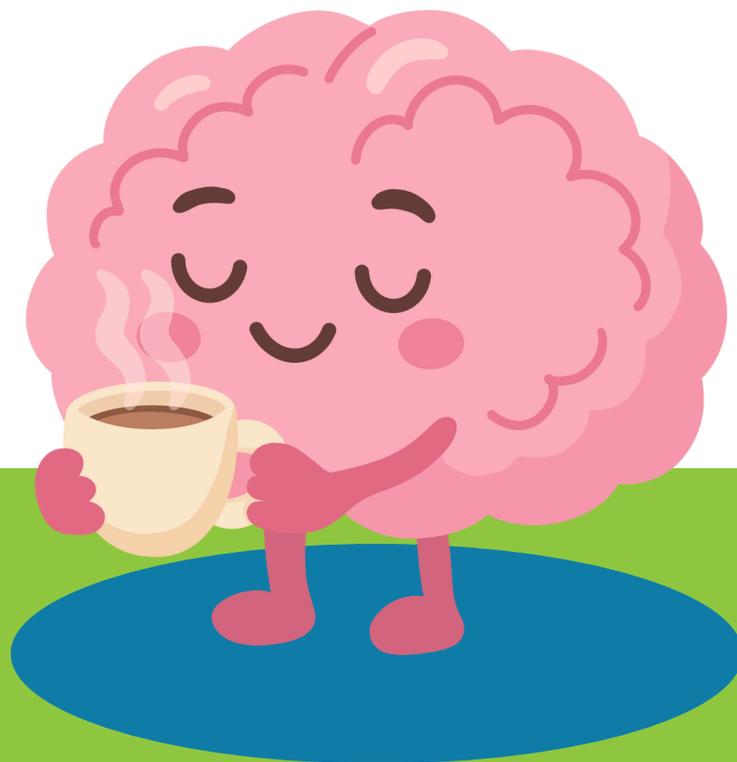




A CAREGIVER'S GUIDE TO BURNOUT

For when you're running on empty.



Ever heard the saying “you can’t pour from an empty cup”? When our internal resources are depleted, our capacity to care, regulate, and respond effectively is reduced. Self-care is the maintenance of our regulatory capacity.

Running on Empty

A parent feeling burnt out is not a failure. It is a nervous system under prolonged stress.

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. When we experience stress the amygdala within the brain is activated. This is a part of the brain that determines whether we will fight, flee, deal with a “threat”, or what we perceive to be a stressor. The brain then experiences an uptick in cortisol as we go through a short stress cycle: brief fear/panic, followed by resolution.

Burnout can be caused by prolonged stress, showing up after the brain experiences repeated upticks in cortisol as we deal with these stressors and accumulates over days or weeks.

Burnout often shows up as:

- Irritability or snapping more easily
- Emotional numbness or detachment
- Feeling overwhelmed by small tasks
- Guilt about not being the parent you “should” be
- Exhaustion that sleep doesn’t fix



The goal is not perfection.

The goal is regulation!

Step 1: Regulate Before You Respond

When you are dysregulated, your thinking brain goes offline. The first step to get back on track is to calm your nervous system.

Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (or DBT) introduces the TIPP technique when we're experiencing extreme emotions. TIPP stands for Temperature, Intense Exercise, Paced Breathing and Progressive Muscle Relaxation. When you're feeling distressed, try the following exercises, in order from 1 to 4, to reset your system.

1. T - Temperature Shift

Interrupt emotional escalation with a temperature change. This shocks the system and begins the process of de-escalation.

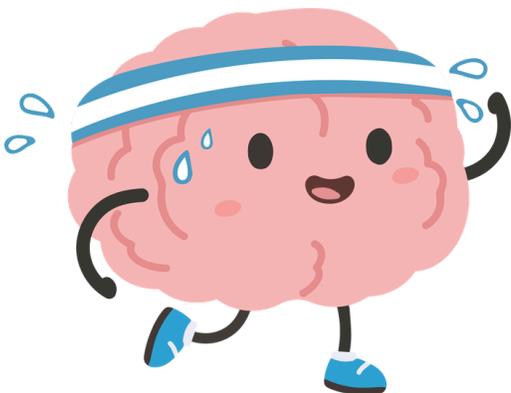
- Splash cool water on your face
- Step outside for 2 minutes of fresh air

2. I - Intense exercise

Similar to temperature changes, engaging in movement will interrupt the cycle!

