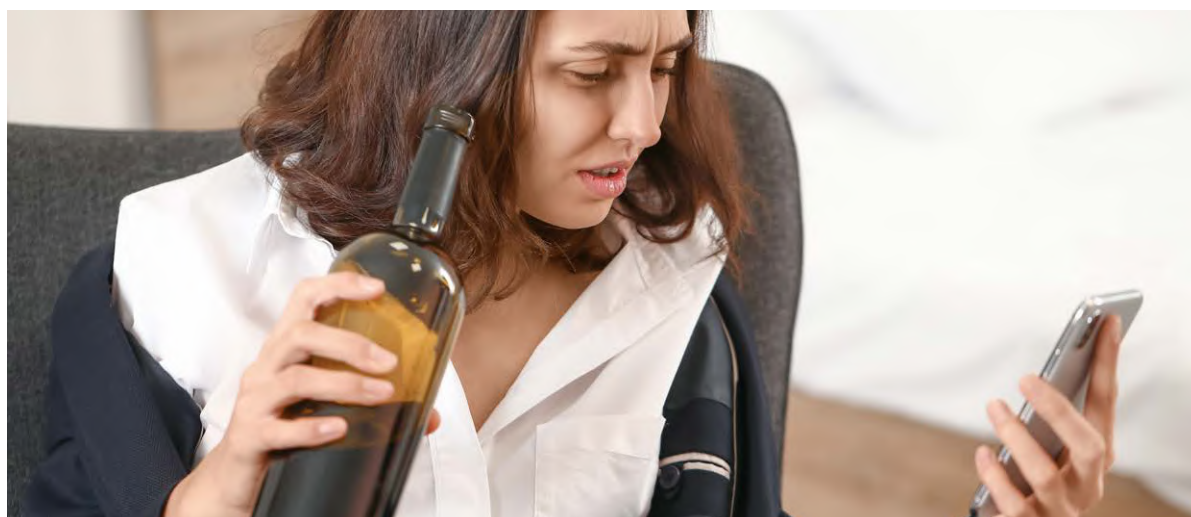
To prevent burnout, we need to fully appreciate that sleep is a time when we stimulate the parasympathetic (recovery) system to recharge the batteries, which only occurs when we are truly resting or sleeping. To get

“ *Quality restorative sleep rarely occurs by accident. Sleep is not a luxury it is a necessity.* ”

the full benefits of the PNS, we need to overturn our sedentary, highly caffeinated, constantly “on” lifestyle, as quality restorative sleep rarely occurs by accident. Sleep is not a luxury it is a necessity. Here are five ways to take control of your sleep hygiene and boost productivity at work:

5 TIPS FOR RESTORATIVE SLEEP

- 1 **Switch Off Devices 30 Minutes Before Bed.** Reducing blue light exposure switches off stress hormones including serotonin and induces relaxing hormones including melatonin.
- 2 **Make Sleep a Priority.** Aim to get 7 to 8 hours of quality, restorative sleep most nights of the week, including the weekend.
- 3 **Go to Bed and Get Up at The Same Time.** Your body doesn’t know Wednesday from Saturday, changing up your sleep routine messes with your biological clock.
- 4 **Keep The Bedroom Cool and Dark.** Invest in a comfortable mattress, keep your room at a constant temperature and use dark blinds to block the light out.
- 5 **Avoid Large Meals, Alcohol and Sugar Before Bed.** These all disrupt sleep and make it hard to feel rested the next day. Eat your last meal two to three hours before bed and relax 30 minutes before bed.





PHYSIOLOGICAL CAPACITY

Optimal physiological capacity refers to the body's ability to have reserves and adapt in a range of situations, especially in response to challenging tasks or stressful times.

We are not just brains on a stick. Science has proven people with poor physiological capacity have lower stress resilience and reach stress thresholds way quicker. Lower physiological capacity also impacts recovery time.

