FREE GUIDE · BURNOUT

Exhaustion and burnout: your brain's token economy

Why you cope on Monday and fall apart on Thursday, why the old you is cheaper, not stronger, and how to manage your brain's budget.

Why can you cope brilliantly with a hard day on Monday, and fall apart over a lost sock on Thursday? I explain it to almost everyone I work with, usually by drawing a bucket on a scrap of paper. It's the idea people most often tell me changed how they see themselves.

Your brain runs on tokens

Imagine that every morning you wake up with a bucket of tokens. Let's say 100. They are your capacity to think, focus, regulate your emotions, be patient, make decisions, be kind, be sociable and resist the biscuits. Everything costs tokens.

Before you've done anything, your body takes a big chunk, say 30, just to keep you alive: heartbeat, breathing, digestion, fighting off bugs. So you start the day with about 70 to spend. Then the day begins:

- Getting the kids up and out: 10.
- A delayed train: 5.
- A meeting with the person who talks over everyone: 8.
- Concentrating on a complicated piece of work: 15.
- Deciding what to make for dinner: 3. (Decisions are expensive.)
- Worrying about your dad's test results in the background, all day: 10.

You're past 70 by teatime. Then someone leaves a wet towel on the bed, and you explode. It wasn't the towel. You'd run out.

So what do you think happens when the day costs more than you've got? And what would have to happen overnight for tomorrow to be any different?

These numbers are an illustration, not a measurement. Nobody has counted your tokens. But the principle is solid: the brain is about 2% of your body weight and uses roughly 20% of your energy at rest, and stress, poor sleep, pain and illness measurably change how well it works.

It isn't your character. It's your budget.

Once people understand tokens, a lot of shame falls away. You're not a short-tempered person. You're a person who was short-tempered at the end of a day that cost 90 tokens when you had 70. The same person with a full bucket is patient, funny and wise. You've seen that person. That person is real too.

It also explains why you can be calm and competent at work and then snap at everyone at home. You spent your tokens being calm at work. Home is often where your brain feels safe enough to run out.

The old you isn't stronger. It's cheaper.

Old, well-practised habits run on autopilot and cost almost nothing. New ones need attention and effort, and cost a lot. So when tokens run low, your brain falls back on the cheapest programme it has: the snapping, the scrolling, the cake, the drink. A setback after a bad week isn't proof that you haven't changed. It's information about your budget.

Going into debt, and burnout

Spend 90 when you had 70, and you've borrowed 20 from tomorrow. Do that for a few days and you start each morning in a hole. Do it for months and you're living on credit. People in this state are exhausted all the time, tearful, irritable, flat, forgetful and unable to make decisions. They feel like they're going mad. They're not. They're bankrupt.

Often it's a stacking effect: one thing lands on top of another (a loss, a new job, an illness, a move) with no time in between to process any of them. Each one takes resources to come to terms with. Stack them up and there's nothing left.

A bankrupt brain does something sensible: it cuts costs. It switches off what it sees as non-essential: emotional regulation, motivation, pleasure, social interest, patience, self-care. That's why burnout can look so much like depression. It isn't laziness. It's triage.

Burnout rarely comes out of nowhere, either. Spend just 5 tokens more than you have each day, and after a month you're over 100 in debt. Small overspends, every day, add up to big collapses.

What drains you

- **Poor sleep**: the overnight bank doesn't refill. One bad night makes your alarm system more sensitive and your brakes weaker.
- **Alcohol**: it feels like a deposit, but it costs you. Your body treats it as a toxin and works for hours to clear it out, and it wrecks the second half of the night. You may not feel hungover, but don't be fooled: there's always a hangover in tokens.
- **Pain**: a constant withdrawal that pulls on attention and sleep.
- **Worry and uncertainty**: a team running in the background all day. Waiting for news can drain you faster than bad news itself.
- **Watching and masking**: scanning faces, reading the room, hiding how you feel to fit in. Huge hidden costs.
- **Some people**: we'll come to them.

What fills you up

- **Sleep**, by far the biggest deposit.

- **Movement**, **food** at regular times, **nature**, even a few minutes.
- **Laughter**: a brain that's laughing isn't under threat.
- **Connection** with people you don't have to perform for.
- **Rest that is actually rest**, not scrolling while answering emails.
- **Getting the chemistry right.** Sometimes the bucket has a hole in it: an underactive thyroid, anaemia, unmanaged pain. If you've been depleted for a long time and nothing helps, see your GP.

Where are your people tokens going?

Draw three circles, one inside the other. In the middle, the handful of people who matter most. In the next ring, friends you like and trust. In the outer ring, acquaintances and colleagues. Then ask: where am I spending most of my tokens?

Very often, people spend huge amounts on the outer ring (agonising over what a colleague thinks) and give the people who matter most whatever is left at the end of the day. Rebalance it. The outer ring is usually not lying awake worrying about you.

A simple rule for now: choose who you spend time with based on how they leave you feeling. Energised, or drained? Some people are important but not urgent, and they can wait until you've got more to give.

Build a life bar

Most people only notice their tokens when they've hit zero. Instead, check in three times a day: morning, mid-afternoon and bedtime. Rate yourself out of 10. Once you can see the bar going down, you can do something before it empties.

Claw resources back

If you're running on empty, look for places to claw resources back: commitments you can pause, people you can see less of for now, small things you're spending on that don't really matter at the moment. And when you're ready to build up again, treat it like the gym after an illness. You can't go straight back to last month's weights. Build up gradually.

Do the best you can with what you've got

What you manage on any day depends on what's in the bucket, not on how good a person you are. On a 90-token day your best might be a run, a finished project and a lovely evening. On a 20-token day your best might be getting dressed and eating something that isn't toast. Both are your best. Both count.

A conversation with your brain

"Brain, what happened there?"
"We went back to the old way. We're hopeless."
"How many tokens did we have left?"
"…None, really. We were up half the night."

"So we weren't hopeless. We were skint. Different problem. Let's sort the budget."

When to get more help

See your GP if exhaustion has lasted for weeks despite rest, or comes with other symptoms such as weight change, breathlessness or low mood that won't lift. If burnout is affecting your work, relationships or mood, therapy can help you rework the budget. If you're in crisis, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or Samaritans on 116 123.

Worksheets

You'll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **The token audit**: a one-week life bar and spending log
- **Three circles**: where your people tokens are going
- **Deposits menu**: your personal list of things that refill the bucket

Further help

- NHS: tiredness and fatigue: common causes and when to see a GP.
- NHS Every Mind Matters: sleep: practical tips for better sleep.
- Mind: stress: information and support.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

Read this guide online, and find more free guides, at drmonicaberntsen.com/resources.

WORKSHEET 1

The token audit

For one week, rate your life bar three times a day (10 = full, 0 = empty). At bedtime, note your biggest spends, any deposits, and whether you went to bed in debt.

Day	Morning /10	Afternoon /10	Bedtime /10	Big spends	Deposits	In debt?

WORKSHEET 2

Three circles

Write names in each circle. Next to each, put + if time with them usually leaves you with more tokens, − if fewer, ± if it depends.

Inner circle: the few people who matter most

Middle circle: friends you like and trust

Outer circle: acquaintances, colleagues

What I notice, and one thing I'll rebalance

WORKSHEET 3

Deposits menu

Your personal menu of things that refill the bucket. Include some that take two minutes, some that take an hour, and some that take a day.

Two-minute deposits

Twenty-minute deposits

Bigger deposits (an afternoon, a day)

People who are deposits

Things that feel like deposits but are really loans