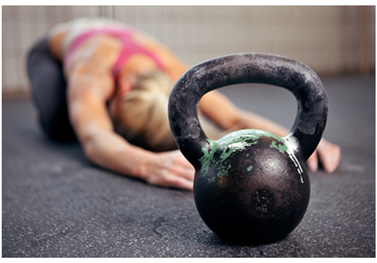
HEALTH + WELLBEING

How to jump off the treadmill before you hit business burnout

TAMMY TANSLEY · JUNE 14, 2017 · 5 MIN READ



Do you feel as though you are constantly moving but just not getting anywhere? And even though the business treadmill is getting faster and faster, you have to run to keep up?

We all have the same 24 hours in the day, and yet some people appear to have a secret extra hour or two where they seem to achieve more with less effort. Then there are people who constantly find themselves on the edge of **burnout** and exhaustion.

No doubt you'll know people in both camps. You may even be in one of those camps yourself. If you're in the latter camp it can be incredibly frustrating. You're working your proverbial butt off only to feel like a hamster on a wheel – all spin, no actual movement forward.

So what is the difference between those that burnout and those that don't?

The bad news is that burnout is self-perpetuating. Once you're on the treadmill – you work harder and harder to get out of it – only fuelling the road to burnout quicker.

The good news is that those are in camp one don't really have an extra hour in the day, and they definitely don't work harder. They just do things a bit differently and you can too.

Burnout

Burnout comes when in order to make things work in your life or business, you need to work ever harder. You start to work longer hours, which has a negative flow on effect to other aspects of your life. You might start to **sleep less**, or have less time to exercise. Your diet might suffer because you don't have time to prepare nutritious meals. You might stop seeing friends and family and even give up your hobbies because you just don't have time. All you're doing is working, working, working!

As a soloist, this hard work often also comes with a double whammy of financial insecurity and inconsistency. While sustainable for a short period of time, this state of affairs becomes unpleasant.

The real problem arises when the only way to maintain the pace is to jump on the treadmill. But unlike before when it was just for a quick burst to get things moving, the frenetic pace becomes the new norm. And when you look on the horizon you truly can't see any other way of being.

The brain and burnout

Here's where the self-perpetuating cycle starts. A little stress for a pending deadline can help you focus, ongoing and sustained stress affects the brain by affecting memory, mood and other mental functions. Ongoing and high arousal eventually causes the brain to stop thinking clearly.

This makes sense. You know when your brain just feels fuzzy. You start forgetting things and making silly mistakes. You often spend a disproportionate period of time every day looking for lost car keys and your phone.

Add to that the physical effects of lack of good quality sleep, poor diet, not enough exercise and you can see how it's all adds up. The brain needs sleep to recover each day. The body needs good quality fuel, particularly during periods of high intensity.

Running on empty means inevitably the fuel tank just runs out.

Slowing down the treadmill

Slowing down the treadmill is tricky, because when you're in burnout mode, it all seems just so overwhelming. The thought of having to do yet more in an already frenetic life seems just too hard.

Even if you know what you have to do – there just isn't enough energy to do it. And so things progressively get worse.

Getting your head above the clouds

When we're burnt out it's impossible to see the **problems** and their solutions with clarity.

So if you think you're approaching burnout (or are well and truly there) the first action required is to get some help. It could be a supportive family member, a friend or a professional like your GP, a counsellor or some other health practitioner who can help you short-circuit the cycle.

Importantly, the key to this support person is that they are there to support you, not judge you.

You'll need this person to brainstorm with you what the issues are. They could ask you questions such as:

- What keeps you from sleeping at night (be specific)?
- What is the one thing you dread doing every day/week/month?
- What's the most time consuming part of your business?
- If there was one thing you could get someone else to do, what would it be and why?

So let's say that your tax bill is keeping you awake at night. You just cannot see a way to pay it. And you're so tired, you would give anything for a good night sleep but instead you can't get this debt out of your head. And let's say you spend two days every quarter doing your BAS statement. And you don't have two days every quarter, so you get further and further behind.

And let's say that because you are tired and stressed, your tone is sharper and less patient, which causes unnecessary conflict in every aspect of your life and you just don't have enough energy to resolve it. Add to that the myriad of decisions that need to be made every single day but which you JUST CAN'T because your brain is full!

