

AN AUSTRIAN

REMEDY FOR

BURNOUT

**This is not just an essay on resilience.**

How can we focus solely on a cure when we still have so much to discuss about the underlying causes?

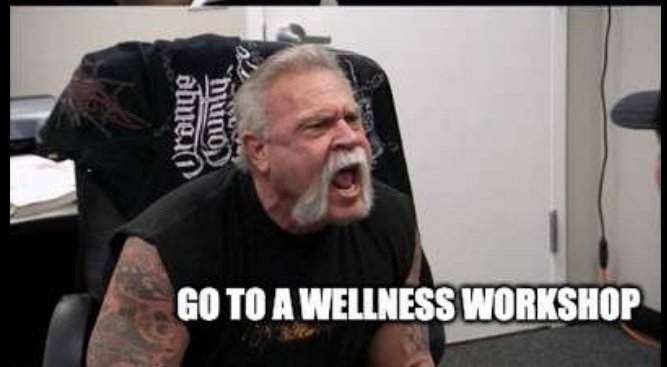
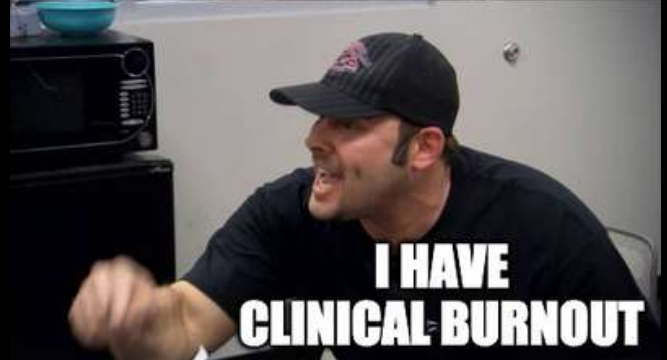
Let's try another approach.

The first step in investigating resilience should be asking ourselves why we need it so much today, more than ever. And what do we need it for?

Upon diagnosing today's unhealthy work culture, perhaps we can conceive fresh strategies to exist beyond the narrow forms of suffering and anesthesia imposed on us by contemporary neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup>

No one is (nor should be) alone in their dilemmas and challenges. We cannot perpetuate the notion that we are individually responsible for what is (or is not) right in our work-related experiences.

*After all, what are we working for?*



## **It was during the pandemic.**

I was the manager of an emerging startup that promoted climate change awareness and social justice through innovative approaches in art and technology, targeting vulnerable communities globally. We were growing fast and had already established solid ties with the local communities, government entities and several organizations.

Everything was up and running. It was my dream job.  
I could never complain.  
Or could I?

For months, I had been struggling at work and it was gradually getting worse. We weren't keeping up with our rapid growth, and the overwhelming workload I had taken on became unsustainable. I was responsible for managing people, finances, accounting, projects and commercial operations. Moreover, I was the primary executor of most of these sectors. With a small and inexperienced team, I devoted entire days to learning and executing new tasks with tight deadlines. It was what I believed a manager should do. And I was terrified of failure.

Each day, I received assignments that I knew were well beyond my scope, yet I convinced myself that it was my duty to handle them. I worked remotely, as the projects were running far from home. However, the demands left me with little time for my home and my loved ones. Something felt off, but I couldn't quite articulate it.

*"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said."<sup>2</sup>*

Once I tried watching Succession, a TV show that follows a wealthy family's power struggles and repetitive destructive patterns navigating the business world. While I found it exceptionally well-crafted, I felt rather uncomfortable with that setting. I struggled to connect deeply with any of the characters. Eventually, I realized that I had been struggling to truly care about anything for quite some time.

Months later, I was jogging while listening to a podcast discussing the recently classified Burnout syndrome and its associated symptoms, which included emotional exhaustion and disaffection. Rain fell, sweat trickled, and tears streamed down my face.

# THEN I REALIZED



## WWPDD - WHAT WOULD PETER DRUCKER DO?

The work of Peter Drucker has been a primordial guide since the beginning of my journey as a young manager. However, amidst the chaos of those early days, I failed to fully internalize certain insights that would have been immensely useful in navigating my initial challenges. Upon revisiting Drucker's theory, I found all the answers were right there.

