

# How To Tame Burnout When Your Office Is Your Bedroom

**Susan David:** We may have never met, you and I, but I can say with a reasonable amount of confidence that the coronavirus pandemic has left you feeling stressed. There must be some folks out there who are reacting to the scary and unprecedented situation with Buddha-like equanimity. But most people I know are struggling to juggle a new and evolving array of obligations along with health, economic, and existential anxieties. In much of the world (and especially in the United States) many of us were teetering on the edge of burnout before COVID-19 arrived to further disrupt our precarious balancing act. Already-fuzzy boundaries between work and life have all but disintegrated. A host of new concerns threaten to overwhelm us now: the prospect of getting sick, of our kids falling behind academically, of mass layoffs and missed rent payments. It is a sad reality that we do not have the power to eliminate many of these stressors. However, we can be mindful and strategic in how we engage with them. This is Checking In with Susan David.

Our culture has a tendency to pathologize difficult emotions and stress is no exception. Stress is often equated with being “bad.” From a very young age, we’re taught to suppress these feelings, to push them aside. We become uncomfortable talking about them, we see them as somehow aberrant or unseemly. This is both unproductive and unkind. We often learn more about ourselves in the darkness of stress than in the lightness of ease. Stress is part of life. It is typically the foundation of growth. We often do most of our learning, self reflection, and gain our agency during periods of stress. Right now though, globally, we’re experiencing more stress than we had anticipated would come in 2020. And we are getting burned out in the process. None of us can choose to make a pandemic disappear. But each of us can choose how we respond to these challenges.

I don’t need to explain the value of grit. It’s embedded in our well worn cultural aphorisms, from Britain’s, “keep calm and carry on” to the American adage, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” These sentiments seem especially relevant right now, as we’re all sacrificing so much. Everything from our plans to our mobility, from our livelihoods to a hug from grandma. It can feel that there’s little option for us to do anything but just endure. Grittiness is a necessary ingredient for human thriving, both during trying historical moments and periods of relative calm. There will be times in our lives when we must keep putting one foot in front of the other, even as each step feels too exhausting to bear. Right now, the prospect of one more math lesson with your child, one more call to the state’s unemployment center, or one more 24 hour shift at the hospital may seem impossible. Yet we try and sometimes fail to keep going. Many of us, perhaps most of us, are either nearing or surpassing the limits of what we can endure right now. It is important, then, to recognize whether we are hanging on to unrealistic or harmful goals and to separate the tasks that

we must grit our way through from the ones that we do not need to do so with. In other words, we need to be intentional about when to grit and when to quit. As the satirical newspaper *The Onion* put it in a recent headline, “Man not sure why he thought the most psychologically taxing situation of his life would be the thing to make him productive.” You’re going through one of the more traumatizing events in recent world history. So be kind to yourself. Don’t spend your Saturdays trying to force a stubborn loaf of sourdough to rise when you know you’d rather be rewatching your favorite episodes of *Downton Abbey*. There’s simply no need to grit your way through the hours that should be giving you pleasure. Make time for what relaxes you, not what stresses you out. As I’ve mentioned previously on this podcast, it’s the tiny tweaks, the small changes, that have all the power right now. If your life has become a blur between bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, Sunday is the same as Monday, Tuesday, and Saturday, and work and family are all happening, all at once, in the stress of pandemic life, it’s this doing, doing, doing that you may need to quit. Recognize that this is the place of burnout. Restoration, on the other hand, is what happens in the small choices. The putting the work down at 6 pm because now it’s family time and space for joy, tickles, picnics on the bedroom floor, and connection. Restoration comes in intentional unproductivity: daydreaming, reading, in finding a quiet room and closing the door, in forgiving yourself.

Of course not all of our obligations are as simple to discard as the social pressure to become a star baker. It’s considerably harder to tune out of the boss demanding a daily check-in over Zoom, or the third grader struggling with a reading assignment. In these cases, it can be useful to shift your thinking from task to objective. This objective-focus thinking can be useful to making it through the pandemic without burning out. If you find certain tasks especially draining, then determine what objective they’re building toward and consider if there are less taxing ways to get from A to B. Let’s look at the example of the daily Zoom calls with your boss. Maybe he or she finds them a useful way to monitor progress on your projects, but you find the whole experience exhausting, from making yourself presentable to the inevitable digressions in conversation to regaining your momentum after you finally get back to work. Here we can separate the task—the daily Zoom check-ins—from the objective, keeping him or her informed as to what you’re up to. With a little thought you can likely come up with a new, less burdensome task that still fulfills the overall objective. Perhaps you can send out a quick, bullet-pointed email that outlines your progress at the end of each workday and scale the Zoom calls back to once a week. Your boss’s objective gets met and you keep your sanity.

