

# What is Burnout and How to Manage It with Leah Steele

**Frances Barrett:** [00:00:00] Have you ever been in this situation where you are keeping all of the plates spinning and then all of a sudden your body tells you to stop? That you need to rest, that you need to slow down?

Today I'm going to be joined by a very, very special guest burnout mentor called Leah Steele. But if we haven't met yet, hello, my name is Frances and I'm the Head Brain from The Social Brain. And I help businesses with their social media presence to take one plate off of their spinning sticks, to make sure that they get seen and they, their business gets to grow.

Generally as people, regardless of if you're a business owner or if you're a mum or whatever else is going on, we generally have all of the, all of the tabs open in our brains, right? And I would like to know in the comments while we're waiting for our guests to join us, have you ever experienced burnout to your knowledge, and felt like you just can't, there's like a mental wall and you can't push past it?

Hello? Hello, [00:01:00] hello. Good morning. Good morning. So for everybody who's watching now, this is the lovely Leah Steele and she is a burnout mentor. Leah, if you wouldn't mind just introducing yourself in your own words, what it is that you do, how you help people, who you help, just so that people get to know you.

**Leah Steele:** Yeah. So, hi, my name's Leah Steele. I, as you said, I'm a burn out mentor. I do coaching training. I work, I was a lawyer before I burned out. Okay. So I work with a lot of professionals who have been experiencing these issues who are stressed and burned out. But as you might expect, given I run my own business, I dunno if you've noticed, but running a business can be a little bit stressful.

So I work with a lot of people who are professionals, basically, anybody who cares a lot about doing a really good job, takes it really seriously, or ends up accidentally taking it seriously. And who is feeling like they're exhausted and overwhelmed. And I refer to it as work being almost like a special kind of self-harm.

That's [00:02:00] the kind of person that I work with, where you're beginning to feel like it's just all too much.

**Frances Barrett:** It's crazy, isn't it? Because you are right. It absolutely derives from passion. Like I and I, I don't know if I've experienced burnout by your definition, but there have been times where I've had to just stop and I've, I've been running my business five years and I think I've experienced it twice every year, because you just end up adding more to your plate the things that need to be do, things that need to be done. And being a business owner, you. Especially in the first instance, you do all of it, right? So it is, it is, it is that. So what is, what is really burnout to you when you are looking to work with somebody? What, what is it that they are coming to you and saying?

**Leah Steele:** So that's the thing. You're already gonna hate me for this. I'm really sorry because you just said, you know, get to the point where I need to stop. And actually, if we look at the definition of burnout. That's beyond burnout. Oh, wow. So, yeah. And so this is the thing, this is the first [00:03:00] thing, but if I had a pound for every LinkedIn message I've had over the last few years where somebody says, hi, I don't think I'm experiencing burnout, but, and then they list these symptoms and I go, no, I have to have a really awkward conversation now.

Because the definition of burnouts, the World Health Organization has a definition that they have in the ICD 11. Big fat book of all the reasons why you'd ever need to see a doctor. The definition that they use is, it's an occupational phenomenon that arises as a result of chronic workplace stress that's not been successfully managed, right? And it's got three key symptoms, exhaustion depletion, negative de cynicism and increased mental distance from your work and reduced professional efficacy.

So basically if you woke up today and you feel more tired than you did yesterday, you feel like you're more under the cosh, you've got more work to do. It's more difficult to get it done, and you're either feeling negative, cynical, wondering why you're bothering, what's the point? That's burnout. Oh, okay.

So it's actually because, [00:04:00] most of us think we have to break down, right? We have to be non-functional. We have to be signed off sick, we have to be unable to get out of bed. And actually the definition of burnout is, it's something you're doing whilst you're working. Mm-hmm. And so I, I have five, kind of, stages of burnout, as it were. And most people think it's the crisis, right? Mm-hmm. It's, I can't do this. Something terrible's happened in my life, blah, blah, blah.

And actually stage five is habitualised burnout. So it's waking up every day feeling more tired, feeling like it's more difficult, and beginning to wonder why you're bothering or feeling so removed from why you started, which is so important for us as business owners, right?

Yeah. We started with this idea and then fast forward a year, five years, 10 years down the line, and we're like, why am I doing this again?

