

What Actually Is Midlife Burnout? Here's What's Really Happening, According to a Stanford Scholar

Expert therapists say it's different from work burnout, but they're often connected—and highly common. Here are the signs of midlife burnout, and strategies for survival.



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About the Experts:

- **Leah Weiss, PhD**, is a scholar-practitioner, Stanford lecturer, author, therapist, and researcher who has spent more than 25 years studying how accomplished adults change, how systems shape identity, and what it takes to navigate pivotal life transitions with integrity. She's the creator of *The Midlife Curriculum*, a framework drawing on developmental psychology research around midlife transitions combined with insights from her therapy and coaching practice.
- **Julie Hannan** is a U.K.-based Chartered Counselling Psychologist and Psychotherapist who supports people aged 35 to 60 through life transitions. She created a step-by-step guide to

understanding and overcoming a midlife crisis in her book, The Midlife Crisis Handbook: Finding Direction in the Second Half of Life.

When the accumulated load of managing multiple responsibilities like your career, household, kids, relationships and aging parents all feel overwhelming, you may reach a point of midlife burnout.

“Psychologists describe burnout as a nervous system that has become stuck in overdrive, moving between states of hyperarousal, frantic productivity and eventual shutdown,” Julie Hannan, a U.K.-based psychologist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*, tells *MyLifetime*.

Many people in midlife are not simply tired, but have lost the ability to move flexibly between activity and recovery, she adds. “They may collapse on the sofa or wake at 3 a.m., finding themselves mentally switched on, thinking about work, children, or parents. Their body has stopped, but their stress response has not,” Hannan continues.

Sometimes burnout develops after years of pushing through a life that increasingly runs counter to your current needs and values. “Work, achievement and responsibility may once have given us purpose, but by midlife we may want greater autonomy, creativity, health, flexibility or time with people we love,” Hannan says.

If those needs are continually ignored, she says it can feel like the psyche gradually withdraws its support for what you’re doing. For instance, motivation disappears, it might be hard to get out of bed, vitality and energy decline, and once-manageable tasks become intolerable. “This does not mean burnout is ‘all in the mind,’ but it can mean that prolonged stress and psychological misalignment can be happening at the same time,” Hannan says.

Midlife Burnout Differs From Workplace Burnout

An identifier of workplace burnout is that it’s in relation to your job. “So, if you were to step away from work, you’d be functioning differently,” Leah Weiss, PhD, a scholar-practitioner who has spent more than 25 years studying midlife and how to navigate pivotal life transitions, tells *MyLifetime*.

During midlife burnout, people feel the oversaturation of over-functioning in different areas of their life, and it's not possible to remove themselves from any one component to reset. "These roles are entangled, so unlike a job you can navigate differently or quit, this has a much more complex set of layers that need to be handled," Weiss says.

This can be particularly relevant for women, who still tend to carry a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic, organizational and caregiving work, Hannan points out. She says physical demands play a part, but so does the mental load of remembering appointments, anticipating everyone's needs and making sure family life continues to function.

"Women can become exhausted through years of 'doing' for other people while gradually deprioritizing themselves," she says. "Research consistently links the combined burden of paid and unpaid work with poorer wellbeing, particularly for women."

Warning Signs of Midlife Burnout

The following may indicate midlife burnout:

- Feeling highly anxious or depressed. "People may stop enjoying things they previously liked, withdraw socially or feel they need an entire weekend to recover from a normal working week," Hannan says.
- Becoming easily agitated with others. "I've had women say that they're usually patient with people but suddenly want to snap at them," Weiss says.
- Experiencing sleep disruptions, like being able to fall asleep or stay asleep, or feeling tired after a good night's sleep.
- Changes in memory and concentration. "People walk into a room and forget why, lose words, struggle to read a paragraph or find that they can no longer manage several demands at once," Hannan says.
- Physical signs might include headaches, muscular tension, digestive disturbance, palpitations, frequent minor illnesses, loss of libido and tinnitus.
- Tearfulness and emotional numbness.
- Depending on caffeine, recreational drugs, alcohol, sugar or scrolling to regulate the day.

“The challenge of midlife is that many things can have medical explanations, including hormonal changes,” Weiss says.

Hannan agrees, noting that women in midlife should be careful not to assume that every symptom is psychological. “Perimenopause, menopause, thyroid problems, anemia, sleep disorders, depression and other health conditions can overlap with burnout,” she says.

Why Rest Doesn't Cut It

Rest is restorative when the structure of your life is broadly sustainable and aligned with your values, Hannan says. “You take a proper break, sleep, reduce stimulation, and begin to feel more like yourself,” she adds. “Your energy gradually returns, and you can re-enter your life without feeling like you’re walking through treacle [a syrup-like molasses].”

However, structural change is needed when rest helps only temporarily before you return to the same conditions that exhausted you, such as an unmanageable workload, sole responsibility for an aging parent and an unequal domestic workload.

“It may also be more internal [such as] perfectionism, over-responsibility, fear of disappointing people or a belief that being valuable means being endlessly available and useful to others,” Hannan says.

3 Ways to Cope with Midlife Burnout

Because many occurrences during midlife like mortgages, children and aging parents don't disappear, Hannan says reducing your load in realistic ways while increasing your capacity to recover can help. She suggests the below strategies to help cope with midlife burnout.

Make the invisible load visible to yourself and others by writing down everything you are required to remember, anticipate, organize and emotionally support. “Many people say their partners or siblings help out, but often it's not the same as shared ownership; they themselves tend to do the lion's share,” Hannan says. “Tasks need to be transferred in full wherever possible, not just assisted with.”

Separate what is necessary from what is being maintained through habit, guilt, obligation, people-pleasing behavior, expectation or perfectionism. For instance, Hannan says not every email needs an immediate response, adult children don't need rescuing from every mistake and family traditions can be simplified, paused or reduced in frequency. “Standards at home may

need to drop,” she says. “Burnout recovery often requires tolerating other people’s disappointment rather than continually sacrificing yourself to prevent it.”

Embrace slowing down. Hannan says many of her clients who are experiencing midlife burnout are active in mind and body, find relaxation challenging, and prefer to exercise, walk, or attend a Pilates class rather than sit still and meditate. “Slow breathing, particularly with a gentle, unforced, longer exhalation, can support parasympathetic activity and improve heart rate variability,” she says.

While the evidence doesn’t show that breathing exercises will solve burnout, she says they can help the body practice moving from mobilization towards recovery. “Regularity is more useful than waiting until the person is completely overwhelmed,” she says.

She encourages building short periods of nervous-system recovery into the day by going on a 10-minute walk without your phone, slow breathing before sleep, eating lunch away from your desk or doing something repetitive and absorbing, such as gardening, knitting or gentle movement. “Rest is not simply the absence of work,” Hannan says. “It is an experience in which the body receives the message that, for a short period, nothing is being demanded of it.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cathy Cassata

For more than 15 years, Cathy Cassata has written about health, mental health, wellness and inspiring people. She has interviewed hundreds of experts from a wide range of backgrounds, including physicians, psychologists, sociologists, researchers and scientists, as well as everyday people about their personal journeys. With an aptitude for listening to others, asking thought-provoking questions and writing with empathy and accuracy, Cathy crafts stories worth reading. She is a regular contributor to a variety of outlets, including Healthline and *Health*.

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