

Burnout to Balance: Doing & Being

- inquiry -

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based on articles by Sophy Banks 2016, and by Claire Milne 2018

Balancing Polarities

Humans naturally move between periods of Doing and Being; activity and rest; spending energy and replenishing; learning and integrating. Stress researcher Emily Nagoski has found that mental energy oscillates between task focus and processing. She describes mental rest as a 'Default Mode,' which is necessary for the brain to process the world.

Doing and Being are polarities, and both are important; too much of either one can be problematic; a balance of both is ideal ([see Beach & Joyce article](#)). Balancing work and well-being, Doing and Being, is ideally a central aspect of any Transition. Many people, due to socio-economic pressures, can feel they must stay in a Doing-mode in order to survive day-to-day. Ideally, a Transition will address important structural issues so that Being becomes more available to everyone.

How things get done is as important as what things get done.

	Doing	Being	Balance
Time	Speed. Time is short. We must act urgently. Speed is necessary. Delay means catastrophic failure.	Slowness. We act strategically after consideration. We deliberate how to use limited resources. It is a good use of time to build relationships that will endure.	Both. Sometimes we act quickly to respond to a situation. Sometimes we act slowly, to rest, reflect, and integrate our experience.
External-Internal	Transition should have an external focus, to defend against danger. Fossil-fuel extraction has huge negative impacts on the environment and the economy. Unmitigated climate change will lead to mass extinction.	Transition should have an internal focus to promote an ecological worldview. Humans will change behaviours & choices, reduce their ecological impacts, transitioning to sustainable economies and ways of living.	Both. Transition focuses on both polarities: inner and outer, social and personal, environmental and political.

	Doing	Being	Balance
Work vs. Life	Transition should focus on municipalities and businesses to make widespread socio-economic changes as fast as possible.	Transition should focus on relationships – connecting with self, neighbours, community and place to increase caring, meaning, and joy.	Transition can have a holistic focus on all aspects of human life, including economic, ecological, and interpersonal well-being.
Task-Process-Relationship	Group meetings should focus on 'what:' doing actions and accomplishing tasks. Anything else is a waste of time.	Group meetings should focus on 'how:' process (agreements, practices, roles, planning, evaluation) and relationships. Anything else is unsatisfying.	Groups that spend at least 25% of their time on process and relationships – 'how' they work together – improve all aspects of their work, including accomplishing tasks – 'what' they do.
Scarcity vs. Plenty	Scarcity. Not Enough. More always needed.	Plenty. Enough. More unnecessary.	Both. Natural cycle of scarcity and plenty.
Theory of Change	Social change by sustained efforts aimed at institutions & infrastructures.	Lasting social change by internal shifts in cultural narratives & values.	Both strategies can bring desirable aspects of lasting social change.

What is Burnout?

Chambers dictionary definition:

1. physical or emotional exhaustion caused by overwork or stress.
2. the point at which a rocket engine stops working when the fuel is used up.

Burnout is a state of severe exhaustion where recovery takes a long time. Burnout comes from using one part of your brain or attention too much and not using others enough, from doing too much, overworking, giving too much energy to others; and not receiving enough rest or replenishment. It is distinct from an intense short-term period of stress and tiredness, like a sprint, after which recovery is usually quick. With severe exhaustion, an individual's well-being may be seriously compromised – mentally, emotionally or physically.

Burnout is common to many social change movements, showing up similarly on all levels – for individuals, groups, and the planet. Transition aims to address planetary depletion, what some view as burnout on a large scale – human systems that deplete resources, not allowing enough time for natural systems to replenish and revitalise. Any system, group, or individual that uses its resources faster than they can replenish will steadily deplete them. Burnout can result from consistent depletion over a long time, with many naturally restorative processes disrupted. Typically some kind of intervention or change is required to restore a more self-nourishing balance.