**Frances Barrett:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Absolutely. And it, it, it always, everything always links back to the why you're doing it. Right. So having that at the forefront, I suppose, can help you when you are, when you're managing this right?

**Leah Steele:** Yeah, go ahead. It's a double-edged sword. I was gonna, you could see it on my face. Yeah. This is a double edged [00:05:00] sword because passion is the thing that gives us energy, it gives us reward, right. But it's also a thing that will keep us in the room longer when we're struggling. Mm-hmm. You know, it's, I need to pay the bills. This is really important stuff and those are the two things that will just override all of our internal red flag mechanisms and we'll just keep going. Mm-hmm. So, yeah.

**Frances Barrett:** Mm-hmm. That's so, so interesting. And I just had a quick question, before we move on to kind of like the signs and symptoms and the prevention stuff.

Mm-hmm. Now, I don't know if you work globally, I assume that you have an audience all over. Do you see a difference with Brits with the whole keep calm and carry on mentality that we have all kind of adopted, compared to somebody somewhere else in the world? Do you, do you see that?

**Leah Steele:** I do to a certain extent. I mean, it's, it's very much like a universal thing. Mm-hmm. If you are in, and I say professional, if you're in any kind of job, I, I worked with people who are traditional blue collar workers as well, [00:06:00] who just care so much about their job, know it makes a huge difference and they can experience burnouts.

So it's not just professionals, it's not just one type of person. It is very much universal, but it's about how we cope. Mm. Right. And in particular, I do a lot of work with organizations where I'm talking to 'em about psychological safety. So how much we can speak up. Psychological safety is the idea that we have the shared belief between a group of us that we won't be harmed for speaking up.

We can ask questions. We won't be humiliated. We won't be punished in some way. Mm.

And so if you put that on one side, And you put keep calm and carry on, it'll all be all right in the end. If it hasn't, if it's not happy ending, it hasn't worked out yet. That's not psychological safety, that's emotional bypassing.

Right, right. Okay. And so if we are not able to say, Hey, I'm struggling. Hey, this isn't as glossy and fun as it might have been before, or, I need to tell you the truth of what's going on. We can't talk about burnout and therefore we [00:07:00] can't change it. Hmm. So yeah, it's definitely I'll keep calm and carry on doesn't help. It keeps us in it longer, that's for sure.

**Frances Barrett:** And I've definitely noticed that like within myself because I'll just be like, oh, it's fine, it's fine. And it's something that my business coach is just like you, it's not, it's okay. For it not to be fine. Yeah. When you ask, when, when you're asked how you are, you know, it's, it's fine to be okay, well actually I'm struggling with this, or, you know, this plate isn't spinning as well as this one. And I keep saying plates spinning, but it's also tabs open. I keep all of the tabs open. Yeah. And, yeah, it, it, it's, it's a very really, and I just thought, you know, we, we, even though that's something that we've kind of adopted from World War Times, we are all still like that, aren't we? We're all very much like, oh, it's, keep calm and carry on, it's, it's all gonna work out okay.

**Leah Steele:** Yeah. And actually, if you think about as a society, as a culture, there are lots of different reasons why we do it. There's like, it's like when you go and get your nails done, like I have not, had mine done for ages, but you know, when you get your [00:08:00] nails done and they buff back and buff back instead of just taking the whole thing off and starting again.

Yeah. You can tell used to get gel nails. And you end up with this kind of like multi-layer approach. So you've got yes, from the war, keep calm, carry on. It was a whole propaganda thing. Yeah. But we've also got the religious background, we've got the cultural background, we've got the political background. You know, any time you hear well, we don't air our dirty laundry in public. That's a fight against psychological safety.

Anytime we're told well the rewards will come at the end, and if you're a good person long enough, you might get rewards later on. Yeah, it's telling us to just ignore what's going on and hope it'll be all right at the end. Right. This magical thinking. So there's lots of different layers to it.

There's lots of different messages that come through, but we get a lot of, no, don't speak up, don't be honest, don't rock the boat. Mm-hmm. And so as a result, we just have to grin and bear it. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And that's how we end up with habitualised burnout.

