

# Three Kinds of Burnout

Paul R. Potts with Grace Potts

13 Mar 2022

It's the evening of Sunday March 13th. Today we went back on Daylight Saving Time and this always messes me up quite a bit, and it sometimes takes me over a week to feel like I'm back in sync. The computer clock says it is just after 8:30 p.m. but it doesn't feel like 8:30. Grace is joining me to help me work on this newsletter today, to provide a little moral support. I'm going to try to keep it brief. Our week is already stacked up with appointments and I know that trying to get up early tomorrow morning is going to feel like someone is playing a bad joke on me.

## Walks

We managed to get most of the kids out for a walk at Rolling Hills Park yesterday, just a couple of miles from our home. The air temperature was 24 degrees and it was partly sunny, but with high humidity and gusting winds, in the open it felt like the temperature was in the single digits. When we parked and tried to get out of the Suburban, the wind gusts of about 45 miles per hour made it hard to even open the car doors. So we actually decided to drive a little bit further, to park by a wooded trail and start there. The woods were full of young people smoking weed and having a disc golf tournament, so we worked around them. In the woods the wind was greatly reduced and it was much more comfortable. We had a brief but lovely walk in the woods. Brief, because when we got to the sledding hill two of the kids decided they wanted to run up and down the hill. We waited while they did that, but then after a couple of laps of the hill, they were too tired to walk any more. So we decided to go back home while the younger kids were still having a good time.

Today, Grace and I got out for a walk up and down the muddy, pothole-ridden mess that is our street. Today it was about 45 degrees and sunny with very little wind, so it was a much different experience; I didn't even zip my jacket. It is supposed to get up to almost seventy this week.

Grace is hoping to get the kids involved in a "52 hikes" challenge and complete 52 hikes by the end of 2022 — that'll take doing more than a hike a week, but it's good to have a goal, and even if we don't accomplish it, we'll be getting more walks than we are now.

## Tantalus Faltering, Sisyphus Floundering

I'm trying to work my way in to the main topic tonight, which is burnout. Let me start by sharing an article about parenting and working during the pandemic. This is from Slate, called "Your Co-Workers With Kids Are Not OK." I actually shared it in my work Slack. Here's an excerpt:

While much of the rest of the country is trying to figure out some sort of "new normal," working parents of small children feel utterly abandoned, and many of them are at their breaking point.

With children under 5 still not able to be vaccinated — although that's coming, but who knows how soon — and day cares frequently closing for COVID cases or exposures, parents of young kids are struggling. Without reliable child care, they're regularly forced to take time off work — often unpaid if they've already used up all their PTO — or to try to work from home while simultaneously caring for kids so young they require constant supervision.

This was what I felt comfortable sharing with co-workers, but the truth is that the situation is much more dire than this. The piece does not factor in the rational fears of people with disabilities, compromised immune systems, or who have high-risk folks in their circles. It does not factor in the long-term isolation, the grief from loss of ordinary activities, and the grief from the lost friends and family members. It does not take "long COVID" into account, or reinfection, or the disability that may become endemic in the wake of this disease.

The word "tantalize" comes from the myth of Tantalus, whose punishment

...was to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches. Whenever he reached for the fruit, the branches raised his intended meal from his grasp. Whenever he bent down to get a drink, the water receded before he could get any.

A similar mythological figure, Sisyphus, endured a different kind of punishment:

...Hades made Sisyphus roll a huge boulder endlessly up a steep hill... the boulder [always rolled] away from Sisyphus before he reached the top, which ended up consigning Sisyphus to an eternity of useless efforts and unending frustration.

Today, the thirteenth, is the two-year anniversary of the day our lockdown began in earnest. Two years ago today, on a Friday, I went into work with mask on and packed up a few things, to prepare to work from home. We had spent weeks stocking up on grocery items and alcohol wipes and gloves; we knew what was coming.

To live through the pandemic has been to endure the punishment of Tantalus: with two job losses, our mortgage has receding further from our ability to one day pay it off. Financial support, in the form of stimulus checks and tax credits,

has been offered, then taken away. We've been advised that with vaccination, things can go back to normal. But "normal" keeps receding. The vaccine didn't bring the lasting immunity that many were led to believe it would. Last summer, the Delta wave began. I was boosted; I've gotten three shots now. There is talk of a fourth. This winter, the Omicron wave began. I've just been hearing that my company's offices in Palo Alto are almost back to full capacity as fewer workers are working from home. But I've also just been reading about the BA.2 Omicron variant spiking in wastewater monitoring in Palo Alto. So I expect to hear that some of the co-workers I see through my computer screen, in meeting rooms, unmasked, are sick with COVID, perhaps for a second time.

To live through the pandemic has been to endure the punishment of Sisyphus, too: workers keep pushing, keep working. With each job loss, the very modest progress I had made towards solvency was rolled back. Workers' safety has now been declared entirely a matter of "personal responsibility." But no amount of personal diligence can make up for the risk posed by a whole society that has chosen to ignore collective safety. One might be forgiven for feeling like the boulder, rolling back down to the bottom of the hill, had flattened us under it, while there is uncontrolled spread happening everywhere, and the authorities are recalibrating their scales to simply re-label this high risk of transmission as low.

After two years of this, is it surprising that we're burned out?

### **Three Kinds of Burnout**

I want to describe three specific kinds of burnout I feel that I'm experiencing right now. There are probably more. And this is all over-and-above simple *grief* and the generalized *anxiety* of life during the pandemic.