"After assessing thousands of corporate workers in our lab we know higher cardiorespiratory fitness (measured as VO2 max) is associated with lower symptoms of stress-related exhaustion, creating a buffer against burnout. Optimal cardiorespiratory fitness helps buffer against increased blood pressure, elevated resting heart rate, raised blood sugar and increased inflammation markers, all burnout related physiological disturbances." Reports Dr Tom. Additionally, low levels of Vitamin D are linked to increased risk of fatigue and low mood state.²⁸

“ *Physical activity enhances cognitive flexibility, boosts energy levels, reduces chronic lethargy, boosts mood, increases social cohesion and buffers against future burnout.*

Physical activity enhances cognitive flexibility, boosts energy levels, reduces chronic lethargy, boosts mood, increases social cohesion and can reduce symptoms of mild depression - all buffers against future burnout.^{29,30} Increasing physiological capacity through optimal exercise/recovery balance trains the PNS to be more dominant, which in turn increases stress resilience both mentally and psychologically.

FINDING THE MINIMAL EFFECTIVE DOSE

As good as exercise is, the key to preventing burnout is to find the optimal dose as more is not always better. In medicine, this is called finding the minimum effective dose³¹. Overtraining can cause mood changes, irritability, agitation decreases in motivation, lower concentration ability, raised heart rate and blood pressure, anxiety, restless sleep, adrenal gland fatigue as well as suppress the immune system, making you more prone to fatigue and burnout.^{32,33}

Physical Activity Boosts Mood

Physical activity has been proven to be successful in treating mild forms of depression.³⁴ The good news is today depression can be treated in many ways, including psychological counselling, medication and exercise. The major advantage of exercise to boost mood is the side effect profile is more favourable than many commonly prescribed medications. Being physically active helps regulate the systems affected by depression, improving sleep, boosting mood and increasing energy levels.

Physical Activity Makes You Smarter

Regular exercise grows more brain cells, prevents age-related decrease in brain matter, enhances cognitive flexibility and reduces the risk of developing dementia.³⁵ A good way to pull these new neurons into the brain's superhighway is to learn something new - like a language, or a musical instrument. Once you have those extra neurons firing, you need to make them nimble. This is where exercise helps again, improving the connection of the neurons by increasing levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), an important molecule in learning and memory.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PHYSIOLOGICAL CAPACITY

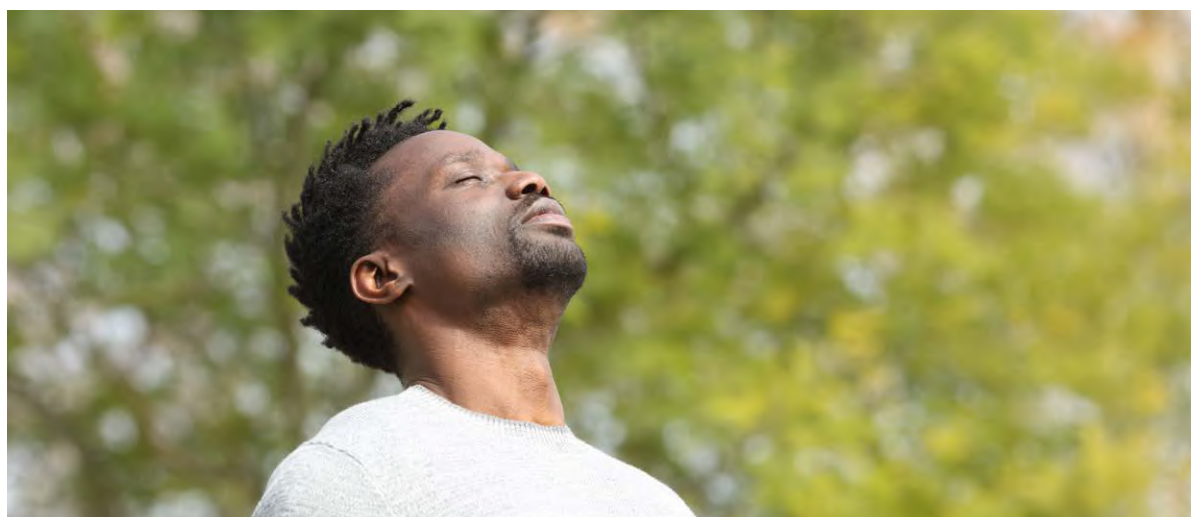
The building blocks to optimise physiological capacity include healthy eating, regular physical activity, and rest and recovery. Fuel your body with fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, oily fish, extra virgin olive oil, avocado, eggs and whole grains like oats, brown rice, quinoa and wholegrain bread. Build in regular physical activity – including 10,000 steps each day to fire up your mitochondria and aim for 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, or at least 75–150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity; and muscle-strengthening activities at a moderate or greater intensity that involve all major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week. Elevating your heart rate and pushing yourself regularly (interval training) builds that extra physical and mental capacity to deal with stressors and buffer against burnout.³⁶ Focus on active recovery and safeguard sleep as outlined in sections 2 and 3.

