

## COPING WITH BURNOUT?

For students who undertake a long, drawn out project such as a thesis, burn out is a common issue. Tired of the task and bored with doing the same type of work (usually researching and writing) students can lose their motivation to continue. By following these steps, you may be able to rediscover the energy to continue and complete the task.



### **EVALUATE: WHERE ARE YOU?**

First, decide if you can do anything related to the project at this point. If not, skip to Hiatus (see below). If you are able to do something, a relatively painless way to begin the evaluation process is an orientation, particularly if you've been feeling lost in thesis land for a while. Where exactly are you in the project? Determine this by looking back at where you've come from. In concrete terms, what is already done? Make a written summary of the parts of the project that have been completed, or are close to completion.

At this point don't worry about where you're going next. The objective is to demonstrate how far you've come. Take time to take comfort in your progress - don't discount what you've achieved because there's still a lot to do, or guilt trip yourself because you think that you should be much further by now. How far you still have to go does not depreciate how far you've come. Look at what you've accomplished and savor it.

This orientation - plotting exactly how far you've come with the project - provides a reality check of sorts. When you're very close to a project day after day, it's easy to lose some perspective on progress, and become overwhelmed and stressed by assumptions about how little work has been done and how much is left to do. Defining, evaluating and focusing on what has been completed instead of on what is left to do provides a refreshing change. It's a concrete reckoning of progress that can help determine if the remaining work is really as overwhelming or onerous as you may have assumed or imagined. Even if it is, it doesn't hurt to pat yourself on the back for what you've accomplished so far.

## EVALUATE: WHAT'S FUELING THE BURNOUT?

There are probably many reasons why you're feeling burned out on the project. It is helpful, however, to assess and define the reasons in order to determine if there is something specific that needs to be dealt with in addition to the more general issue of burnout. For example, you may be sick and tired of the project, but is this because:

- you're frustrated with running into the same barrier over and over? A controversy in the literature or a methodology problem perhaps?
- one part of the project just won't come together and is holding up progress?
- your supervisor is creating problems that you're struggling to deal with, or he/she just isn't around?

Sometimes just being able to name the problem, to identify it and label it, can be helpful. If a specific issue is fueling your burnout, you may regain a sense of momentum if you acknowledge its significance, see that particular issue as separate from the rest of the project, take some time to focus just on it, and get some specialized, professional help to deal with it. Zen philosophy says "The barrier is the way." Identifying and dealing with any barriers to your project may be the prerequisite for progress.

The items listed above - literature, methodology, supervisor - are examples of barriers external to you. Another type of barrier you may be struggling with is internal. In our work with graduate students, we've found that perfectionism is a very common, yet largely unrecognized issue, particularly when it comes to forms of academic performance. Perfectionism is often the unsuspected cause of writer's block, for example. Even if you don't consider yourself a perfectionist, or feel that this is a positive trait, it's worth your time to explore this issue with one of the professionals in [Learning Services](#).

## RE-EVALUATE

Another option is to try to rediscover your original inspiration for doing graduate work (or for undergrads, for coming to university) and for choosing to conduct research on this topic. Think back to the spark that first kindled your interest - was it a book, a movie, a trip, a job, a speaker, a special teacher? Connect with the source of inspiration again if you can and re-evaluate its importance to you and the decisions you've made. Understanding why you started out on this path may help you to keep going.

## IS THERE LIFE AFTER THESIS?

Another way to re-ignite interest and regain momentum on a project is to look to the future. It may be helpful to talk to graduates of your program who've made it through the same struggle. Your supervisor can likely put you in touch with former students. Talking to them about their experiences with their thesis and about what they're doing now can help to restore your ability to see beyond the project and envision the future.

## **RECHARGING: HIATUS**

### **BREAKS OR 'VACATIONS'**

If you're stuck and feeling in a rut, a major break might be just what you need to recharge your motivation and get a fresh perspective on the topic. Try something as different as you can manage from researching, reading and writing, or whatever activities your project involves. Volunteering for a short-term assignment is a good way to put yourself in a completely new environment, focussing on completely new things. Be sure to talk frankly with your supervisor about your needs, and secure his or her approval.

Once you begin again on the project, plan short, frequent breaks to maintain your motivation and momentum. You may, for example, proclaim Sunday evenings as your sacred sanity time, regardless of what else is happening with the project. Plan in advance for future "vacations" away from the project, whether it's a day, a weekend or a week or more. These periodic long breaks can be essential to preventing further burnout.

### **REWARDS**

Along with breaks and vacations, rewards can be another effective means of motivation. If you're stressed, feeling guilty and/or doubtful of your competence, rewarding yourself may seem like the last thing you "deserve." Some students dismiss rewards as a form of self-bribery or manipulation, and others claim they just back-fire by making people feel worse when they don't accomplish what they wanted to. Despite the validity of these reservations, rewards are an essential part of persevering on a long project. Negative outcomes are likely the result of students not using rewards effectively, rather than them being a flawed strategy.

## **RESTARTING: THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

Once you are able to return to the project, it can be helpful to think of this phase as something of a new beginning. Just as there is some truth to cliches like "tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life," there can be truth and strength in conceptualizing the restart of the project as the beginning of the end.

Use a process similar to the one described in "Evaluate: Where are You" to focus now on exactly what remains to be done on the project. Again, this provides a reality check. When you're struggling with burnout, it's not difficult to become overwhelmed and stressed by assumptions about how much work is left to do. Make a list, make it specific, and estimate how long each step will take. List what you can delegate to someone else, and where you'll need help. Create a concrete reckoning of the remaining work as a reality check and a project management tool. See [Making a Task List](#) for more on creating lists.

The support of your supervisor, another professor or a professional on your campus (writing advisor, counsellor, etc.) could be critical at this stage. If you're not comfortable with sharing your situation with any of them, there are other forms of support available. For example, there are Internet groups for graduate students, or you could even start your own "thesis management" group with your fellow students in your department, to offer support and encouragement to each other. Don't be too surprised

or disappointed if partners, family, and friends may not be able to understand or provide the support you need. It's very difficult for someone who hasn't been through a major project like a thesis to understand what it's like.

Recovering from burnout isn't an easy task, but armed with strategies, patience, and above all gentleness on yourself, you can see burnout for what it is - a temporary phase - and regain the momentum needed to finish your project.