**Frances Barrett:** That's so interesting. So, so interesting. Yeah, I'm just like, oh my gosh, I wanna do what you do.[00:09:00] So tell me what other real signs and symptoms that we should be looking out for if we are not looking out for, oh my gosh, I need to rest. Yes, what are kind of the, the things that we should be looking out for and should really be aware of when we are looking after ourselves?

**Leah Steele:** So I use a process, red, amber, green. You know, any, most of us are used to some version of this. So red is stop, done, non-functional, throwing the laptop out the window, throwing somebody else out after it, that kind of stuff. Right? I use a gift set in corporate training, so I'm like, this is what you probably thought burnout out was. It's like, ah, scream face, laptop out the window, you know IT crowd with the office on fire. Yeah.

But actually if we then look at the other side and we've got green, everything's good, everything's healthy, it's happy. We're not feeling beyond our capabilities. In the middle, there's this really wide stretch of amber, and what we can do is identify when things are getting more difficult.

So it doesn't mean necessarily stop, but it does mean [00:10:00] reassess. Look differently, right? We don't just keep driving through on the amber lights unless we are pushing for something, right? You don't, if you're out for a Sunday afternoon drive, you don't drive through the amber lights, you stop. You only drive through them when you're under pressure and you need to get somewhere quickly.

Yeah, so those Amber flag symptoms like feeling exhausted, like falling into those narratives that we've talked about, keep calm and carry on. It'll be all right in the end. I just need to get through. Those are all little flags that say, hey, I'm not comfortable. But I'm trying to make myself stay. What's wrong here?

And that's one of the things that comes back for me all the time. Mm-hmm. The other thing is, there's something that we do that keeps us stuck in burnout. And I'm gonna, I'm just gonna hold this up and say we all do it. That's something called maladaptive coping mechanisms, which it means it's not a coping mechanism that's fixing the situation.

I refer to it as it's fixing the surface level. It's making us keep going, [00:11:00] but it's not a functional deeper level fix, right? Mm-hmm. So for example, you wake up tired and what do you do? You have a cup of coffee or three? In my case, this is my third. Oh gosh. You know, we all, but we all, we all, but we do them.

**Frances Barrett:** We all do do it. Yeah. Absolutely.

**Leah Steele:** And so what are the things that I'm doing either out of habit because, you know, a glass of wine at the end of the day to help me wind down. We all saw there was this thing about cakes in the office and how it should be a pernicious evil, which was great to hear the week before I was hosting a new workshop at a bakery.

Great. Okay. Awful timing. Yeah, I don't care. I'm gonna go with it. But you know, coffee into a wine time. Sugar to bring us up. A little dopamine fix of, okay, I've been paid, I'm gonna buy something to make myself feel better. What are the maladaptive coping mechanisms? Cause what we're trying to do there is give ourselves a little boost in the moment.

And it's not fixing the deeper issues. So if we can identify when they're happening, we don't need to give up coffee or wine [00:12:00] or you know, impulsive spending if we don't want to. Mm-hmm. What we can do is say, okay, what could be going on here? And am I doing this cuz I want to or am I doing it cuz I need to.

That's, to me, that's always the thing comes back to, am I pouring this gin and tonic because I want it and I'm gonna enjoy it, or because I feel like I need it. Yeah. So yeah.

**Frances Barrett:** It's just having that awareness and asking yourself again, why, like, everything always boils down to why doesn't it everything. Yeah. So, but what, yeah. You've, but, but why, why do I need this coffee? Why do I need this wine? Absolutely. No, I'll totally, totally get that. So if you, you're, you're super aware, you know where you are on your, on your scale of, red, amber, green, but you're feeling like you're going a little bit further towards the red, what sort of measures are there that, that, you know, you, you, you can prevent a full on red, red meltdown, as it were? Yeah. What, what are the kind of steps that you were put into place to, to prevent that?



**Leah Steele:** It's gonna vary from person to person, [00:13:00] but remembering that burnout is exhaustion, depletion, negative cynicism and disengagement and reduced professional efficacy.

Okay. Okay. It arises as a result of chronic stress that's not been successfully managed. Right. So we can either eradicate chronic stress, because that's been so easy the last few years, right? Or we can more successfully manage, and by the way, it's not a judgment thing and we're like chronic stress, that's not successfully managed.