GO GREEN

Getting out in nature – ideally exercising outside – serves multiple purposes. Given that the average person spends 90 per cent of their time indoors³⁷, to maintain healthy vitamin D levels, aim to get a minimum of 30 minutes of sunlight every day. The advantage of nature extends beyond vitamin D. Regularly being in green spaces or blue spaces (near water) is associated with better mental health and wellbeing and improved blood pressure.³⁸ The awe of being in nature reminds you of being part of something greater and can provide a helpful shift in perspective.

5 TIPS FOR PHYSIOLOGICAL CAPACITY

- 1 5 Years Younger.** Measure biological age and aim to be 5 years younger than your chronological age. This provides an extra buffer to deal with stressors life throws at you.
- 2 Healthy Natural Foods.** Eat foods as close to their natural state as possible, with the bulk of intake being fresh vegetables, quality protein and performance carbs to fuel you through the day.
- 3 High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT).** Include intervals in your training regime 2 or 3 times a week to improve VO2 Max, this also helps lower resting heart rate.
- 4 Go Green.** Regularly get a good dose of nature and where you can double dip – exercising or engaging in active recovery activities in the great outdoors.
- 5 Safeguard Sleep.** Sleep is vital for physiology to adapt and regenerate. This is when your body gains the most benefit from exercise and physiological growth and regeneration happens while you sleep.





SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Flourishing relationships and connection with community are fundamental to pleasure, meaning and fulfilment in life.

Human beings crave connection. For thousands of years, we have lived and worked in communities. It's fundamental to the way we experience the world. Loneliness and limited social connection are linked with poorer mental and physical health, with social connection being a greater determinant to overall health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.³⁹⁻⁴¹ People low in social connection report more vulnerability to anxiety, depression and anti-social behaviour.⁴² Conversely, working on social connections, especially long-term friendships that go back to our youth, provide emotional stability, a sense of shared history and anchor us during challenging times. Being connected to others gives us purpose, meaning and pleasure, higher self-esteem and empathy, all buffers against burnout.

A common symptom of burnout is cynicism. Positive personal relationships provide an antidote to this and seeking out rich connections professionally is important for a few reasons. Firstly, people who say that they can't talk about mental health at work are more at risk of burnout.⁴³ Secondly, cynicism stems from a breakdown in trust. Peer support and professional mentors or coaches can alleviate this distrust and negative effect. Strong social connections help provide perspective on our situation, the way we are feeling and the momentum to create change.

Chances are that if you are feeling burnout at work, it is highly likely others around you are too. Social connections provide a buffer from work stresses, re-energise you and gives you the support and stability to navigate tricky patches. Social connectedness may be overlooked, but it is critical to positive mental health and preventing burnout.

Minister for Loneliness in the UK

In 2018 the British government appointed its first Minister for Loneliness. More than 9 million people in the UK report feeling lonely most of the time. The Campaign to End Loneliness is a network tackling the health threat isolation poses to the elderly. Its research shows most doctors in Britain see between one and five patients a day who have come mainly because they are lonely.⁴⁴

Minister for Happiness in the UAE

In 2016 the UAE appointed the country's first Minister of State for Happiness. Upon making this announcement the Prime Minister said the Minister for Happiness "will be tasked with overseeing plans, projects, programs [and] indices that improve the country's overall mood."

LONELINESS IS THE OPPOSITE OF CONNECTION

Loneliness is a response to our fundamental need to belong and feel connected. Lack of feeling connected either emotionally or socially can result in an unpleasant aching feeling of emptiness, anxiety, restlessness and marginality.⁴³

The causes of loneliness can include social, mental, emotional and physical factors. Loneliness can be felt even when you are surrounded by other people. While technology has made us more 'digitally connected', there is an increase in reported loneliness among people constantly connected to their digital devices, and who lack meaningful relationships in the real world.⁴⁵

“ *Building and maintaining close relationships with friends and family is vital for our physical and mental wellbeing.*

Loneliness does not depend on how many friends you have: in fact, two-thirds of lonely people are married.⁴⁶ Loneliness activates our physical and psychological stress responses and depresses the immune system. Chronic loneliness significantly increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and represents as great a risk for long-term health and longevity as smoking cigarettes.⁴⁷

For all these reasons and more, building and maintaining close relationships with friends and family is vital for our physical and mental wellbeing. Groups are also powerful buffers against burnout.

