
THE BRAIN BURNOUT SERIES

BURNING OUT OUR BRAINS

PART 1

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In a previous article in the Stress Series, I introduced the idea of “Brain Burnout” and whether or not we are burning out our brains with the amount of time we spend focusing on the tasks and work we do in our busy lives. This is part one of a four-part series that will explore this phenomenon that so many of us are dealing with every day to varying degrees. Some of us deal with the short term effects of burning out our brains on a daily or weekly basis and are managing to deal with it, or are just surviving it currently. But many – from my own professional experience with clients who are mostly high level managers/executives, company owners or successful entrepreneurs – have been misusing and overworking their brain for so long that they are in what I call “chronic brain burnout”, which is debilitating and can take you completely out of your capacity to function as a professional in the workplace and in your life.

From time to time we find ourselves working on a task or in a conversation with someone, and it becomes very obvious that you are not able to think clearly. Retrieving information and thoughts from the recesses of your brain is challenged, and it seems neurons are just not firing properly; you are slower in being able to respond or think about what action to take next, and you have to work really hard to stay focused and concentrate on whatever it is that you are trying to accomplish. This happens to all of us, it even happens to me – an expert in managing the mind and brain and performing at a high level.

In starting this series on Brain Burnout which was spurred on the article I wrote for *M2*'s May issue, I thought it would be good to actually paint a real picture of what it looks like when you are in the midst of your brain burning out, and give a personal example that actually happened to me only a few days before writing this article. I feel it is important to remember we are all human, and we are all in this modern world that demands more of us mentally than ever before, especially if we are wanting to keep improving our performance. As is the case with my example, I got caught being at the mercy of this world, and had to deal with the aftermath of not managing myself as I normally do so well. Most of the time I manage myself in a way that means I can thrive and perform in it at a high level without experiencing being stressed, overwhelmed or busy – all the experiences most people would say about their lives. I am fortunate with my training and the amount I have studied human behaviour and stress, that I am mostly very present, calm, and grounded. I do not “react” (especially negatively) to anything that life throws at me, and can work at very intense levels to get a lot done, without being tired or exhausted at the end of the week and needing one or two days to recover.

The example I want to share was on a Thursday morning from when I woke up, to the end of a session with a client. The purpose of me giving you this example is so it stimulates your thinking and

awareness of yourself and how you are operating in life. As I create for you what happened to me, I encourage you to draw similarities to times in your life when you are experiencing this so you can begin to understand this phenomenon of brain burnout, and master being able to manage your mind such that you are not affected by it, and thus create new levels of performance, productivity as well as an overall great state of mind.

When I woke that morning, I noticed that I was a little more tired than normal after getting a sufficient night's sleep. As I got up and came into the lounge to do my morning exercise routine, the effort it took just to get into it was greater than normal. As I was doing a routine that requires little energy to perform, my mind and body seemed to tell me that they were not enjoying it and wanted to stop. Normally I love doing it – it is invigorating and very mentally stimulating. I was compelled to stop the more intense part of the activity after this signal, and with very little self-control to keep going and just push through I decided to lay down to do some stretches on the floor. As I lay back I thought, “I could lie here and just go back to sleep right now”, and had the urge to just stay there, rest and relax. My mind felt agitated, a little overwhelmed and thinking slightly negatively about all the things I had on that day. I had the overwhelming sense of not wanting to confront what I had on that day. As this registered in my consciousness, I started thinking, “this is not normal for me”, and began to reflect on the last few days to see why I was feeling so lethargic and not in control of my state of mind. When I looked at the first three days of that week I saw that each day had been longer than normal, with a meeting until 8:30pm on Monday, a programme till 10pm on Tuesday, and a meeting until 9:30pm on Wednesday. Each day had an unusual amount of multi-tasking and task switching due to some deadlines for events I had coming up. Reviews needed to be approved, and there was less structure to my days than I normally schedule; I was having to focus constantly without decent breaks and split my focus almost constantly for the first three days of the week. I also saw that because I was being spread over so many varying tasks and reacting and responding to them constantly, I did not manage having sufficient breaks and down time for my brain to decompress and my unconscious to process all the things that have been demanding my focus. These factors I know lead to a full memory cache, and eventually shut down my capacity to focus until I let it process what I have put into it. I also realised that both Monday and Tuesday nights, I only slept seven hours because I went to bed a little later than I knew I should (clearly lacking my normal levels of willpower – a sure sign already of my brain burning out), which I know is not enough to be able to maintain my performance with the work I had for the week. I knew on Sunday as I scheduled and prepared for it, that it was going to be a challenging week with the various deadlines I had. The three unusually late night meetings were diligently scheduled