Since Drucker's passing in 2005, the world has undergone profound transformations. Technological advancements brought about rapid changes in our economy, society and work systems. This new era of multitasking, convenience culture and permanent digital presence massively produces a multitude of symptoms, including anxiety, exhaustion, depression and fatigue – engendering what we can aptly describe as "The Burnout Society."<sup>3</sup>

As often happens in capitalism, mass culture has turned burnout into a widely discussed and cynically commodified discontent – a major cultural product. A thriving market has emerged with digital content, books, therapies and medications, all targeting a generation of distressed workers. Different forms of physical and mental weariness have been condensed into the same narrow definition, turning exhaustion into a societal identity marker.

The danger of identifying ourselves with a symptom is that we disconnect with the debate on how to overcome that condition. "Culture – no matter how defined – is singularly persistent."<sup>4</sup> We have become so fixated on building enough resilience to bounce back that we often neglect to address the root problem and explore ways to prevent burnout altogether. It is as if we are so occupied formulating strategies to win a war that we forget the possibility of attaining a lasting truce. We operate under the mindset that we must adapt ourselves to work rather than seeking innovative methods to work better.

Burnout is not merely an individual medical condition, but an emerging occupational phenomenon, as evidenced by studies such as APA's 2021 Survey, where 59% of participants reported experiencing negative work-related stress in the past month.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, there is an over-emphasis on individual rather than organizational interventions. We cannot attribute burnout to a lack of individual resilience. The workplace should not operate on the principle of survival of the fittest. A secure and enriching employment is not a luxury, but an essential resource for the well-being of most workers.<sup>6</sup> Thus, prevention and recovery from burnout can and should be an organizational responsibility.





According to the World Health Organization, burnout syndrome arises from workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.<sup>7</sup> Realizing this, I turned to management theory for guidance during my own rehabilitation and transformation of my company's work culture. By implementing Drucker's principles, we witnessed our team become better able to manage their workload, maintain well-being, set realistic goals and create boundaries that fostered a sustainable and fulfilling professional journey, preventing burnout from taking hold.

Effective time management was considered a primary aspect, as "time is the scarcest resource, and unless it is managed, nothing else can be managed."<sup>8</sup> Once we allocated time for important responsibilities and delegated tasks efficiently, we regained a sense of control over our schedules. Sometimes, feeling overloaded just means we are carrying more than necessary.

This led us to clarify our goals and priorities. We discovered that certain tasks were time-wasting and counter-productive, whether they were just inefficient methods or energy-draining activities that aligned with an idealized version of our company that was not feasible at the time. "We must accept the fact that we will never be able to do everything we want to do. It's important to prioritize and be realistic about what is possible."<sup>9</sup> This reassessment provided us with the necessary perspective to redefine our goals and move closer to becoming that ideal company. We realized that, despite the visible growth of our operations, we hadn't actually been evolving as a business. "Do not confuse motion and progress. A rocking horse keeps moving but does not make any progress."<sup>10</sup>

Cultivating a new organizational culture allowed for more collaborative and effective teamwork, aligned with Drucker's vision of building strong relationships within organizations.<sup>11</sup> By promoting a supportive network through efficient communication and leadership, colleagues developed professional relationships based on mutual respect and trust. This ensured that no one felt overwhelmed, isolated, constrained or alone in facing their challenges. Every employee is part of a larger system, so addressing burnout requires collective change. By cultivating organizational resilience, we empower all employees to develop their own personal resilience.

## **It was not an instant change.**

Between recognizing the signs of burnout and taking action, months passed in a state of numbness. “A time of turbulence is a dangerous time, but its greatest danger is a temptation to deny reality.”<sup>12</sup> My steadfast supporting system was fundamental, providing the necessary strength to press on.

First, I broke free of all that was dysfunctional.

Then, I took responsibility for what was mine to take and proceeded to try and repair what had been broken.

It's a delicate matter to apologize for suffering from burnout and months of emotional overload and disaffection. I knew I was not at fault, but I lingered to blame somehow. I was still responsible for understanding my emotions and effectively communicating with those important in my life and anyone affected by that situation. Failing to do so reflected my lack of self-awareness and emotional maturity — fundamental elements in cultivating personal resilience.

It took me several months to become literate in my own boundaries.

I left my startup, understanding that the demands of remote work under such strenuous conditions were not feasible for me at that time.

Simultaneously, I embarked on a new managerial role, driven by a fresh start.

The first time a colleague presented me with an undue assignment, I mustered the courage to say no. Despite my fear of conflict and failure, I drew a line. To my surprise, everything proceeded smoothly. My position was understood, tasks were appropriately delegated and it was a resounding success. I found the right path.



