

Book Extract

Be Kind to Yourself

We can develop self-compassion, as it is a skill, one that can benefit us by helping us to cope with stress and anxiety in everyday life (Egan, Manzius & Jackson, 2017). Furthermore, it not only increases our ability to cope but it also improves our resilience (Neff et al., 2020). This may be because another benefit is that being compassionate towards ourselves is considered a helpful tool to assist us to cope with our emotions and is thus linked to emotional intelligence (EI) (Neff, 2003) (described in the first key). EI, and effective emotion-management, is therefore an important aspect of managing our well-being. Some researchers, for example, have found that EI helps protect us against burnout and that it can even reduce it (Vlachou, Damigos, Lyrakos et al., 2016). Similarly, there is mounting evidence to support that people with greater compassion for themselves experience less burnout (e.g., Barnard and Curry, 2011).....

A note on perfectionism

Perfectionism is another vast topic that has been extensively researched. Although there are some positive aspects of perfectionism, depending on which type it is (which is beyond the scope of this book), it can also cause us problems. It is included here briefly, as it relates to this key and burnout and, as I mentioned in the first key, is an aspect of my personality that I am aware of, which is connected to my workaholic tendencies (the “responsible-workaholic” pattern I referred to previously). Perfectionists tend to strive for perfection, particularly in relation to work. It can also be linked to being critical of oneself, doubting oneself and feeling not good enough (Richardson, Trusty & George, 2018), all negative aspects of perfectionism that I have personally experienced over the years.

There are many examples in the research demonstrating that perfectionists struggle with self-acceptance and that it makes them susceptible to psychological issues at times, including depression (Flett et al., 2003), as previously mentioned. Additionally, a link has been found between perfectionism and burnout, such that perfectionists are at a greater risk of burning out than people who are not (Taris, Van Beek & Schaufeli, 2010). Hence, it has been suggested it is paramount that perfectionists should aim to develop more acceptance of themselves (Flett et al., 2003). In addition, self-compassion is important for people who have particularly high levels of what is described as “self-critical perfectionism” because it has been found that less depression and burnout is experienced by individuals with greater levels of compassion for themselves (Richardson et al., 2018).

My first burnout recovery

As soon as I resigned from my job due to burnout and ill-health, I felt bereft. I had defined myself by my work and work-related achievements for so long. Additionally, I lost my “good-time party girl” identity too. So, one of the main aspects of my recovery consisted of learning to accept myself and where I was. This involved raising my awareness (as described in the first key) of when I was being critical of myself and change that. It included a process of forgiveness too. I had to forgive myself for how I had treated myself, for ignoring my intuition, and later my bodily signals, for not pushing for clarity regarding my roles and

responsibilities, for not standing up for myself and asserting my boundaries, and most of all, for trying to be perfect and pushing myself beyond my limits.

Learning to accept myself and be kind and compassionate towards myself was an ongoing process. I found some aspects more challenging than others. I found it challenging to be kind and compassionate towards myself after I had taken a step backwards on my recovery journey, such as getting drunk one night with a friend after I had vowed to abstain from drinking until I had made a full recovery, due to the detrimental effects of alcohol for me mentally and physically, for example. This, and other factors, led me to include the following advice on accepting yourself in my first book:

It is therefore particularly important to accept yourself and where you are on your journey and treat yourself as you would an innocent child who is just learning to walk. Be kind and gentle with yourself and praise yourself for the steps you are taking. (Buchan, 2008)

My recovery journey also led to me finding out about spirituality, and I read several books on the subject and attended a retreat. These are elements which helped make the process of cultivating self-acceptance and self-compassion easier, and practising meditation was a key factor in this process.

One area in my recovery which I thought at the time was appropriate, but in hindsight I have learnt that it actually had a detrimental effect on me, and I now understand why, was in relation to self-esteem. Part of my recovery involved focusing on boosting my self-esteem through therapy and self-development and so on, because I had become consciously aware I had feelings of inadequacy often (though not in all contexts) and at that time, I thought if I boosted my self-esteem, I would finally feel good enough. Nevertheless, it meant that I was still driven to achieve, no matter what (which was in part fuelled by the need and desire to earn money again).

Consequently, even though I had made some progress but did not feel fully recovered and had begun my career retraining in psychology by doing the degree, my dominant mind drove me to take on a part-time course on top of the degree, to train as a massage therapist. I rationalised I could earn money doing that whilst I was still retraining. It also then drove me to undertake a course in NLP, hypnotherapy and coaching, which took place one weekend a month, during the final year of my degree. Then, as soon as that course and the degree ended, I did another (albeit brief) – spirituality-related training! Although these would be considered sensible courses of action for anyone wanting to change careers and set themselves up in private practice offering a variety of therapies, for someone like myself, still recovering from burnout and other health issues, it was detrimental. It meant that I was still being driven to achieve and had issues with perfectionism, which continued over the years, and consequently, partly led to the second burnout.

My second burnout recovery

By the time I experienced the second burnout, my thinking had evolved regarding the subject of self-esteem. Consequently, I have come to agree with the opinion of certain others (e.g. Ellis, 1996; Ryan & Brown, 2003; Thompson & Waltz, 2008) that there are risks involved with self-esteem as it involves evaluating our worth, which can have negative consequences on us, as my experience illustrates. Thus, it is better for our psychological well-being to cultivate self-acceptance instead. Similarly, it is better for our health and well-being to

cultivate self-compassion rather than self-esteem (Neff, 2011). This shift in my thinking about self-esteem, that is, not focusing on it at all, rather focusing on compassion and acceptance instead, has been one of the most significant aspects of my recovery from burnout (and in maintaining my well-being). This is because it has finally enabled me to no longer be driven by the tyranny of my workaholic and critical perfectionistic tendencies, and instead to experience peace with myself.

Therefore, rather than work on my self-esteem as part of my second recovery, I focused on being kind to myself, enhancing my self-acceptance and self-compassion. I found this was essential because I was initially very critical towards myself for burning out again, given I knew about awareness, the importance of taking care of my body, and my soul (i.e. my heart-related core values) and how detrimental it is to ignore all of that and allow my head to dominate my life. I also berated myself for neglecting something that I had considered to be essential to my well-being since the first burnout – my mindfulness/meditation practice.

Furthermore, I became consciously aware that a lack of self-acceptance, and self-compassion, was partly the reason I ignored the part of me that needed a break following the doctorate, and instead, took the job that resulted in me burning out again. I consider that this was partly to do with the fact that being chronically stressed (and thus chronic activation of the SNS) meant that I was stuck in “threat” mode. Thus, I responded from the habitual pattern of “responsible-workaholic”, driven to achieve, and driven by fear – fear of missing out what I perceived then as my only opportunity of developing a career in the NHS. I was unable to think of other, more creative solutions. Now that I have an awareness of this element of neuroscience, I can see that it would have been better for me to have not made any decisions about my future at that point. In contrast, it would have been better for me to have taken some time out to activate the PNS by resting, relaxing and practising self-compassion. Nevertheless, I did not have the awareness then and thus the second burnout.....

Adapted from:

Buchan, C. (2021). *The 5 Keys to Burnout Recovery*. Fortigenesis, a part of The Agile Leader Ltd.

If you would like to read more of *The 5 Keys to Burnout Recovery*, the go to <https://amzn.to/3sbN9gb>

Thank You