so I could manage the week, and I knew I had to get to bed when I had planned to get up early each day. The plan failed. I was also well aware that because of the work I had during the weekend that I was going to need to manage myself very carefully the coming week to ensure I performed well and was still productive, and did not start experiencing the inevitable burning out of my brain and shutting down of my normal high level of functioning.

So here I was, knowing I was in the middle of what I call short term brain burnout, or simply, the process of burning out your brain. If I took no action and soldiered on, I knew I would be risking getting sick or being even worse by the end of the week – which was no less full than the last few days with events and some work on the weekend. I could already feel my system starting to let me know it was strained; my glands felt slightly tender, my voice was a little hoarse, and my body just felt tired and sluggish. So I stopped my morning exercise routine, and considered what I had to do to get myself right for the very full day of clients that I had that day. I proceeded to have a cruisy next hour or so to just allow my mind and body to rest and chill, thinking this should be enough to deal with it. I felt a little better as I began the long working day. During the session, it became obvious to me that I was not right, and I was really struggling to maintain focus and concentrate. I had an unusual amount of thoughts flooding in from my unconscious about other things that were needing to be thought about. I delivered a great session with the client and they had some great insights that opened up as I normally deliver, however what it took for me to generate that left me at the end of the session feeling even more tired, and my body and mind got louder and louder with their protests. By the end of the session with the client, and due to my capacity to know when I have tipped over the edge and my brain is burning out, I had already decided that I needed to take immediate action to deal with my state of mind along with my physical symptoms. It was the kind of feeling where one would say “I feel like am fighting something”, or “I feel like I am coming down with something”. So as my next client called to start the session, I told her I could not deliver the session that day and told her that I was not 100 percent. I rescheduled the session the following day, and then rescheduled everything else that day apart from the two meetings that were not as moveable or going to require my 100 percent power to focus.

I then dealt with whatever other things I had promised to do that day and replanned them and let a couple of people know that the things I was getting to them that day would be delayed until tomorrow – and swiftly dealt with my mental and physical state caused by burning out my brain. I then turned my phone my computer off, rested and switched off until the meetings that afternoon, and then did nothing else for the rest of the day after those meetings and got an early night.

I woke up Friday morning feeling like a completely different person, and was firing on almost all cylinders, though not completely recovered. But it was enough to deliver everything I needed to that day. I did not get sick, and I was back to full capacity within about 48 hours, and have been able to accomplish a whole weekend project that I had scheduled months ago that was at risk of not getting finished had I not been in a proper functioning state to focus my mind again.

While it may seem drastic to cancel half a day of work when I was not “sick” like most would say when they are sick, it is clear to me why only I get sick about once a year, for about a day. I very rarely take a half day off like this one to deal with when I have tipped over the edge and burning out my brain. This is what it looks like to be proactive and deal powerfully with when you have not managed your schedule and the tasks you have, and to take care of what it requires your brain to do to manage and function properly while also having enough time to recover so you can focus again the next day and beyond. While I lost half a day of work and productivity, I was able to be fully productive the following day, and know that if I had not dealt with it I would likely have been less productive for several days. Had I not stopped and recovered, I would potentially have

gotten the full symptoms of being “sick”.