## I HAD BURNOUT, NOW WHAT?

While prioritizing organizational resilience is key in preventing burnout, its effects aren't limited to the workplace. Job insecurity inflicts mental strain on people and is mostly reflected in other facets of their lives, such as family and health.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, fostering personal resilience is imperative as well, recognizing its crucial role in both preventing and recovering from burnout. This process involves acknowledging the inevitable adversity individuals encounter in their life and work, enabling them to seek a healthier work-life balance.

Drucker's lessons also underscore the importance of self-awareness in self-management. By developing a deep understanding of one's strengths, weaknesses, values, and preferred learning and performance methods, individuals can make better informed decisions about how they allocate their time and energy.<sup>14</sup> This self-awareness empowers individuals to establish realistic expectations, effectively manage their workload and take proactive measures to prevent burnout.

There are numerous approaches to developing self-awareness. The one I resonate with the most is psychoanalysis, a therapeutic approach developed by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, the intention of psychoanalysis is "to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the superego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where id was, there ego shall be".<sup>15</sup> That is, it aims to help individuals resolve internal conflicts between the different parts of their psyche (ego, superego and id) by gaining a deeper understanding of these conflicts, leading to a healthier and more balanced psychological state.

Psychoanalysis delves into the depths of the unconscious mind, unraveling unconscious desires, conflicts and motivations that greatly influence how individuals respond to stress and adversity. Psychoanalytic theory calls for coming to terms with not knowing nor controlling everything that arises from our unconscious. Thus, self-awareness does not grant us complete control over ourselves. A compulsive need for control will only add to our burden, contributing to an obsessive tendency of micromanagement and consequent feelings of anxiety and stress.<sup>16</sup>



Self-awareness requires us to embrace our complexity and approach the unknown with curiosity and openness. As Drucker observed, “management by objectives works if you know the objectives. Ninety percent of the time you don’t.”<sup>17</sup> By developing self-awareness, individuals can uncover and address unconscious patterns, fostering personal growth. In the psychoanalytic framework, cultivating a strong and adaptable ego is essential for building resilience. It empowers individuals to employ effective coping strategies to better navigate conflict and recover from setbacks.

Conflict is an inherent part of our lives and developmental journey. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein notes that through experiencing conflict, we develop the capacity to tolerate ambivalence and navigate complex relationships. “The recognition of ambivalence is a great step forward in the development of the mind.”<sup>18</sup> Burnout is a manifestation of the disconnect between our conscious desires and unconscious needs. Resilience begins by unearthing the buried desires and finding ways to align them with our daily lives.

While psychoanalysis offers valuable insights into personal resilience, it is crucial to acknowledge that resilience is a multifaceted construct influenced by genetics, environment, social support and personal characteristics. It is a journey that involves integrating various factors to nurture a holistic and sustainable sense of well-being.





Hey, Peter! I've been pondering about overcoming burnout

Share your insights?

Hmm, I believe it requires an organizational and personal effort to cultivate resilience. Transform the environment with a healthy work culture that promotes support, open communication and clear expectations.



Fascinating, indeed! Resilience flourishes in environments where we feel secure expressing our needs and emotions

It is through this support that we find the strength to bounce back

Precisely. It entails embracing our boundaries, reevaluating our priorities, and rediscovering the path to a vibrant life.



Absolutely! However, let us not forget that resilience does not mean evading pain. It involves confronting it, learning from it, and discovering meaning amidst challenges. Traumatic experiences can leave lasting impacts, but resilience emerges as we process the trauma, integrate it into our identity and find purpose despite adversity. Then, "one day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful."<sup>1819</sup>

Wise words, my dear Freud. Resilience empowers us to forge our own destiny, even in face of uncertainty.



Indeed, it requires deep introspection and reassessment of our desires and priorities. Then we can identify what depletes us and redirect our energy towards what truly matters

As I often say, "efficiency is doing things right, but effectiveness is doing the right things."<sup>20</sup>



We must focus on what genuinely adds value to our lives.



I couldn't agree more. Resilience also entails recognizing our limitations and embracing self-compassion

Burnout often stems from our unrelenting pursuit of perfection, so finding solace in self-acceptance and honoring our boundaries is crucial

Now, I must admit



I'm quite intrigued by your personal inclinations in this matter.