It's not like you didn't cope. It's actually the amount of stresses most of us are experiencing are more than we can handle. You talked about spinning plates, right? Mm-hmm. So one of my clients shared this phrase I love, which is when you're spinning too many plates, figure out which ones are glass and which ones are plastic.

So what can I drop that you can pick back up again. Right? I know. I hate her for it because it's a brilliant phrase and I wish I thought of it and she actually stole it from somebody else, so it's all fine. But you know, what can we pick up that will be okay? What will survive and what is going to be a [00:14:00] real problem?

So it's a little bit of a different version of that Eisenhower decision matrix. Do, delete, delegate, defer, right? But that's one of the first places I'd start. Actually, when our backs are against the wall, we think everything's a drama, everything's a problem. What if instead, we can go, what can I pick up a week from now, a month from now, three months from now?

What's gonna be the end of the world? Is it the end of the world for my kid to have more screen time today? Is that gonna make them into a terrible human being? Or is my kid having screen time so that I can just decompress a little bit and do a few things? Is that gonna be better for all of us in the round, right?

Mm-hmm. So that's the first place that I'd start. What can we drop? What can we, what's gonna smash? I love that. Like I'm seeing the comments. Yeah, love that. Which is glass, which is plastics, like a sort of triage. It's exactly that. We put so much pressure on ourselves to do everything and to do it all perfectly.

And so for me, that's the first step to take a step back and go, oh, it's okay. It's gonna be okay. And I don't need to do all of it by myself. And that's the second thing [00:15:00] for me is really speaking to somebody. So it doesn't have to be

a professional, it doesn't have to be a big, scary conversation, but we do need some honesty.

We do need to be able to say, I'm having a shit day today. Mm-hmm. It's not great. And I need some help and support, or I just need to offload a little bit because again, if we're holding everything in all the time, there's nowhere for it to go. We've gotta manage that stress more successfully. So it's got to go somewhere.

It's gotta leave the system. Rather than it just be circling around and around and around the whole time I see it. Absolutely. And you know I'm distracted cause my partner just brought me another coffee behind the scenes.

**Frances Barrett:** Number four. See, that's not solving the problem there, Leah.

**Leah Steele:** I mean, you say that. But I love it. It'll be great for my clients this afternoon. He'll be like, why'd she on one? Well, I was doing a video and..

**Frances Barrett:** I'm just seeing the comments. Everybody is loving this plastic or glass.

**Leah Steele:** I know kind of I need to start paying that client for it. [00:16:00] Definitely like a little referral fee.

**Frances Barrett:** I mean, even if you had like a brain dump and you are, you are feeling this and you have a brain dump, just two columns, it's like plastic or glass, right? It's, it's really, really straightforward to do that, so that's so, so cool. Someone else is having lots of coffee too. I, I'm still like on my energy drink. So anyway, that's another, that's another conversation.

**Leah Steele:** Between the two of us we're great this afternoon.

**Frances Barrett:** I'm calling it moving stress, but it, it's, it's all good. Okay, so, so, when. And I'm, I'm thinking of the best way to phrase this question, cause this was so in our bullet points that we spoke about before. Ok. So when, when is the best time for somebody to come and see you? Is it when they are aware of these signs and these symptoms? Or is it the, they are well in, they are well in it? They're digging a way out.

**Leah Steele:** Ideally they would be a fresh-faced baby and they would never have to go through this stuff. That would be the best. And that's why I do a lot of corporate training. I try and, you know, I do trainings recently for people here



in the first year of their career, so, you know, if we can [00:17:00] stop it before it becomes a problem, brilliant.

Mm-hmm. However, wherever you are on the scale, burnout is manageable and reversible, right? You think of burnout as death by a thousand paper cuts. It's not, you know, it's not, for example, one week of moving stress. It's everything that came before and everything that comes after and everything we're trying to juggle at the same time, right?