Stress & The Nervous System

(see [Guide to the Human Nervous System](#))

Cultures that prioritise Doing are often accompanied by chronic stress. The human nervous system's stress-responses were designed as short-term strategies for dealing with emergencies. Over the long-term, adverse effects can develop if the nervous system is habitually activated by stress into its fight/flight/freeze mode. Prolonged stress can lead to:

- Narrowing focus to short-term, preventing a wider scope or long-term thinking, caused by reduced blood flow to the brain.
- Adopting a defensive posture; assuming threats and dangers lurk everywhere.
- Fears driving actions, maintaining the fight/flight/freeze mode, creating confrontations and conflicts.
- Activating emergency survival strategies like suppressing emotions, inhibiting digestion, and avoiding rest.
- Stopping for any reason can feel so uncomfortable as to seem impossible.

Continued action without rest keeps the sympathetic nervous system activated. Adding stressors like fear, urgency, or anger can activate it even more. Over time stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline start to affect the immune system and bodily functions, and can lead to health problems like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) and other conditions related to prolonged stress.

What Causes Burnout?

Two things: lack of balance & lack of inner feedback.

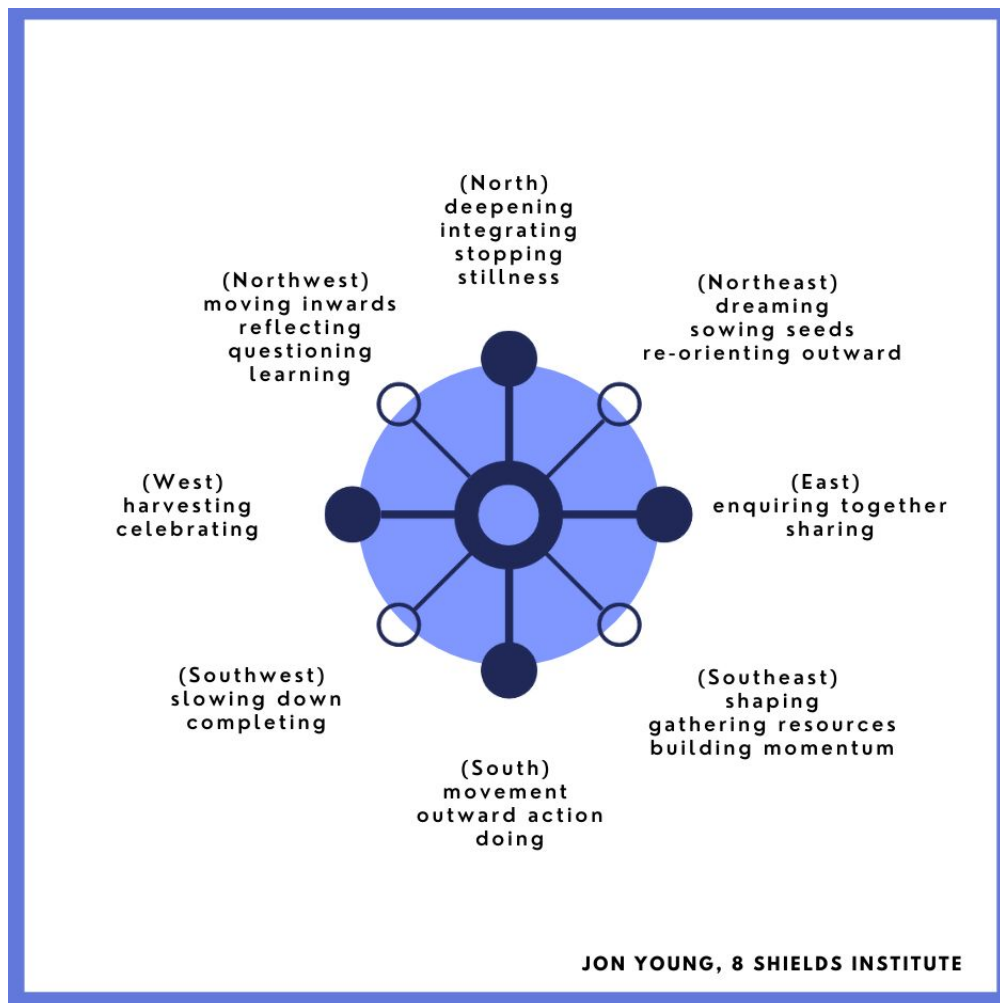
Lack of Balance

Individuals can learn to notice when they are out of balance, to understand what circumstances and beliefs are contributing to their imbalance, and respond by re-balancing. Individuals can take steps to reduce stress by changing their behaviours or work patterns. Ideally this will shift the individual's balance – they will give less and receive more; reduce stressful activities, and increase replenishing ones.