Rumors have reached my ears that you dedicate entire days to your work, my esteemed workaholic companion!



me telling my friends mental health is important and they should take care of themselves

how i deal with my own mental health



## IDEAS FOR A RESILIENT FUTURE

While Drucker and Freud may have different areas of expertise, their work converges on themes of self-awareness, personal growth and resilience. Their shared Austrian background certainly shapes their perspectives, reflecting a cultural heritage that values intellectual pursuits, artistic expression and introspective thinking. In the face of fast-paced technoliberalism, such attentiveness to the underlying currents of social phenomena is a potent antidote to disrupt unhealthy dynamics and promote sustainable alternatives.

By considering the ideas of Drucker and Freud together, a more comprehensive understanding of burnout emerges. This multifaceted issue demands a multifaceted approach to prevent and mitigate its impact: Drucker's practical framework and Freud's psychological perspective offer a holistic view, encompassing both organizational and individual dynamics. Their words illuminate the essence of resilience, combining strategy, introspection and the human capacity for growth and renewal.

The new generation of workers faces heightened vulnerability to anxiety and other challenges stemming from the evolving neoliberal system. However, they also possess a greater awareness of the significance of self-awareness in leading a fulfilling life. Whether through the works of fundamental authors like Drucker and Freud or contemporary disciples, there exists a readily available wealth of knowledge to cultivate personal growth and resilience. Yet, we must stress that true development requires applied experience, as “entrepreneurship is neither a science nor an art, but a practice.”<sup>21</sup>

The crucial point lies in perceiving ourselves as agents of change and taking proactive steps to foster a healthier work-life balance. We must actively engage in activities that contribute to our well-being. In this sense, the collective duty to build resilience against the pressures of the precarization of labor should be our highest priority. After all, if we do not prioritize our own growth and advocate for a more sustainable approach, who else will?

But sometimes it isn't enough.

Then what comes after burnout?



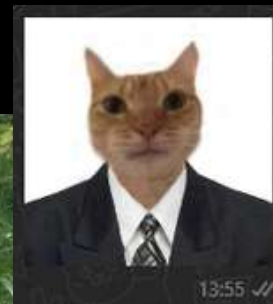
**We should not romanticize exploitative experiences as lessons.**

Yet, in the best case scenarios, that's what remains — we learn. It doesn't guarantee we will never fall back into the same toxic patterns again. I did, more than once. But now I had the tools to agilely realize it and fight back.

And I did not exactly bounce *back*. True recovery from setbacks involves embracing the negative experience as an integral part of your personal history and using it as a trampoline to leap forward.

Resilience is more than endurance. It's about respecting your boundaries and knowing what you can and what you cannot endure at a given moment. It's also about seeking support for the challenges we cannot face alone. We are never alone.

Perhaps the greatest lesson self-awareness imparts about resilience is that it demands an open heart, the strength to love and the courage to face the vulnerabilities that come with it. Even our dream job may require resilience not to wear us out. "We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love."<sup>22</sup> And therein lies our strength.



## REFERENCES

1. André Alves & Lucas Liedke. *vibes do trabalho* (2021).
2. Peter Drucker. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1973)
3. Byung-Chul Han. *The Burnout Society* (2015).
4. Peter Drucker. "Don't Change Corporate Culture—Use It!", *The Wall Street Journal* (1991).
5. APA. *Work and Well-being Survey report* (2021).
6. Yehuda Baruch & Yoav Vardi. "A fresh look at the dark side of contemporary careers: toward a realistic discourse", *British Journal of Management* (2016).
7. WHO. *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases* (2019).
8. Peter Drucker. *The Effective Executive* (1967).
9. Peter Drucker. *Managing for Results* (1964).
10. Peter Drucker. *The Effective Executive* (1967).
11. Peter Drucker. *Managing Oneself* (1999).
12. Peter Drucker. *Managing in Turbulent Times* (1980).
13. Yehuda Baruch & Yoav Vardi. "A fresh look at the dark side of contemporary careers: toward a realistic discourse", *British Journal of Management* (2016).
14. Peter Drucker. "Managing Oneself", *Harvard Business Review* (2009).
15. Sigmund Freud. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933).
16. Melanie Klein. *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States* (1935).
17. Peter Drucker. "Drucker Speaks His Mind", *Management Review* (1995).
18. Melanie Klein. *Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States* (1940).
19. Sigmund Freud. *Letter to Carl Jung* (1907).
20. Peter Drucker. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1974).
21. Peter Drucker. *Innovations and Entrepreneurship* (1985).
22. Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its Discontents* (1937).