Working with someone could help you see that there are some things that you could do immediately that would make a difference and start to free up time.

- You could ring the tax office tomorrow and make a plan to repay the debt.
- You could either get a bookkeeper or purchase your own software such as Xero, which will allow you to generate your BAS statement at the click of a button.
- You can commit to yourself that you will go to bed every night for a month at 10pm at the latest. And that you'll do one thing during the day that is good for your body – whether that's swapping out one junk meal with a nutritious one, drinking more water, going for a ten minute walk around the block, or doing a three minute meditation in the morning. It doesn't matter what it is, just make it something that's easy to do every single day.

The burnout cycle slows when you recognize where you are, and can stop long enough to identify what the main contributing factors are. Only then can you action the most critical step: putting in place accountability structures that support you to do what you say you'll do (and gently hold you to account if you don't).

Those with the extra hour in the day

So what do the people who have the extra hour in the day do? After all, they are operating in the same environment as the rest of us. How do they make it work?

- They look after their body and their mind.
- They systemize and they outsource what they don't need or want to do. Or what it doesn't make sense for them to do.
- They have enough space to take a big picture view regularly and to adjust course if and when things start to go off track.
- They have enough space to celebrate the wins along the way and enjoy the journey, rather than feel like it is just one long, hard slog.
- They have enough space to remember why they started the journey in the first place, and to tap into that "why" when things get tough.

The reality is that they have the same challenges as the rest of us. They are just better able to face them because they have the mental space to do so, and the physical wellbeing to make it happen.

Out of burnout, off the treadmill

The good news out of all of this is that you can take this decision now. Immediately. You can decide to get off the treadmill. Now.

Remember it's rarely linear – there will be three steps forward, one step back- but you will still be two steps ahead of where you were.

So:

- Find a support person
- Identify at least some of the more immediate issues
- Come up with a realistic plan to slow down the treadmill
- Be gently supported to be held accountable to putting that plan in place
- Systemize whatever you can (one small step at a time)
- Outsource your biggest source of pain or whatever you can afford that will make a difference to your life
- Celebrate the wins, even the teeniest of wins
- Systemically look to build space into your life – to both look forward and to look back.
- Look after your body and your mind – you need both running effectively.

And then, as you feel things easing up ever slightly – repeat again and again, until slowly, every so slowly, the treadmill has stopped.

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TOPIC HEALTH + WELLBEING

Tammy Tansley

This can mean anything from getting the **people basics right**, to the **solving of a systemic or/difficult people or team problem**, to the/**introduction of complex organisational and cultural changes. Why** do I do this? Because I know that the bit that makes work unpleasant usually is when people interactions start to go wrong. I love working with clients to help them resolve issues or put in place/approaches so that the issues don't arise in the first place, rather than for them to spend hours lying awake at night trying to work out how to move an issue (or person) forward.

There are lots of consultants out there; so how will you know if I am the right person to work with you and your business? Clients have described me as part confidante, part strategist, part tactician. Clients say that they have a sense of relief that/things are being dealt with, and that they are no longer alone in trying to deal with an issue (particularly complex or long standing/issues). They say that it is not just the quality of the advice but the depth of the/advice. That they feel/that they have someone on their side. In answer to the question - what do you do?

I work with either individual clients (usually via /a coaching relationship) or organisations either at the team or organisational level. Sometimes I am working with a CEO on people strategy, a team on high performance and coaching individual employees, all in the same organisation. /I can work in organisations for a discrete period of time or a specific project. Other times, it is an ongoing and varied relationship that evolves as the organisation evolves. I work as a /**human resources, culture & change**/and/**industrial relations consultancy**/for businesses in/**finance, manufacturing, resources, oil and gas, government, retail, services and not for profit sectors**/- both in Western Australia and nationally.

These include both smaller 100-500 employee organisations and large global businesses. I am also the author of *Do What You Say You'll Do* (a book for new leaders and those reinventing their leadership styles). /Check out the website here /**www.dowhatyousayyoullsdo.com.au** and Enterprise Agreements : Made Easy (a book on how to easily negotiate an enterprise agreement that meets the needs of all parties). Check out the website here: **www.easymadeeasy.com.au**

To find out more about the person behind the business, take a look at my **Flying Solo Spotlight profile**.

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