

# Burnout to Breakthrough



BUILDING RESILIENCE  
TO REFUEL, RECHARGE, AND  
RECLAIM WHAT MATTERS

---

Eileen McDargh

Founder of The Resiliency Group and  
author of *Your Resiliency GPS*

## More Praise for *Burnout to Breakthrough*

“Eileen McDargh provides a clear road map that will give you the inspiration to do more and be more. This book will help you rediscover your passion, unlock your potential, and realize a future filled with unlimited possibilities.”

—Roger Crawford, Hall of Fame Speaker and bestselling author of *How High Can You Bounce?*

“*Burnout to Breakthrough* is a bighearted book, written in a lively style with lots of relatable examples and immediately applicable advice. Eileen McDargh makes reading about a very serious topic extraordinarily engaging and gratifying. It's like having an intimate conversation with a best friend—you know someone's been listening and is there for you. You'll come away with a better sense of what matters most to you and what you can do to reclaim your life.”

—Jim Kouzes, coauthor of *The Leadership Challenge* and Executive Fellow, Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

“Eileen McDargh's latest meditation on occupational burnout, *Burnout to Breakthrough*, is a much-needed component to the contemporary dialogue about achieving more by beating burnout and building resilience. By emphasizing the importance of personal leadership elements such as self-talk and energy management, Eileen makes a powerful case for the role of the individual in refueling, recharging, and reclaiming what matters. At the same time, Eileen offers a nuanced, broader perspective about a workplace that is ‘preheated’ for overachievers, and she equips leaders with valuable questions and practices to help reduce chronic stress among their employees. Eileen's new book is timely, relevant, and highly actionable. Written in her signature buoyant and empowering voice, it's an accessible and empowering read. I highly recommend this as a spiritual companion to my own book, *The Burnout Gamble*.”

—Hamza Khan, cofounder of SkillsCamp

“Words like *disengagement*, *compassion fatigue*, *burnout*, and even *suicide* exist across industries and generations. In this book, Eileen McDargh offers a powerful and proven formula for building a more positive workplace culture by helping people live more effective and resilient lives.”

—Joe Tye, founder and CEO, Values Coach, and author of *The Florence Prescription*

"You'll be inspired by the wise insights. Buy a book for yourself and a friend. Work through it together as you answer the questions and celebrate your results. You'll be well on your way to breaking through burnout."

—**Sam Horn, author of *Someday Is Not a Day in the Week***

"Get ready to get energized! From the first sentence, Eileen McDargh captivates you and catapults you into a world of abundance and possibilities. Eileen is the master of energy, and in her brilliant new book, she reveals her secrets. Read *Burnout to Breakthrough* and reap the rewards!"

—**Jesse Lyn Stoner, coauthor of *Full Steam Ahead!***

"The author knows her stuff. She has been delivering on this topic to organizations around the world. And she lives it! Eileen delivers a very easy-to-digest set of doable ideas that will absolutely move you out of the doldrums and back to delight."

—**Dr. Beverly Kaye, CEO, Bev Kaye & Co., and coauthor of *Love It, Don't Leave It and Love 'Em or Lose 'Em***

"Boundlessly brilliant! The answer to our quest to move from burnouts to breakthroughs. Eileen McDargh takes us rapidly from Argh! to Aha! to Ahh. If you are tired of being tired and are seeking to be wiser and stronger and grow through the challenges that keep coming at you, you must get this book. Now!"

—**Bill Jensen, author of the bestsellers *Simplicity*, *Disrupt!*, and *The Courage within Us***

# **BURNOUT TO BREAKTHROUGH**

*This page intentionally left blank*

# BURNOUT TO BREAKTHROUGH

BUILDING RESILIENCE  
TO REFUEL, RECHARGE, AND  
RECLAIM WHAT MATTERS

**Eileen McDargh**



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

# Burnout to Breakthrough

Copyright © 2020 by Eileen McDargh

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

Distributed to the U.S. trade and internationally by Penguin Random House Publisher Services.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-5230-8946-8

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8947-5

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8948-2

Digital audio ISBN 978-1-5230-8949-9

2020-1

Produced by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services; Text design by Nancy Kerner; Copy editing by Nancy Evans; Cover design by Nita Ybarra

*To my GRANDS, Alicia, Clare, Siena, and Keaton,  
who continue to teach me what matters most*