#### **Caregiver Burnout**

Grace and I have caregiver burnout. This is also known as "compassion fatigue" — it happens when people have been caring for anyone — children, elders, or others — too long, without enough help. Grace and I have not had a sitter to help us with caring for our seven children at home in over two years. We didn't use them that often, but sometimes. Many of the activities that occupied the kids' time have not been available to them. They are home-schooled. This has drained us. We're still doing the most necessary caregiving, but we're running on shin splints, especially because several of our children have special needs, including our wonderful but very messy and destructive five-year-old.

We've had hopes to start getting the kids back into some activities outside the home this spring. We don't know yet what's going to become of those plans because the expected summer period of diminished transmission may not really happen as we imagined, with mass unmasking and the emergence of even more transmissible variants.

## Work Burnout

I am working for a startup, yet again. The pay is now very good, which is going a long way towards reducing some of our long-term worries; we're making progress paying down debts and accumulating a little savings. But startup environments are always high-stress. The expectations are very high. My co-workers very frequently work extremely long days. I usually limit my work days to nine or ten hours, and have only occasionally been willing to put in hours on a weekend, but it isn't unusual for me to get messages on the Slack before 7 a.m., past midnight, and on weekends. Because most of my team works in California, I've been working mostly on California time. But I also have co-workers on Eastern time. So I often am pushed to be engaged both very early and very late in my work day.

Because of this, and because I'm still relatively new at this job, I'm in the awkward position of recently being an underperformer on our small team, in this regard, while at the same time being the most senior. I've tried to be as up-front with my boss as possible about this; he knows we had an outbreak and were isolating for over a week in January. He knows I was dealing with more personal crises. But it's left my ability to concentrate and perform my work compromised. I'm not used to this situation and I don't know how this is going to play out, long-term — specifically, whether I'll be able to continue in this job long enough to begin to regularly contribute enough to justify my salary. My team boss is aggressive in his management style, and very critical — for example, he has called me out in team meetings. I've asked him not to do this — to criticise me privately instead. But as a result of all this, I find myself dreading our interactions. I feel like I can't win. Each time I report that I've made good progress on what he has asked me to focus on, he instantly counters with criticism about the half-dozen other things that I failed to do.

There is a great deal of pressure to go into the office in person again, even though all the devices and computers I typically work with are remote anyway, and I may be expected to travel internationally soon. Once I flew fairly regularly to conferences; now I haven't flown since 2008 and my passport has been expired for years.

I don't feel smart any more; I don't feel on top of things. My short-term memory is shot. My executive function is shot. I'm often very tired. On Friday, for a time I just had to stare at the clock. I felt like curling up under my desk and crying. I just had to wait it out, and drink another caffeinated drink and hope my brain would come online.

It did, for a while, so I got a little bit done to finish out the week, but my performance feels so inadequate, even compared to what I was able to achieve last year.

I feel that since we had an outbreak in our home, I've had the long COVID “brain fog” — sluggish thoughts, and fatigue, along with the circulatory problems,

chest pain, tachycardia, tinnitus, and other issues. Is this really due to COVID? I don't know, and even if it is, I don't know that I'd be able to convince a doctor. But I see my doctor next week.

### **Autistic Burnout**

There's one more kind of burnout that I want to speak to, personally: autistic burnout. This is

...the intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by a loss of skills, that some adults with autism experience. Many autistic people say it results mainly from the cumulative effect of having to navigate a world that is designed for neurotypical people.

And:

Burnout is often a consequence of camouflaging, or masking, a strategy in which autistic people mimic neurotypical behavior by using scripts for small talk, forcing themselves to make eye contact or suppressing repetitive behaviors. These strategies can help autistic people in their jobs and relationships but require immense effort.

It can also result from sensory overstimulation, such as a noisy bus commute; executive function demands such as having to juggle too many tasks at once; or stress associated with change.

In my own case, I've always known that I needed to engage in certain self-soothing activities to avoid this. I start most days with a bath to calm my nerves. I had arranged to be up and around before the kids were awake, so that I didn't have to interact with them in the morning. Through early 2020 I routinely had breakfasts out at one of a few restaurants that were quiet places where I could nurse a coffee and a book. I spent time regularly writing, or practicing guitar, or working on podcast projects. Watching certain kinds of films was often a good self-soothing activity. Reading before bed, aloud or silently, was also soothing.

During our pandemic lockdown, as months have dragged into years, and I've been the only one who has to reliably be any kind of enforced schedule, we've tended to get more and more "out of sync" with the outside world. Some of the kids have been more prone to sleeping late and staying up late, while some have developed a habit of getting up very early. This means that I'm often woken up very early, or kept up very late, or both, often by fighting or arguing kids, or screaming babies. My ability to get a decent night's sleep, already very compromised by anxiety and stress during the pandemic, has been blown straight to hell. I have found myself often unable to tolerate being around the noise and chaos of the kids at all. My reading has fallen almost to nothing. Working long hours, I don't have time for writing, or the podcast. Even trying to watch a movie has become a very fraught and difficult activity as the choice of movie becomes an argument, and the viewing itself is constantly interrupted. When I

do have quiet time to read, I'm often too tired to focus on the words.

How do you fix it?

A first step is for autistic people to remove themselves from the situation that triggered the burnout. This could be as simple as going back to a hotel room to rest alone after a day of unpredictable social interactions at a conference.

What happens when you're also a burned-out care provider *and* worker and can't get that down time?

### **How About You?**

Are you burned out?

If not, how did you avoid it?

If so, how do you fix it?

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