Doing	Being
Energising to get things moving	Letting go into the flow, surrender, allowing
Action: focused attention on work, using will to get things done, meetings, projects, tasks, building, growing	Rest: downtime, silence, solitude, socialising, nurturing relationships and connection, unstructured time and attention
Giving: time, energy, money, commitment, attention	Receiving: appreciation, connection, warmth, money, care
Talking	Listening
Overfocus on happiness, suppressing challenging emotions	Expressing challenging emotions regularly
Knowing through mind, rational thought	Knowing through intuition, feelings, dreams
Strength	Vulnerability
Activated sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight, freeze)	Stimulated parasympathetic nervous system (rest, digest, relax)

Many cultures prioritise restoring balance. Traditional Chinese medicine aims to balance 5 elements as well as yin and yang. Some African traditions aim to balance fire and water – with 3 parts water to 1 part fire. Some First Nations and Celtic traditions aim to balance 4 elements. Many wisdom traditions, and many traditional and indigenous cultures, teach and role model the same basic pattern, based on natural cycles, rhythms of the seasons, the moon, or the sun. The 8 Shields Institute (based on the work of Jon Young) recommends this balanced pattern based on natural cycles:

- SOUTH - movement, outward action, doing;
- SOUTHWEST - slowing down, completing;
- WEST - harvesting, celebrating;
- NORTHWEST - moving inwards, reflecting, questioning, learning;
- NORTH - deepening, integrating, stopping, stillness.
- NORTHEAST - dreaming, sowing seeds, re-orienting outward;
- EAST - enquiring together, sharing;
- SOUTHEAST - shaping, gathering resources, building momentum;
- SOUTH - movement, outward action, and the cycle repeats.



Models like this one can inform how a group might balance their Doing and Being. A group might prioritise, and schedule time for, both kinds of activities on a daily, weekly, seasonal, or yearly basis. A more balanced approach will ideally reduce burnout for individuals and for the group as a whole.

Lack of Inner Feedback

(See [Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience](#))

Individuals who deplete their inner resources faster than they replenish them, typically experience symptoms of chronic stress as a kind of inner feedback. Burnout can result from us consistently ignoring the inner feedback we are receiving about the impacts on our well-being of habitual behaviours or lifestyle choices. When it is time to replenish our inner resources before they are depleted and well-being declines, the nervous system typically sends us physical, emotional, or mental signals. These can be loss of sleep, irritability, illness, depression, etc. (see [Guide to the Human Nervous System](#)).

Ideally individuals respond to this inner feedback with various self-care practices: physical, mental, emotional, social, or time in nature in order to rebalance. (See Self-Care guides - [Self Care: Physical & Sensory](#), [Self Care: Emotional & Social](#), [Self Care: Mental & Worldview](#), [Self Care: Nature](#).)

Responding to Inner Feedback

These 5 steps can help us to understand inner feedback and how to rebalance.

- 1. Noticing the feedback:** Those who are habitually active, used to a fast pace, or undervalue vulnerability, may ignore or misinterpret inner feedback signals. They may not notice, or even deny that the feedback is happening. We need to address this by becoming much more aware of the feedback we are receiving from our bodies and others around us.
- 2. Understanding the feedback:** Feedback signals can be difficult to diagnose. What does it mean to be ill for half a month? to be unproductive or argumentative? Individuals and groups can benefit from time for both personal reflection, and making meaning of what that reflection reveals (See [Personal Reflection](#)). This is a skill one can develop, related to communication techniques and group dynamics, which can help with making meaning of the signals. Sometimes talking to a coach, counsellor, mentor, friend, or family member can help with this.
- 3. Taking steps to re-balance:** Responding to the feedback and re-balancing may benefit from specific methods for physical or mental well-being. For groups it may involve making changes in the group culture – structuring meetings differently, adding time for appreciation or celebration, including time for both personal and business topics, or discussing group processes. (See [Task-Process-Relationship](#) and [Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions](#)). For individuals it may involve increasing self-care practices – walks in nature, time with friends, holidays, personal practices like yoga or mindfulness meditation (See [Self-Care Guides](#)) or decreasing their workload. It may not be clear at first what's needed, so be open to trying different things.