*To my Sweet William,  
who refuels my heart every day*

*To my siblings, Susan and John,  
cohorts in cheers and compassion since the get-go*



*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!** I

## **PART 1 BURNOUT**

CHAPTER 1 The Age of Burnout II

CHAPTER 2 What Triggers the Flames? 19

CHAPTER 3 The Organization's Role in Burnout 27

CHAPTER 4 The Role of Resilience 35

## **PART 2 BREAKOUT**

CHAPTER 5 Your Body 45

CHAPTER 6 Your Work 55

CHAPTER 7 Your Relationships 59

CHAPTER 8 Your Soul and Your Stuff 63

## **PART 3 BREAKTHROUGH**

### **CHAPTER 9 HEAD**

Brain Brilliance or Brain Baloney? 73

### **CHAPTER 10 HEART**

Powerful or Pitiful 89

### **CHAPTER 11 HANDS**

Set a Fence or Be Defenseless 95

### **CHAPTER 12 Extend a Hand to Others and Yourself 103**

### **CHAPTER 13 HUMOR**

The Energy of Perspective 113

## **CONCLUSION THE POWER OF MEANING 123**

Notes 131

Resources 139

Acknowledgments 145

Index 147

About the Author 155

Discussion Guide 159

# **BURNOUT TO BREAKTHROUGH**

*This page intentionally left blank*

## INTRODUCTION

# STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!

It's official. The World Health Organization (WHO) now places burnout in its International Classification of Diseases diagnostic manual. It's no longer just a stress syndrome but rather "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." It is characterized by three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or mental exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job or negative feelings toward one's career
- Reduced professional productivity

Let me phrase these dimensions in more common terms. Consider these questions:

- Does the job that turned you on now seem to turn you off?
- Are you working more but enjoying it less?

- Have you lost who you are because you lost the work you loved?
- Does life seem to be leading you rather than you leading a life?
- Are you so exhausted that you can't even sleep?
- Are you struggling to handle the demands of too much to do and too little time?
- Are people telling you that you look tired all the time?
- Have you lost your sense of humor?
- Does it seem that no matter how much you work, there's no completion, no recognition, and little intrinsic or extrinsic reward?
- Do you find yourself short-tempered?
- Are you feeling anxious, unsettled, and circling on a merry-go-round that's no longer merry?

Whether you answered “yes” to one or all of these questions, this book is for you. My intention is to help you not only to “successfully manage” work demands but also to make even larger strides in understanding how to put together a life by design and not by default. In order to recharge, refuel, and reclaim what matters, we need to make a journey of self-discovery. It will require honesty, courage, and a willingness to do exactly what we're warned about at a railroad crossing: *Stop! Look! Listen!* If we don't follow that warning, we can find ourselves flattened by an oncoming locomotive.

You did not consciously choose burnout. No one does.

That's why it's so insidious and, as you will see in chapter 1, you are not alone. This is the Age of Burnout. To be honest, organizational cultures and systems are also to blame for some toxic environments. With that in mind, chapter 3 will offer actions for leaders to take to counteract workplace burnout plus ideas to ensure that an organization breeds well-being, community, and resiliency. I debated long and hard about putting this chapter first because you, the reader, might find this a reason to point to the organization and say, "See, I told you so." You might cross your arms and wait for the organization to change. Don't do that! Share the chapter as appropriate, but start working on YOU!

My primary intention is to put you in command, to have you take control of what you put in your twenty-four-hour day.

- First, you'll explore what *burnout* is, what its symptoms are, and what the potential triggers are that ignite the "flames."
- Second, you will learn to stop, look, and listen deeply to what is happening in the critical parts of your life. What really is going on? What are you doing, saying, or thinking that is exhausting your mental and physical energies? This is *breakout*—the understanding—the "Aha" moment.
- Third, you will discover that *breakthrough* comes when we break out of energy-draining thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and consider more powerful options to refuel, recharge, and reclaim what matters. That's breakthrough! Ahhhh.



Breakthrough comes when you build resilience skillsets and mindsets and realign energy flows. Yes, energy! That's really what this is all about. Energy is the core of resilience. Resilience is *not* about "bouncing back," as the dictionary insists. Rather, for humans, it's about growing through this period of our life to a better place. Building resilience is like building a muscle. It takes persistence and patience. With use, it becomes easier for us to refuel, recharge, and reclaim what matters. This is not an overnight process. It takes time.