Our lives are relentless these days, and most people are pushing on and trying to use their brains to focus way more than they are designed to do. Given I am an expert in how to manage my mind to not suffer from burning out my brain, I am able to be ambitious and perform at a high level in my profession and personally in my life. Unless you have a low level of mental and emotional stressors in your life and are not wrapped up in the marketplace that demands speed and constantly being online, wired in to the network and available 24/7, then you will at times be affected by your brain being in a state of burning out – or for some, you are on the brink of, or in the process of, chronic brain burn out. There is the state of burning out your brain, which is more temporary and if handled and managed well, will not disrupt your performance and productivity long term. However, when this is left unchecked and this state is chronic for an extended period, then you will inevitably experience brain burnout. It may be diagnosed as depression, anxiety or panic attacks, burnout, adrenal or mental fatigue. There are a few other names that are all the result of chronic levels of stress over an extended period. In the case of most people in the modern world, the stress is mental and emotional, and the brain becomes burnt out, which results in your mental faculties not functioning properly. This malfunction will also show up as all sorts of physical symptoms and ailments – hence the popular and well-documented notion that the mind and body are completely connected. The holistic concept of a self-regulating system that is always seeking to stay in balance implies that if it cannot stay in balance, then no amount of convincing yourself to just “keep going”,

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“harden up” or “soldier on” will successfully override our fundamental physiological and biological nature that is giving us ample warning of things not being in balance. Eventually as it is with human beings, our physiology/biology will win the day, and force us to stop and deal with the symptoms of being chronically stressed and our brain burnt out.

Brain burnout is a phenomenon that I am currently engaged in inquiring into to help many people that come to me who are or were performing at a high level across most areas of their life, and have lost the capacity to maintain it and are not functioning properly. So I do not have a clear picture yet of exactly what it looks like when you are burning out your brain or

when you are actually in the throes of brain burnout. Here are some of the signs and symptoms that you could start to notice when they are happening and monitor and watch what happens if you don't deal with them, or how they are affecting you. In this first part of the Brain Burnout series, as it is with all of the people I coach and train, you must first become aware of this phenomenon, notice and observe your own habits, behaviours and patterns of thinking that may be contributing to it. In the next part of the series, I will get more into what is going on in your brain when this is happening, and show you how to prevent and deal with it when it is happening, alongside some practical things to work on in your daily life to reduce, mitigate or remove the stressors contributing to it. This first article is so you can hopefully begin to understand that these symptoms are not just part of what you have to endure to be in the working world and modern day life. There are ways to have the full and busy lives and not feel like a rat on a wheel hoping for this imaginary time when it won't be as relentless and non-stop as it is. Holidays need not be the time when you can actually stop and be present and just enjoy being in the moment; you can create that experience in the full swing of life as it is right now for you.

If you read anything about the functions of the pre-frontal cortex and the studies done on it – showing how it is responsible for the executive brain functions and voluntary behaviour such as decision making, planning, problem solving – you will understand that it has a finite and limited amount of glucose available and is only about five percent of the total brain function. So if you use it to focus on any amount of tasks in a given period of time or day, it will get depleted of its resources and stop functioning at its best. This is a very real limitation, and cannot be ignored. If you deplete the resources in your

prefrontal cortex, you will not perform at your best. And if you don't deal with what it takes to replenish it, you will not stop being able to function with that part of your brain at all.

So you can start to get a sense of why I am looking seriously at this phenomenon I am calling Brain Burnout, I am going to review some of the facts I have discussed in a previous article, that are the result of the mental stress we are under from the stressors that we have working in our modern day, fast-paced, multi-task demanding world.

Let's start with some of the most relevant statistics and facts I could find in New Zealand alone, plus a few from other reports of other countries to give you a picture of what is actually happening out there in modern western society:

Almost one quarter of New Zealand adults have been diagnosed with a common mental disorder (depression and anxiety) or psychological (mental) distress. One in six have high blood pressure; one in ten have high cholesterol; two thirds are overweight or obese; half are physically inactive; five percent have diagnosed diabetes; and one in six have chronic pain. – *Ministry Of Health Report, 2011/2012*.

In the past six years, the number of New Zealanders taking antidepressants has doubled, and a psychiatry professor says the drugs are being over-prescribed. The Government's drug-buying agency, Pharmac, released figures which showed one in ten New Zealanders were now prescribed antidepressants. – *NZ Herald Oct, 2012*.

Eight million prescriptions for pills to treat these complaints (depression, anxiety, insomnia and chronic pain) were dispensed in 2011-2012, pushing the nation further into a drug-induced state, according to Pharmac figures. – *stuff.co.nz, January 2013*.