4. **Overcoming resistance:** Reverting to a default setting can feel easy and familiar. Groups and individuals typically have a default setting, however dysfunctional, to which they become habituated. Notice where there is pressure to revert to a default rather than make changes that restore balance.
 - How does it feel to say no? (See [Respecting Yes and No](#)).
 - Is it uncomfortable to appreciate others, or to receive appreciation?
 - Is there an inner voice saying “waste of time” when the group discusses processes or relationships? (see [Task-Process-Relationship](#)).
 - Is there resistance to self-care? (See [Date With Your Self](#))
5. **Reviewing the re-balancing:** How effective have the changes been? Have they helped to restore balance or not? Would something different be better? What adjustments or improvements could be made?

Preventing burnout has two simple parts, and can be easy after a little practice. Pay attention to inner feedback signaling that it's time to replenish or re-balance. Then take steps to re-balance, and make sure those steps are helping.

Why is Burnout So Common?

In cultures that prioritise Doing, it's easy to burn out. Why don't more people try to prevent burnout? In a Doing culture it's common to over-identify with either doing or resting rather than a healthy balance between the two. These parallel the basic nervous system responses: sympathetic (fight/flight), or parasympathetic (rest and digest) (See [Guide to Nervous System](#)). The pattern of overworking and burning out is an extreme version of the basic pattern. In a Doing culture, allowing time to find a balance can be challenging at first.

Transitioners from a Doing culture can benefit from being easier on themselves, not harder. The patterns of over-Doing from the wider society or culture are likely to show up in individuals, groups, and social change movements. Some people do not consciously choose patterns of over-Doing, but may have felt forced into them in order to simply survive. Part of an Inner Transition is to clarify such patterns, so they can be recognised and adjusted before they result in burnout. Rather than reverting to default behaviours, Transitioners can have more choice about making behaviour changes that prevent burnout.

Doing vs. Being

In Doing cultures where process and relationship may be less valued than action and outcomes, “productive” work is often given high value (See [Task-Process-Relationship](#)). Those who over-identify with Doing may view with contempt those who work less or produce less, and can punish or shame the least productive workers. This is an imbalance common in Doing cultures, where Being is seen as a 'waste of time.'

A Transition group's culture can aim to be more balanced, viewing both Doing and Being as valuable (see [Understanding and Integrating Inner Transition: Creating Healthy Human Culture](#)). Ideally an Inner Transition will lead to a more balanced group culture of Doing and Being; allowing for periods of activity and rest, giving out energy and replenishing, learning and digesting.

Action vs. Feeling

(Emotional Suppression, see [Guide to Emotions](#))

It can be difficult to deal with emotions that arise when thinking about what might happen if successful Transitions do not happen. The news is full of apocalyptic images – natural disasters, climate refugees, wars over resources, exploitation, extraction, and destruction of the Earth. Staying busy can be a way to numb painful emotions like despair, outrage, fear, grief, powerlessness, or anger.

Ignoring such emotions has consequences. Anger can leak out inappropriately and affect those nearby. Fears can grow enormous and out of step with reality. Grief can solidify into numbness or toxicity in the body. Finding good ways to express such emotions is important. This can be challenging in cultures where expressing emotions is not common.

Joanna Macy's *Work that Reconnects*, and her book with Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, offer several accessible and effective activities. Some Transition groups have set up [facilitated supportive spaces](#) – either as a single event or an ongoing series – where some of these can be explored.

Heroism & Heroics

The trope of the hero is common in many social change movements. It's tempting for one person to become the single spokesperson of a movement; it can be harder to amplify and uplift many voices. Some cultures have a default setting of looking toward a hero. It can be easy for leaders in social change movements to behave in ways that increase this tendency. Some founders don't make space for the newcomers who might replace them.

Leaders may be doing too much, saying they are serving others, and actually not trusting that others can do the job properly. Leaders may struggle to collaborate, to share power or credit, or to allow their vision of the group to be adjusted by anyone else's view. In addition, in today's online world, leaders/heros can also be more open and vulnerable to receiving abuse via social media etc.

