

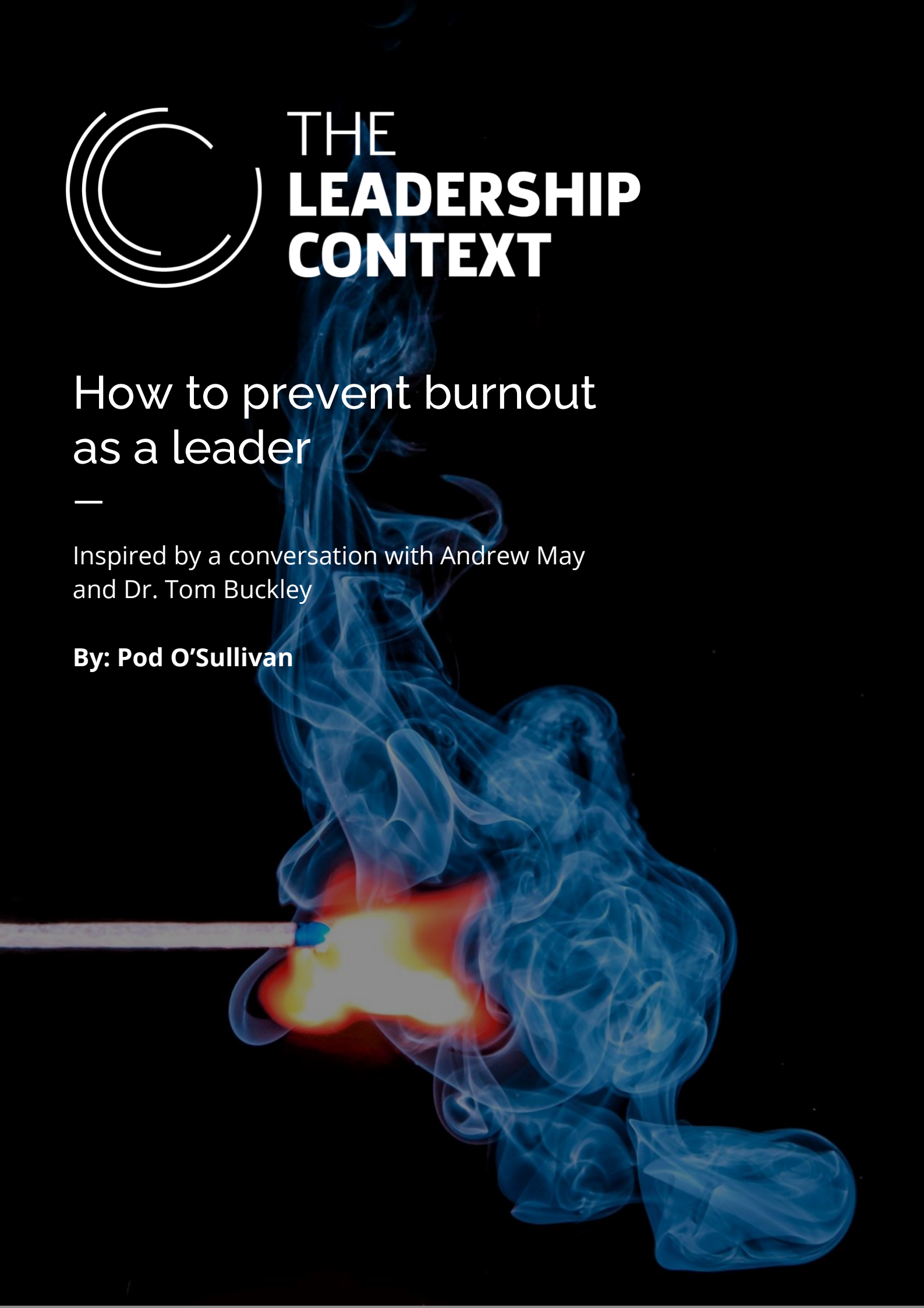
THE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

How to prevent burnout as a leader

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Inspired by a conversation with Andrew May
and Dr. Tom Buckley

By: Pod O'Sullivan



“I know I am not at my best. My patience is low, I feel blunt and slow in my thinking and reactions. No matter how much sleep I get, I am always tired. It is affecting my confidence. I am second guessing myself”

“I used to wake up excited to start the day. Keen to engage in the challenges ahead – even if I knew it was going to be challenging. Today I just feel like I am on autopilot and that it is about surviving until I can retreat and hide at the end of the day”

Striving and ambition are excellent traits but when overextended they can have a dark underbelly. When they are not balanced with restorative practices, depletion can settle its dark cloak as evidenced in the two comments from CEO clients. These are representative of the many versions of the same story that I have heard from C suite leaders who are approaching or have hit “Burnout”.

Originally profiled in the 1970s to describe the consequences of severer stress and high ideals in “helping” professions i.e. medical and healthcare practitioners, Burnout is now formally recognised as a disease by the World Health Organisation who define it as:

“Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:



1. Feelings of physical and emotional energy depletion and/or chronic exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
3. Reduced personal accomplishment and professional inefficacy."

"You cannot pour from an empty cup

Anon

In [a recent Leadership Diet podcast](#) with [Andrew May](#) and [Dr Tom Buckley](#) we explored this phenomenon. Andrew is CEO and founder of [StriveStronger.com](#) a digital consultancy that partners with organisations to create Cultures of Wellbeing. Tom is an internationally recognised expert on the impact of stress on human health and wellbeing.

"Burnout is not about hours worked."