- Do 10 wall push-ups
- Walk briskly around the house

Physical regulation precedes emotional regulation.

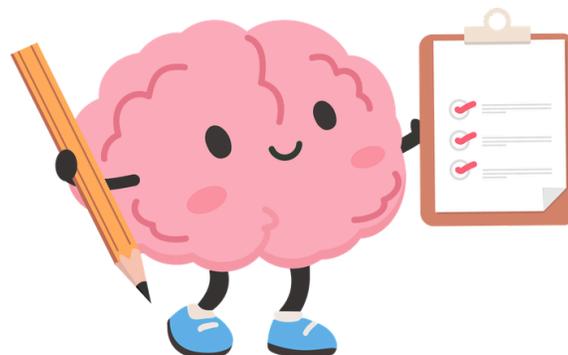


3. P - Paced Breathing - The 90-Second Reset

Remember that strong emotions often surge or hit their peak for about 60–90 seconds, while taking longer exhales signals safety to your body.

Try to relax your breathing and follow these steps:

- Inhale for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds
- Exhale slowly for 6 seconds
- Repeat this 5 times



4. P - Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation allows us to target the tense muscles in our body while we are experiencing extreme emotions and release excess energy. This exercise can be done from a seated position. Begin by focusing on the top of your body. Bring your awareness to your muscles and the upper back and deliberately tighten these muscles for five seconds. Then let go. You should feel that area begin to loosen up.

Continue this with your arms, abdominals and lower back, your glute muscles, thighs, upper legs and calves. This practice allows your body to release the excessive energy build up, while also allowing for a moment of mindfulness and relaxation.

By the time individuals have reached the 4th exercise of the TIPP technique they often report feeling more calm or relaxed!

Step 2: Reduce Guilt, Increase Compassion

Burnout thrives on self-criticism.

We are often our own biggest critics. The guilt we carry is frequently self-imposed, shaped less by external judgment and more by the expectations we set for ourselves and, at times, for our partners. These internal standards, that are often invisible to others, can quietly escalate, creating pressure that feels constant and unrelenting.

To mitigate burnout, it can be both powerful and restorative to consciously recalibrate those expectations. Intentionally lowering the bar—where appropriate and within reason—allows space for imperfection, flexibility, and grace. By easing the demands we place on ourselves and our families, we create room for sustainability, connection, and well-being to take precedence over unattainable ideals.

Ask yourself:

- What can be postponed?
- What can be simplified?
- What is “good enough” today?



Tonight’s dinner can be simple. The laundry can wait.

Consider the way you speak to yourself and give yourself grace. Instead of: “I’m failing.” instead try: “I am a parent under strain.”

Research shows self-compassion improves resilience and reduces stress hormones. What would you say to a friend in this moment? Can you offer yourself that same tone?

Step 3: Refill Your Cup

Small, consistent deposits matter. It is crucial to find chunks of time for yourself.

The 3M Framework is an approach to managing burnout by incorporating three types of breaks: Macro, Meso and Micro.

1. Macro breaks: a half-day to a full day each month spent disconnected from stressors, perhaps time spent outside in nature, relaxing, or engaging in some of your personal interests.
2. Meso breaks: an hour or so each week, perhaps spent exercising, socializing, spent with your partner, or working on a hobby.
3. Micro breaks: brief breaks throughout the day to help reset, maintain focus and reduce stress.

As a parent it may be difficult to carve out time for those macro and meso breaks every week, but here are some ideas for a micro break:

- Do a breathing exercise
- Sit with a hot drink without multitasking
- Listen to one favourite song with full attention
- Text a safe friend
- Step outside and notice five sensory details
- Read 5 pages of something unrelated to parenting
- Take a shower as a reset, not a task



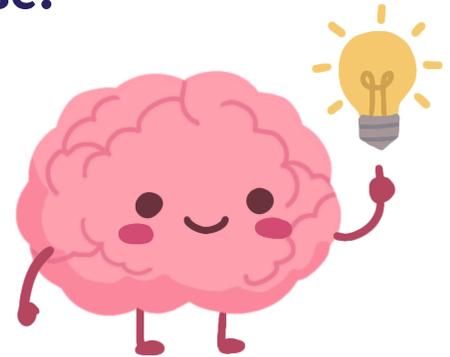
Regulation is cumulative.