So it's day after day. So if we can heal the paper cuts one by one, we can manage and reverse burnout. And I think that's really important to say actually because when I first came across burnout, I was sitting in the toilets at work, I was crying, I was a litigation lawyer, I was working at this big law firm and the first thing I read, first of all, I found burnout because NHS Direct was telling me I was definitely dead already. And then I found burnout. And the first thing I read was, you need to give up all stress in your life cuz your body can't cope with it.

And I had a full existential crisis. Cause I was like, I'm not a litigation lawyer, like stress is literally my life. Mm-hmm. And it took me a while to find other research that said, no, actually it's reversible.

It's okay. You know, so long as we're not having these world ending [00:18:00] changes. It's all reversible, it's all manageable, and actually we need stress to build our resilience. We learn and improve from making mistakes, right? Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So any stage, I would much prefer to talk to somebody when they're aware that they're feeling a bit edgy, they're feeling a bit overwhelmed, that things are feeling like, you know, when everything feels like it's on fast forward and it's just going past you.

I'd rather speak to somebody there. Then when they are on the floor crying, signed off sick because it's gonna be easier for them. Yeah. Because there's not as many big and dramatic things because they're not so exhausted, we have to start with the really, really tiny stuff. But wherever you are on spectrum, we can move it back.

So don't worry. Just also, here's my little adjustment on it. If you're thinking about the way you are right now. If it was your best friend, your little sister or your daughter that came to you and said, hey, this is everything that's going on in my life, [00:19:00] this is everything I'm dealing with and this is how I'm feeling, would you be okay with that?

Or would you probably wanna throw hands at somebody very similar under the patio for them and take them away at like a magical island somewhere? If you would not be happy with your little sister or your best friend living the way you are living, that's your sign. Right there. It's a little sister test.

Yeah. Because we take better care of other people than we do ourselves every single time.

**Frances Barrett:** Yeah, absolutely. And I'm, I'm gonna introduce you to somebody who I know actually called Shelley. We did a, a live a little while back, and that was about like self-talk and how much that can really, really impact you as well.

Yeah. So I think always checking in with yourself and seeing, you know, is, is this okay for a friend? Is, is the way that I'm living, is the way that I'm talking to myself, as I would talk to a friend? I think that that's such a powerful, such, such a powerful thing. Cuz you're right, we are our own worst enemy enemy when it comes to things like that.

Yeah. And we've literally put ourselves to the bottom every single [00:20:00] time.

**Leah Steele:** We're taught to do that, aren't we?

**Frances Barrett:** Yeah. So that's, that's what it is. Like the whole keep calm, carry on piece and the whole, it's gonna be okay stuff. Yeah. They've already dissected. What sort of table do you work with? Is it predominantly women? Is it men? Is it a balance? Corporate? Mum's? Business owners? What is the, what is the mix?

**Leah Steele:** I, I fully say I'm not a mum. I have no idea how you guys do this.

**Frances Barrett:** With difficult, it's a lot, it's a lot difficulty.

**Leah Steele:** And a lot of burnout, let me say that. So I'm not a mum. I was a professional. I'm a woman. But actually really interestingly, so I started out working with female professionals. I now work with everybody. Because the whole point is if you're experiencing these symptoms, you are gonna be experiencing, the people around you are gonna be experiencing them cuz you're not being able to do what you used to do and it's having an impact around you. So I work with everybody.

But really interestingly, so I, I work with people one to one. I have a lower cost group membership and I also do corporate work. And there's a real split [00:21:00] because women will join the group far more than men will. It's like a three to one ratio in that. Versus one to one, where it's about 50/50 men and women. Wow. Because men are more likely to still try to deal with it privately.

It, there's a lot more narratives. I think as women we are more used to sharing. And one of the really interesting issues for me is the more marginalized your identity, the more likely you are to experience imposter syndrome, the more likely you are to experience burnout, anecdotally. I don't have the research I do for the imposter syndrome, because the more your work is devalued, the more difficult it is. The gender pay gap, you know, all of these different things. It's to do with ego somebody said. It is to do with egos, also to do with those messages that we receive. Right? Because as women, we're told to put other people first. But we are also told that we can have community, that we can share, that we can speak to other people.