5 TIPS FOR SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

- 1 **Strengthen Relationships.** Prioritise relationships with family, friends and loved ones. The best way to do this is to schedule relationship time in your diary each week.
- 2 **Find Your Tribe.** Join a local group like an orchestra, dance class or community gardening group. Sign up for a sporting organisation, a swim squad, or cycling club. Or join a book club or volunteer for a local charity.
- 3 **Physical Activity Double Dip.** Regularly train with others to strengthen relationships. Exercise is a great way to build physiological capacity, get a dose of nature and connect with other people.
- 4 **Ditch Digital Devices.** Consciously switch off technology and social media to create meaningful connections. Emphasise connecting in real life, not just online.
- 5 **Reach Out.** If you are feeling burnout at work, reach out to colleagues, family and friends. Connections with others provide a buffer from work stresses and re-energises you.





ABOUT ANDREW MAY

Andrew is CEO and founder of StriveStronger.com a digital consultancy that partners with organisations to create Cultures of Wellbeing. He presents inspiring presentations and is recognised as one of the world's leading performance strategists. Andrew works with elite athletes and is the Mental Skills Coach for the Parramatta Eels National Rugby League Club.

Andrew has worked with multiple Olympic/international athletes in track and field, tennis, swimming, hockey, netball, basketball, and AFL, culminating in working as the Physical Performance Manager for both the NSW and Australian Cricket teams.

He has dual degrees in the body and brain – completing a Bachelor of Applied Science in Exercise Physiology (body) and a Masters in Coaching Psychology (brain). He is exploring a PhD in performance psychology, looking at how the body and brain work together to optimise performance in high-pressure moments.

Andrew built and sold Good Health Solutions to ACCOR (now trading as Executive Health Solutions), Australia's largest provider of Executive Health Assessments; and in 2016 he sold The Performance Clinic to KPMG where he worked as a Partner for 3 years.

Andrew is the author of the bestselling book *Flip the Switch* and the recently released *MatchFit*, which has sold more than 75,000 copies. He has a regular segment on *ABC News Breakfast*, appears across multiple media platforms and hosts the award-winning Business Fit Podcast.

andrewmay.com



ABOUT DR TOM BUCKLEY

Dr Tom Buckley is an internationally recognised expert on the impact of stress on human health and wellbeing. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of Sydney and is Research Director at StriveStronger Research Institute.

Dr Tom has qualifications in Health Sciences, a Masters degree specialising in intensive care and cardiology and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). His groundbreaking doctoral studies identified physiological pathways associated with major life stressors. He has developed a program of research in the identification and management of cardiovascular risk factors and is a global expert in the human factors of performance and behavioural science. Dr Tom's work is regularly featured on national and international TV, radio and print media and he is co-author of the best-selling book *MatchFit*.

Using his extensive knowledge and expertise in health sciences and human behaviour, Dr Tom coaches clients to improve metabolic flexibility, achieve ideal body weight, increase cardiovascular fitness, lower chronic disease risk factors, maintain optimal blood sugar, increase sleep quality, promote liver health and develop stress resilience during demanding times.

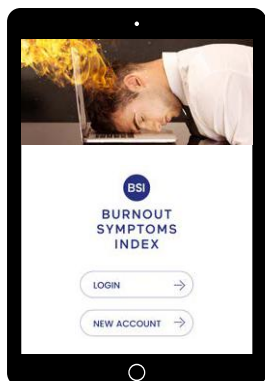
ABOUT STRIVESTRONGER RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Headed by Dr Tom Buckley, the Research Institute collaborates with global experts in medical science, sleep, genetics, ageing, sports science, exercise physiology, elite sport, physiotherapy, nutrition, psychology, neuroscience, technology and computer science, leadership and workplace productivity to examine biological, psychosocial and functional factors underpinning optimal human performance, leadership and wellbeing.