Urgent & Important

Most Transitioners think that making Transition happen is important; otherwise they would do something else. The issues Transition aims to address are also urgent – preventing widespread suffering in the face of potentially catastrophic danger. It can feel so urgent, like many people aren't doing enough of what's needed. If the majority of society were organised to address these important issues, then they would be manageable – and the scale of response would reflect their urgency.

Many Transitioners, however, can feel like they are part of a small, under-resourced group. Taking a rest can feel irresponsible, shameful, or wrong when the stakes seem so high. Some say, "How can I rest when our children's future is at stake?" Ideally Transition will support those who care about what's important, take responsibility, and take urgent action for change.

Taking a Rest

(See [Date With Your Self](#) and [Self-Care Guides](#))

Transition is a journey of change that may continue for years. It can be a joy and privilege to take on some responsibility and actively work toward a better future. And after some time, one responsibility can begin to feel burdensome, or new responsibilities may emerge. After stepping in and doing your part, take some time off and feel the relief of stepping away from work. Try switching it up. Maybe another kind of task that uses the head or the hands differently. Stepping away from a particular type of work can feel like a relief, either as a brief pause or as some more fulsome time off. Individual well-being is a vital part of Transition. Ideally everyone carrying the vision of Transition in their hearts can find a balance of good action and good rest.

Activity: Preventing Burnout - Questions

How things get done is as important as what things get done.

For example, the Transition Town Totnes group added a personal check-in at meetings about individuals' energy levels. When many people said they were in danger of depleting their energy, the group decided to make changes. They first found local funding, and got some short-term paid help – a part-time coordinator. A year later they created a free mentoring service – inviting local therapists, coaches, and health professionals to offer free one-to-one support to Transitioners, from which many have since benefitted. Attention to personal well-being now allows them to be at their best, contributing to their wider communities and to the natural world.

What do you think?

Try answering the following questions individually, and then discuss as a group.

How can Transitioners individually:

- balance Doing and Being? notice signals of exhaustion? take steps to re-balance?
- respect their boundaries and limits? not override inner feedback, not compromise their health, not give more when it's time to replenish?
- role model balance? to show that well-being relies on not over-doing?
- make time for nourishment and self-care? to reflect and celebrate? to find the stillness that supports dreaming into creative visions of the future?

How can Transition groups:

- create a group culture which values self-care, and care for others' well-being?
- value time for Being: downtime, social time, listening, stillness, caring in relationships, honouring and celebrating what is dearly held in the heart?
- create a culture without burnout? Why should this be a part of Transition?
- make time for nourishment and self-care? to reflect and celebrate? to find the stillness that supports dreaming into creative visions of the future?

Activity: Overwork Quiz

(based on Julia Cameron)

Complete each phrase: seldom, often, or never.

I postpone self-care until a task is complete.

I use the word 'deadline' to describe my work load.

I re-schedule time with loved ones to accomplish tasks.

My family and friends complain that I work too much.

I allow calls to lengthen my work day.

I work on weekends and (national) holidays.

I intend to begin one task and start doing three others.

I struggle to finish the final aspects of a project.

I allow myself free time between projects.

I prioritize creative time instead of work.

My day includes at least 1 hour of creative time.

I allow myself down time to do nothing.

I fill my free time with others' plans and agendas.

During this past week, how much time did you spend:

on things you 'should do?' on things you wanted to do?
helping others? receiving help from others?

Related Inner Transition resources

[Become Stress Busting Experts](#)
[Group and Personal Sustainability](#)
Guide to the Human Nervous System
Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience
Self-Care guides (x 6) - Physical & Sensory,
Emotional, Social, Mental, Worldview, Nature.)
Personal Reflection
Date With Your Self
Respecting Yes and No
Task-Process-Relationship
Guide to Emotions
Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions
[Understanding and Integrating Inner Transition:
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Transition Network. basic resources on
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<https://www.transitionnetwork.org/resources/group-and-personal-sustainability-activity>

Transition Network project support
<https://www.transitionnetwork.org/support>

Transition Network videos on burnout, balance,
and emotions:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAG46AHsJ4w>
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