I'll also offer a series of options to move you across the track and into breakthrough. I'll explore four sources that hold the possibility of giving us energy or depleting our energy. These are:

**HEAD** Our thinking affects all aspects of our energy.

**HEART** Emotions rule our actions and our relationships.

**HANDS** In addition to thinking and feeling, doing creates real power. Carl Jung said, "Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain."

**HUMOR** Life needs laughter and the perspective of humor.

**DON'T LOOK FOR BALANCE**

Note that word *breakthrough*. Breakthrough is not “balance.”

Who are we trying to kid? There’s no such thing as balance. This is why I have objected to the term “balance” as the end goal for people experiencing burnout—although I admit in my earlier work, I was guilty of using that term. If I asked you to hold up your hands to show me what balance looks like, inevitably you would hold up your hands in some replica of the scales of justice, with the implication that balance means equality.

Wouldn’t it be nice if everything in our home and work life demanded equal attention, delivered equal rewards, and prompted an equal feeling of well-being and calm? Our energy could be equally distributed. Alas! Life is never going to be “equal.” Let’s get real here. The very word “balance” conjures up an image that sets up a false expectation and is not sustainable. Stuff happens.

Breakthrough, however, happens when our energy is consciously distributed to what REALLY matters most *at this specific period of our life*. At different periods of our life, what matters most will change and energy requirements will shift. Our task is to consciously realign our energy flow so we can recharge and refuel.

There are years that  
ask questions and  
years that answer.

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON

We move into burnout when we don’t make that shift, when our energy is exhausted at the expense of other parts of our life. In this book, you’ll read stories of folks who did not make the shift and became fried into the bargain.

**WE LEARN FROM OTHERS**

I'm grateful for the people who candidly shared their burnout stories with me. You might recognize yourself in their stories. In some cases, their names have been changed for privacy, but their experiences, insights, and admitted challenges are all real. And I use their exact words—some pretty graphic—to honestly report their experience.

**HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

Whether you picked this book up for yourself, a friend, your spouse, or your team, my hope is that you'll find answers here to help you craft a life and a workplace that nurtures and supports your best self. Please take your time. I ask

I write to discover  
what I know.

—FLANNERY O'CONNOR

many questions that invite introspection and reflection. You might decide to read with a notebook at hand. Be warned: I am a huge believer in the power of putting pen

to paper. Recent studies from psychologists and neuroscientists alike have found that writing by hand boosts your ability to retain information, comprehend new ideas, and be more productive.<sup>1</sup> Get a journal and make notations as you read.

The activities in this book are designed to help you identify where more powerful, energy-enhancing choices might be made. You didn't pick up this book because something happened yesterday. The good news is that building resilience and the ability to respond in more powerful ways to potential burnout scenarios in our life can be learned. You will find ways to move from burnout to breakthrough and

**Caveat.** Some events in our life may leave us with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can require medical attention and psychotherapy. On the flip side, there is also PTG—post-traumatic growth. According to the Posttraumatic Growth Research Group at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, PTG can be understood as positive change resulting from an individual's struggle with a major life crisis or traumatic event.<sup>2</sup> This book does not address PTSD or PTG. My focus is on helping organizations and individuals deal with the stresses of everyday life and work and to cultivate resiliency while learning to refuel, recharge, and reclaim what matters.

The best resource I have found with expertise in the full continuum of trauma, resiliency, and post-traumatic growth is the nonprofit National Resilience Institute. Their working definition of resiliency is “the capacity to prepare for, adapt to, and grow through trauma, disruption, or loss.” Dr. Mollie Marti, the founding CEO of the Institute, emphasizes that many skills that help grow resiliency are teachable. She notes that research shows that post-traumatic stress symptoms and post-traumatic growth are not on opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather can coexist over time as people make meaning of their experiences. For more resources, visit the National Resilience Institute at <http://www.NationalResilienceInstitute.org>.

refuel, recharge, and reclaim what matters. Consider this your blueprint, your diagram, for moving from burnout to breakout to breakthrough by building your resilience muscle to refuel, recharge, and reclaim what matters.

Let's get going!