We are a unique, Australian-first initiative using a pragmatic research approach to progress human wellbeing, productivity and leadership. Our vision is to be global leaders in the synthesis, evaluation and translation of evidence-based research into wellbeing, productivity and leadership.

MAKING YOUR TEAM BURNOUT PROOF

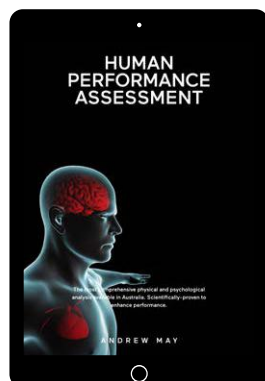
Strive Stronger has a range of evidence-based products and programs designed to inoculate leaders and entire organisations against burning out, including:



1 ASSESSMENTS

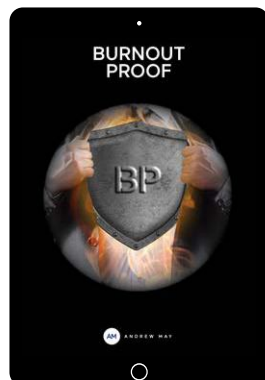
Burnout Symptoms Index (BSI)

The BSI is a science-based assessment measuring an employee's experience of common burnout symptoms in the past month. Individuals receive a confidential report, management receive an executive summary with aggregated data and recommendations to reduce future risk of burning out employees.



Human Performance Assessment (HPA)

Includes an ECG Stress Recovery Assessment, Blood Pathology, Brainwave Analysis and online assessments. Provides a science-based Burnout Ranking out of 100 with performance metrics for physiology, stress and coping, cognitive capacity, physical and psychological recovery, energy management, physical activity, and leadership capability.



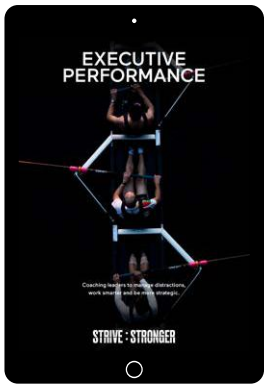
2 BURNOUT PROOF PRESENTATIONS

Train employees to be Burnout Proof with the capacity to compete at a consistently high level and perform at their best, in an ever-changing environment. Book Andrew and Dr Tom for engaging presentations exploring the 5 factors to inoculate your team/organisation against burning out.



3 PERFORMANCE COACHING

The world's best athletes have a coach. And so too do many of the world's best leaders, entrepreneurs and high performers. As coach and confidante to leading CEO's and executives, elite athletes and performing artists, Andrew is regarded as one of the world's leading mental skills coaches and performance strategists.



4 TAILORED PROGRAMS

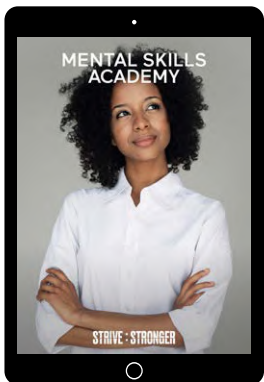
Executive Performance

Many execs haven't been trained with specific skills to perform under constant mental and physical demands. Executive Performance coaches leaders to sustain operating at an extremely high level (without the collateral damage) and inoculates senior talent against burning out. Tailored for each organisation with assessments, workshops, coaching and digital platforms.



Performance Boost

With changes to the way we lead, work, think and manage employee wellbeing; it has never been more challenging to lead teams. Performance Boost coaches people leaders to enhance physical and psychological wellbeing; improve resilience and mental agility; improve decision making and lead confidently during times of constant change.



Mental Skills Academy

Psychological skills, or mental skills are tools for the mind. Just like putting a fitness program together to train the body to be healthy, fit, flexible and strong; we can do exactly the same for the brain. Andrew and Dr Nicola Gates created Mental Skills Academy to elevate productivity and reduce risk of burnout and mental health claims in the workforce.



iStrive

A scalable, world-class, digital solution that measures holistic wellbeing, engages employees at an individual and enterprise level, builds accountability and tracks performance improvement. iStrive has been built to incorporate new ways of leading, working, navigating change, managing mental health and uplifting employee wellbeing.

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Thank You.

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