**PREVENTING BURNOUT**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

A Masters by Research or PhD is often an exciting and fulfilling experience. Nevertheless, these degrees can also be taxing, especially if problems in your research or life begin to mount. Consequently, some research candidates are vulnerable to mental exhaustion or burnout. To prevent this burnout, this document recommends some activities and practices that you could apply.

**Key principles**

People often assume that heavy demands are the main source of burnout. But, actually, many circumstances can diminish the effect of heavy demands on burnout. Burnout is not as likely if individuals

* feel a sense of control over their life
* feel their activities at work or study align to their primary values
* feel their environment is fair, just, and predictable
* perceive their activities as rewarding
* perceive their social environment as supportive

Furthermore, some research indicates that a balance is important: If people experience control over their life—but do not perceive their activities as rewarding or their social environment as supportive, for example—they tend to experience negative rather than positive emotions (Toth-Kiraly, Bothe, Orosz, & Rigo, 2019). Burnout is more likely.

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| **Activities to attempt** |

The following table offers some suggestions on how you can apply these principles to prevent burnout. The first column presents a series of activities you could attempt—preferably but not necessarily in the order in which they appear. The second column presents some examples. The third column justifies these recommendations.

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| Activity | Examples | Recommendation |
| **Clarify a meaningful role you could pursue five years in the future**. To clarify this role, record or type   * your existing strengths and qualities * the activities you like the most—such as working on spreadsheets, offering advice, or public speaking * the skills and attributes you will probably develop during your course * which disadvantaged people or communities you would like to help * in which roles might you be able to help these people or communities—while utilizing your strengths and applying the activities you enjoy   Do not worry if you are not sure of these answers; just guess. Then imagine this role as vividly as possible. | I would like to utilize my knowledge and skills in public policy, neural networks, and compassion to help elderly people maintain jobs | After people imagine their future vividly, they become more resilient, preventing burnout. If this future is meaningful and helpful to other people, burnout is especially unlikely. |
| **Construct a repository of reusable procedures.** To illustrate, in a Word or Excel file, whenever you complete some tedious or administrative task, record notes that could help you complete these activities more efficiently in the future. | Codes and details I might use in the future   * My FOR code: 563056   Computer procedures   * To upload videos… * To submit the progress report… | When you complete tedious activities that might be relevant to your future, these activities do not seem as monotonous, diminishing the likelihood of burnout |
| **Every month or so, improve a hypothetical job application**. That is, improve your CV and construct answers to concocted key selection criteria, such as experience in leadership, experience in teams, experience writing grant applications, and so forth. | After completing an ethics application, you could write in this file   * Knowledge of ethics. I have prepared and submitted applications to seek ethics approval… | If you complete this activity, you feel a sense of reward after each specific task you undertake. That is, each task enhances your job application. |
| **Reward yourself with enjoyable experiences**. After completing a set of tedious or challenging tasks, some research candidates like to reward themselves. This approach is effective. However, research indicates you should reward yourself with enjoyable experiences rather than tangible goods, such as clothes or jewellery. Specifically, the most effective rewards are experiences that involve social interactions or personal development. | After I complete 2500 words on this chapter, I can   * watch a movie with friends * participate in a workshop I really want to attend | Even the anticipation of a future reward tends to promote resilience and thus diminish burnout. Enjoyable experiences tend to elicit more lasting benefits to wellbeing than tangible goods. |
| **Develop a skill in which you can help peers**. If many research candidates develop a key skill, they can form teams in which members help each other. | Possible skills to develop   * Conducting systematic reviews * Calculating statistics for meta-analyses * Testing statistical assumptions * Choosing suitable theoretical perspectives * Ethics for Indigenous research * Writing precisely * Writing concisely | When individuals feel supported by their peers, burnout is not as likely |
| **Complete work in locations that seem remote from demands**. That is, perhaps once or twice a week, arrange a time in which you can work in a location that is devoid of other people | Uncover a spot in nature, like a secluded park, to complete some of your reading | In these locations, individuals feel a sense of autonomy—and this sense of autonomy diminishes burnout. Exposure to nature also precludes burnout |
| **Modify all your deadlines and targets.** To illustrate, you might decide to   * complete slightly more work than necessary on some deadline * submit some paperwork several days before the deadline   However, you should not feel compelled to modify all deadlines or targets; otherwise, this goal becomes burdensome | If an ethics application is due on March 10   * You might decide to include more information that needed—information that could help you with subsequent phases of your research * You might decide to submit a week early | When individuals apply this activity, they do not feel these deadlines and targets have been imposed by someone else. They feel a sense of choice—a feeling that tends to prevent burnout |
| **Consider potential obstacles.** Using any approach you prefer, you should set the goals you would like to achieve during the day, week, or fortnight. These goals should revolve around which topics you plan to learn or which activities you plan to undertake. When setting these goals, consider between two and three obstacles that could impede your progress. Furthermore, specify ranges—such as “I will read 8 to 12 articles this week”. | Obstacles that could prevent me from reading 8 to 12 articles this week   * Family illness * Requests from my supervisor to complete another task | After you consider two to three goals that could impede your progress, you are not as likely to be unduly ambitious, diminishing stress. |
| **Complete three demanding tasks each morning**. Each task should last about 5 to 10 minutes, demand effort, and enhance mood or development. | Examples include   * For 5 to 10 minutes, read some articles as rapidly as possible * For 5 minutes, while watching a video or something similar, flex your biceps as vigorously as possible * For 5 minutes, attempt to memorize various technical words—perhaps words that are relevant to your research | After people complete three distinct challenging tasks in the morning, their capacity to maintain effort improves; they might not feel as exhausted as a consequence. These tasks are also helpful: reading rapidly improves mood; flexing elicits a sense of power and control, and memorizing words can enhance your capacity to resist temptations. |

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| **References** |

Toth-Kiraly, I., Bothe, B., Orosz, G., & Rigo, A. (2019). On the importance of balanced need fulfillment: A person-centered perspective. Journal of Happiness Studies.