Prescriptions for depression, anxiety, insomnia and pain jumped by 60 percent over the past five years. This amounted to an extra 800,000 patients swallowing three million more bottles of prescription pills over the five-year period. Insomnia is also on the increase among adults. About 237,000 people were prescribed sleeping pills in 2011-2012, up 77 percent from five years ago. – *stuff.co.nz, January 2013*.

In 2012, 421,000 patients were prescribed medication for depression; 237,000 for sleep and sedation and 126,000 for anxiety – the latter of which was almost double for each condition from 2006 figures. – *stuff.co.nz, January 2013*.

80 percent of workers feel stress on the job and nearly half say they need help in learning how to manage stress. While 42 percent say their co-workers need such help. – *American Institute of Stress*.

Australian employees are absent for an average of 3.2 working days each year through stress. This workplace stress costs the Australian economy approximately \$14.2 billion. – *Medibank*.

Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor – more so than even financial problems or family problems. – *St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Co*.

Depression is among the leading causes of disability worldwide. – *World Health Organisation*.

The best way I thought for you to start to understand and become more aware of this happening to you and to make it real, was to come up with as many different things I know for myself and have read in neurological studies that are common symptoms of overusing our brain.

Here are all the different symptoms and signs that you are burning out your brain – which means you have used up the resources in your pre-frontal cortex, and your unconscious has not had a chance to process everything you have fed it to deal with, and your memory is getting very full:

- You find yourself in mid conversation with someone trying to retrieve a name or a simple piece of information and you have to strain and think really hard to have the connections fire to communicate the piece of information
- You find yourself physically tired or lethargic (more than normal) and once you are up and about in the morning, either your morning exercise routine feels much harder and your unconscious brain is asking you to stop, or you start to think about the day ahead, and your executive function part of your brain begins to work and

prioritise and plan the day in your head, and this is tiring and you feel like you just don't want to do it, or there is more resistance to your day than normal.

- You are sitting at your computer working and you find yourself staring at the screen and not able to produce your work as fast as you normally would when you are being productive.
- You are easily distractible and struggle to focus on one thing, which could also be looked at as if you find your normal ability to shut out or inhibit the impulse to be distracted is low and you can't manage to stay on task.
- You are struggling to manage your emotional reactions to whatever is going on (when I used to get very stressed in the past I would sometimes get weepy or feel like crying for no reason).
- You come home from work and you are grumpy, snappy, or can't control your reactions to your children or significant other.
- You wake up in the morning and it takes you longer than normal for your brain to feel like it is switched on and able to engage and focus on what you need to.
- You find that when you are reading something, it is struggling to get into your brain, you have to keep re-reading things and your mind is telling you that you don't want to do this.
- You are much more sensitive to sounds and light, and you notice you are easily agitated or irritated and more "jumpy" than usual.
- You find yourself having no willpower to make healthy choices for your food, or whether you should exercise or anything associated with taking care of your health, when you normally have more discipline.
- You find yourself giving up trying to solve any problem sooner than usual.
- You find yourself resisting having to make any complex decision and it makes you feel tired to have to try and decide what to do with whatever choice you are presented.
- You find the chatter in your head is much louder than normal, you are finding yourself listening to it and it is negative, and you are not able to keep yourself in a good mood about things. You are finding that the chatter is out of proportion to what is actually happening, and your reaction and thinking patterns are more negative than normal.
- Your capacity for self control is low, which means being able to resist temptations, deny impulses to do things you shouldn't, and inhibit the automatic patterns of behaviour and habits that are not consistent with how you have committed to behave and act. This could look like having the chocolate bar when you know you shouldn't, watching porn when you know you should be working on something else, doing things that you know do not have integrity for you, or staying out too late and getting drunk when you know that you have important commitments the following day.

This is not an extensive list, but should be enough to start having you think about the way you are managing your own mind and brain. What there is for you to work on for the next month in preparation for the next article is to become aware of what you are doing to your brain in your day to day life with all the activities you do. If you can mitigate, remove or reduce any of the stressors or activities that contribute to the mental or emotional stressors, then I encourage you to do that. Next article we are going to get further into what it looks like to deal with burning out your brain and brain burnout, how to prevent it and manage it when it is happening – which as you can see from my example, none of us can escape.

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