Men get told a whole different set of [00:22:00] messages. Mm. And community is not part of that. For the most part, it's something that a, a lot of men that I'm working with are really trying to change, so it's really interesting to see the ways that it shows up according to your background. I ended up work working with a lot of people who have social mobility background cause I grew up single parent family. My father's an electrician. My mum must school 15, and I ended up being called to the bar of England and Wales.

Not a comfortable place for a kid to grow up, you know, on building sites. Yeah. So there's often, there's a lot of these stories where we don't, we get told we don't fit, we get told we don't belong. And so all the things that we do to try and overcome that, it's really interesting to me.

**Frances Barrett:** Yeah, that's so, so interesting. Like, I'm in the wrong job. I should be doing your job. Cause it's so interesting.

**Leah Steele:** Come along. There's lots of burnout. There's plenty of room. Yeah.

**Frances Barrett:** I could listen to you all day. I'm just like, oh my gosh. Like, dang, listening to everything. It's, it's really, really fascinating. And I guess like things like imposter syndrome and burnout, they just go hand in hand, right?

**Leah Steele:** [00:23:00] Absolutely. Yeah. I break down burnout to beliefs, behaviors, and maladaptive coping mechanisms. And imposter syndrome is always right there in the beliefs.

Mm-hmm. I'm not good enough. Who are I to? With a lot of fear-based stuff, you know, if they know who I am, I'll get found out. I'm never good enough. It'll be good enough when, I have to comply with people. This. It's fascinating. I love it.

**Frances Barrett:** Yeah. So much to unwrap. Yeah. So if people are listening to us right now and they decide that they want to reach out to you, what's the best way to get in touch with you or learn more about how you can support the, the, the people who are listening?

**Leah Steele:** Yeah. Okay. So, In the first instance, reach out, follow me on Instagram, follow me on LinkedIn, send me a message. I don't believe in like massive barriers to entry. I would much rather have a quick conversation with somebody in the dms and be like, here's five things that you can go and do, and hopefully it'll work for 'em. And if it doesn't, they'll come back. So that's the first thing.

There's two things that you can do if you're listening to us and going, okay, she's, she's been watching me. I have a free [00:24:00] assessment tool where people can spend three minutes completing a few questions and it'll give you immediate individual advice.

It's not fully bespoke, but it'll pick up on the biggest issues that you've got and give you some advice of what to do. And I'll give you guys a link for that. Pick three minutes complete, completely free, and you can book a 20 minute call with me for free as well. Or if you're already going, yes, she's been clearly stalking my life, then you can book a 45 minute one-to-one call with me. It's called a Let's Talk Call, and it's heavily discounted from my usual rates because I believe that everybody should have access to the best information and resources because burnout affects 76% of people. So, you know, if it's not you, it's the three people around you. Yeah. Course.

So we all need to know more about this. We all need to be able to do it. It has. I mean, I haven't even gotten into the figures, but it has such a huge financial impact. It has a huge economic impact. It affects businesses, it affects us as individuals, and that's before we even get into all the shopping that we do to make ourselves feel better.

Right? Mm-hmm. Yeah. Little [00:25:00] payday treats and things like that, so yes, I'll give you the links for both of those, but just reach out to me in the first instance and I can send those links onto anybody as well.

**Frances Barrett:** Yeah. Amazing. Thank you so much. And I suppose your biggest tip there is just talk, talk about it, right? Yeah, that's the biggest communicate com communicate. If you, if everything isn't okay, and you, you need some support because there are, there are always people out there to support you.

**Leah Steele:** Yeah, you're gonna experience burnout if you care about doing a good job and you put other people for yourself. That doesn't make you a bad person. That makes you a brilliant person. We want people like that to be able to do their work for longer, more healthily without feeling like it's as form of self-harm.

So I would say instead of feeling like I need support, it's what does my work need so that I can do the best job possible. Amazing. What does my life need to be able to be the best version of it? And we start from there.

**Frances Barrett:** Amazing. Well, thank you so, so much. That was so interesting. I know. I've learned. Thank you so many. I'm gonna take your quiz, your three minute [00:26:00] quiz. Yeah. And see what, see what I can come up with. So thank you so, so much for coming on, talking about that.

As I said, reach out to Leah if anything has resonated with you today. And , I shall speak to you very, very soon.

Take care. So much. Thank you. Bye bye.