The conversation highlighted some interesting notes that I can validate from my own experience and those of the clients with whom I work. Burnout is not about hours worked. Some of my clients work 80+ hour weeks and never burnout but others find themselves struggling regardless of whether they work much fewer hours. Burnout comes from the chronic depletion of our coping resources. In essence, it manifests if we experience prolonged work-related stress but do not have sufficient recovery. As evidenced in the quotes above, key characteristics are exhaustion, disconnection, or alienation from work, and reduced performance.

As a leader it has massive implications. Not only on the impact of performance but also on the role modelling that is being set.



“Creating a culture of burnout is opposite to creating a culture of sustainable creativity. This is something that needs to be taught in business schools. This mentality needs to be introduced as a leadership and performance enhancing tool”

Ariana Huffington

5 Strategies for Avoiding Burnout

An exciting feature of this was Andrew and Tom’s assertion that burnout can be avoided. This is achieved through implementing the 5 strategies of:

1. Purpose Alignment

Invest time to reflect and consider the following. This is where a coach can be a helpful thought partner and critical friend:

- **Articulate Your Purpose.** Invest the time to understand your ‘why?’ Ask yourself “Beyond earning money, why am I working? Why am I here?” When you have a clear answer, you not only feel better about yourself and your life, you generate a kind of force field that protects you from some of the harsher effects of stress.
- **Understand when you are at your best.** Think about when you lose track of time or when you are in flow. What is common amongst these activities? How can you include these activities in your week?
- **Meaning making.** How does your current role provide meaning rather than just paying the bills? How does work contribute to your wellbeing, finances, relationships, learning and development, sense of belonging, etc?
- **Supplementing.** If work and purpose don’t feel aligned or if work is not providing lots of meaning, where can you supplement in other areas of your life? A hobby, sport, education, community involvement.



2. Active Recovery

Physical relaxation and switching off mentally are key to sustaining energy levels, reducing fatigue, nurturing creativity, and enhancing emotional intelligence. Recovery benefits the body and brain, creating physical and psychological detachment from the stresses of your working day. It expels stress hormones from the body and soothes us, it cools down our overheated systems.

Active recovery (doing stuff), as opposed to passive recovery (doing nothing), involves engaging in low intensity physical activities. It is more as a form of detachment or play, rather than physical training or an exercise stressor. Examples include walk in nature, swimming, light stretching, listen to or play music, gardening, cooking, guided meditation, mindfulness exercise, epsom salt bath, creative activities including painting or knitting.

3. Restorative Sleep

Sleep is a superpower. There is a multitude of research about the importance of good quality and quantity sleep, along with the factors for us to implement to make it happen i.e. good sleep hygiene. Yet, people tend to sacrifice sleep to get more work done. Some executives wear their “only got 4 hours sleep” as a ridiculous badge of honour.

The consequences of poor or not enough sleep include reduced concentration and cognitive processing capacity, poor memory, decreased physical activity and increased weight, decreased productivity, greater stress and emotional strain, increased tension in personal relationships and greater susceptibility to a range of illnesses and burnout. “In essence - sleep deprivation is making us larger, less intelligent, and less connected.”



4. Physiological Capacity

Physical activity enhances cognitive flexibility, boosts energy levels, reduces chronic lethargy, boosts mood, increases social cohesion and can reduce symptoms of mild depression - all buffers against future burnout.

Tips for achieving this include:

- **Be 5 Years Younger.** Measure biological age and aim to be 5 years younger than your chronological age. This provides an extra buffer to deal with stressors life throws at you.
- **Choose Healthy Natural Foods.** Eat foods as close to their natural state as possible, with the bulk of intake being fresh vegetables, quality protein and performance carbs to fuel you through the day.
- **Do High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT).** Include intervals in your training regime 2 or 3 times a week to improve VO2 Max, this also helps lower resting heart rate.
- **Go Green.** Regularly get a good dose of nature and where you can double dip – exercising or engaging in active recovery activities in the great outdoors.
- **Safeguard Sleep.** Sleep is vital for physiology to adapt and regenerate. This is when your body gains the most benefit from exercise and physiological growth and regeneration happens while you sleep.

5. Social Connectedness

Sometimes, when you are surrounded by people at work it can seem that engaging with more people in different ways is overwhelming however humans are social beings. Flourishing relationships and connection with community are fundamental to pleasure, meaning and fulfilment in life. Being connected to others gives us purpose, meaning and pleasure, higher self esteem and empathy, all buffers against burnout. What is important is to be connected with people we care about and share interests. It is possible to be lonely and never be alone, because we do not



feel connected to those around us. Here are some tips for social connectedness:

- **Strengthen existing relationships.** Prioritise relationships with family, friends and loved ones. These already exist and have a strong base. The best way to do this is to schedule relationship time in your diary each week.
- **Find Your Tribe.** Join a local group like an orchestra, dance class or community gardening group. Sign up for a sporting organisation, a swim squad, or cycling club. Or join a book club or volunteer for a local charity.
- **Physical Activity Double Dip.** Regularly train with others to strengthen relationships. Exercise is a great way to build physiological capacity, get a dose of nature and connect with other people.
- **Ditch Digital Devices.** Consciously switch off technology and social media to create meaningful connections. Emphasise connecting in real life, not just online.
- **Reach Out.** If you are feeling burnout at work, reach out to colleagues, family and friends. Connections with others provide a buffer from work stresses and re-energises you.

“If you feel burnout setting in, if you feel demoralised and exhausted it is best, for the sake of everyone to withdraw and restore yourself.”

Dalai Lama



Pod O'Sullivan is a partner with [The Leadership Context](#), a boutique consultancy that works with CEO's and leadership teams to help them scale their leadership to enable the organisational strategic imperatives, particularly during complex times. His podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#) is widely regarded as an intimate and insightful look at senior leadership for all its aspirations and realities.





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