Step 4: Build Protective Buffers

Burnout decreases when caregivers increase:

1. Predictability

From your child's "bedtime routine" to a Sunday reset (laundry/meal prep), incorporating routines can help reduce cognitive load. Predictable routines enhance psychological safety for you and your child, promote a sense of control and reduce anxiety levels.



2. Shared Load

Don't try to do it all! Share the load with your partner, your family, your village (whatever that means to you). If it is within your means, consider purchasing support, whether that is a babysitter, splurging on a cleaning service or a grocery delivery now and then. Start small by identifying one task someone in your circle can take on or that you can reasonably drop altogether.

3. Boundaries

You can say no to things! If it simply isn't in your bandwidth this weekend to have plans for the family each day, you are perfectly entitled to stay home. Do you have family members who pop-in unannounced? Have a forthcoming conversation with them about calling ahead. Whatever the boundaries look like for you, protect your peace.

4. Selective Engagement

Pick your battles! Conserve your energy and focus on what truly matters whenever possible. Choosing to let go of minor conflicts is a skill in itself and can effectively de-escalate a situation.

5. Sleep Protection

Sleep is crucial to our wellbeing. You can be doing everything else to combat burnout and stay regulated but if you're not getting enough sleep burnout is inevitable. Ensure you're getting enough sleep, and try going to bed earlier by just 20 minutes. Don't forget to avoid bedtime doom scrolling!

Step 5: Repair When Needed

“I find myself losing my patience more than I’d like, then I feel so guilty for not keeping it together. Am I damaging my child when I lose my cool?” - Caregiver

Losing your cool doesn’t mean you’re damaging your child—it means you’re human. What matters most when we lose our cool with our kids is repair: owning it, reconnecting, and modelling accountability and self-regulation, which are powerful lessons in themselves.

Managing our own emotions while parenting is an ongoing practice, we will never totally master it, but we can always strive to do better.

Tuning into what contributes to our own emotional responses and learning to pause and find our calm is something we can continue to develop as we keep growing alongside our children.

- Dr. Hancock, Clinical Psychologist

All parents lose their temper at times.

When you’ve lost your temper, repair is the most important part.

Repair sounds like:

“I yelled earlier. That wasn’t how I want to handle big feelings. I’m working on it.”

Repair builds security more than perfection does.



Prioritize Yourself

You deserve support too.

Know when to reach out. If you find yourself burnt out more often than not, or having more bad days than good each week, you may want to consider professional support.

Some indicators might include:

- You feel persistently hopeless or numb
- You dread interacting with your child
- Anger feels hard to control
- You are experiencing thoughts of harming yourself



You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Just like on an airplane, we are told to put our air mask on first before putting the air mask on our child, we are not able to care for our children to the best of our ability if we do not first care for ourselves.

Regulating yourself is not selfish, it is protective. Remember, when you care for YOUR nervous system, you are ultimately caring for your child's nervous system.

BETTER OUTCOMES. TOGETHER.

KINARK
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Information Sources

Segal, J., Smith, M., & Robinson, L. (2026, February 2). Stress symptoms, signs, and causes. HelpGuide.org. <https://www.helpguide.org/mental-health/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes>

What Happens to Cause Burnout? [Video]. (n.d.). YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFjK5WLpSHE&t=18s>

DialecticalBehaviorTherapy.com. (2024, February 11). TIPP: DBT skills, worksheets, videos, exercises. <https://dialecticalbehaviortherapy.com/distress-tolerance/tipp/>

McClurg, M. (2025, March 28). Predictability isn't boring—It's brain-friendly. Spark Momentum. <https://www.sparkmomentum.org/blog/predictability-isnt-boringits-brain-friendly>