Or consider the child who refuses to read the book her teacher has assigned. She finds it dreadfully boring, and you don’t have the bandwidth to rehash the same argument every afternoon—not with your demanding boss waiting for you over Zoom. Again, we can separate objective from task. The objective is for your daughter to improve her reading skills. The task is for her to read this book—the one she can’t stand. There are alternate paths to the overall objective. Instead of the assigned book, perhaps she can read one of her own choosing. Most teachers are attuned to the need for flexibility under the current circumstances. Don’t be afraid to ask for accommodations that decrease the stress level of your home. Of course, be polite when you do so—teachers are stressed out, too. So as we’ve explored, there are some stresses we can let go of and others we can

recalibrate to put less of an emotional strain on ourselves.

Then there's a third class of stresses: things that we must do, whether we like it or not. These are the hardest to deal with. Maybe your job as a cashier at a grocery store has suddenly become terrifying, but you can't quit because no one else is hiring. Or perhaps your already-fragile marriage is crumbling under the stress of the pandemic, but neither of you has somewhere else you can safely go to get some space. There are some situations we cannot change right now. However, we can change the way we relate to them. We're so often bombarded with messages about what others think we should do, or even our own messages of what we think we should do: I have to be on dad duty today; I have to go on another Zoom meeting; I have to call my mom. Have-to goals create a prison around us. When we have a have-to goal, we tend to automatically feel a sense of resentment and resistance. Under the current conditions, it might be a stretch to make some of our obligations reach the level of want-to, but by understanding how what we're doing connects with what is important to us, we can hopefully at least upgrade them to the level of can-do. It may very well be that no amount of mental gymnastics will get you to want to go to your job manning the checkout lane at a grocery store in a coronavirus hotspot—I wouldn't blame you in the least. But by considering how it connects to your values, or even what you'll learn about yourself, you might find a way forward. You don't want to be at work today, but you can do it to provide for your family. You don't want to put yourself at risk in this way, but you can because it's now clear that your work is absolutely indispensable. Your courage is helping your community to survive right now. And remember, courage isn't the absence of fear. Courage is fear walking. This shift in thinking allows you to move forward with intentionality. Even if you cannot choose to leave the situation you find yourself in, you can choose why you continue to put one foot in front of the other. And you can choose how you make sense of this experience. You only have so much energy to give, and if you become too invested in specific outcomes, or imprisoned by your have-tos, then it's very likely to be draining on you, your relationships, your work, and your family. Guard your energy wisely. This is a marathon, not a sprint. So first, think of a have-to goal in your life right now. Can you connect it with your values so that it's more of a want-to goal—one aligned with who you are, and the power and agency you bring to the world? Second, what is a task that you've hardened into where softening and thinking more about your objective would be helpful? And last, are there goals or expectations that you are gritting through, but where you can grant yourself the grace and dignity to give yourself a break and to quit? What is one thing you could let go of? Instead of looking at these transitions as giving up, recognize that goal adjustment is the most agile and adaptive way to be in the world. You're letting yourself evolve and grow along with your circumstances. When there is a lot on these days—which is to say, often—I am reminded of Mary Oliver's beautiful poem. It's called "What I Can Do":

What I Can Do

[by Mary Oliver]

The television has two instruments that control it.

I get confused.

The washer asks me, do you want regular or delicate?

Honestly, I just want clean.

Everything is like that.  
I won't even mention cell phones.

I can turn on the light of the lamp beside my chair  
where a book is waiting. But that's about it.

Oh yes, and I can strike a match and make fire.

That poem is so beautiful because in the complexity of our now, we need to pace ourselves. We need to remind ourselves of the "I can" in our world and to allow ourselves the pockets, no matter how short they are or small they are, to just be rather than to do. I invite you to invite the restoration and life that happens in the pause. That's all from me today. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.