

Ep #63: Burnout



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With Your Host

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Period Power with Maisie Hill

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If you are in the horrors with menstrual cycle issues or you want to learn how to harness your hormones then you are in the right place.

Welcome to the *Period Power* podcast. I'm your host Maisie Hill menstrual health expert, acupuncturist, certified life coach and author of *Period Power*. I'm on a mission to help you get your cycle working for you so that you can use it to get what you want out of life. Are you ready? Let's go.

Hello, hello everyone. How are you today? My bleed is due any day now. I am just waiting for my period to start. I have had some insomnia, mild insomnia, I'd say the past couple of nights. And I had some night sweats last night. So that's kind of a tell-tale sign for me that my period is about to start. But I'm 41 years old now and my cycle isn't as predictable as it used to be. I get some variability in length. So it's harder to plan ahead using my cycle, at least in the way that I used to. I still manage it for the most part but it's not like it used to be.

So when this first happened I was quite annoyed but here's what's interesting. The more I have gotten into coaching and managing my own mind, being aware of my thoughts, the more I work with my nervous system, the less I actually need to plan according to my cycle. So in the past I would do my best to sync things with my cycle. I wasn't rigid about it, but it was really important to me because I would need to be aware of the impact of doing things at certain points in my cycle.

So, for example, I would be cautious about doing things like podcast appearances and speaking at events if they were going to take place in the second half of my cycle. So this was around the time when I was prone to losing my ability to speak which is one of the ways that being autistic impacts me.

So if I'm stressed, if my nervous system is dysregulated then I can just struggle to actually speak. And this happened a lot especially after I got my diagnosis which is a common experience after you get a neurodiverse diagnosis of some kind, it tends to intensify or your experience of it tends to intensify in the month that follow. So understandably I was cautious about

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doing things in my luteal phase, so this is from ovulation to the start of my period. And I would largely rely on the first half of my cycle to do these kinds of things and that was great, it worked for me.

I'm just really glad that I know my cycle and I have this awareness because I really can't imagine how infinitely more challenging it would have been and still would be if I didn't know this stuff. It did require me to really love myself and to trust myself especially because I was saying no to people that I really respected. And saying no to projects and opportunities that I wanted to say yes to but felt unable to commit to.

So I just really leaned into my cycle in terms of using it to do things as well as safeguarding and honouring my need for time alone, quiet and to just gently explore what was kind of unravelling inside of me and what was going on in my mind, and what was going on in my body. Okay, this is turning into a far longer cycle update than I'd planned. But as I'm saying it, I'm thinking, God, this is actually perfect for today's topic of conversation. And I suspect it's going to be helpful for you to hear so I'm going to just roll with it and continue.

So as I was doing this, I was really nerding out on all things to do with the nervous system and doing some training there. And I just was re-partnering with my nervous system to get to know it in the same way that I got to know my cycle all those years ago. And I learnt how to create safety with myself so I could actually feel my emotions instead of just being really freaked out by them and trying to avoid them at all costs. Sometimes that meant I would just have these huge crying sessions with massive headaches afterwards.

Most of the time it was actually in the moment processing. So I would experience an emotion like irritation, or anger, or doubt. And instead of judging those emotions, making them a problem I would just choose to feel them on purpose and to get to know them and why they were there, why they were showing up. And I would also notice my nervous system's response, okay, feeling annoyed. I can really feel that I'm gearing up for fight or flight.

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And then by partnering with my nervous system, in that moment I could acknowledge that, and I could care for myself. Instead of just reacting to whatever what was going on and being unaware of why. And really what I'm talking about here is the practice of taking responsibility for your own emotional wellbeing and not just blaming everyone else.

And listen, I know how easy and how tempting it is to blame other people for how we feel. It's like you did this, you said that. That's why I'm annoyed. Or sometimes I would say it's more like something hasn't been done like the dishes, or laundry, or whatever. But basically it is all your fault that I'm annoyed and now you will feel my wrath. So when I feel that reaction happening in me, that level of activation I would ask, what would I be able to do, what could I do if I were to take a 100% responsibility for myself in the moment?

So you all know I'm a big fan of self-responsibility. I did a three-part series a while back on the podcast about being over-responsible, under-responsible and then being self-responsible so you can check those ones out if you haven't listened to them yet. And I think sometimes when I talk about self-responsibility, on occasion it can be misconstrued as going it alone, and toughing it out, and excluding yourself from others. And that's not what I mean.

When you're being self-responsible, I would say you're actually more likely to be open to connecting with others, whether that's having a conversation, having a hug, regulating with someone else. It doesn't mean being hard and tough with yourself, it's actually the opposite, it's all about being tender with yourself and being kind. And this can be the hardest work you'll ever do. I know I'm making it seem a bit soft and cuddly, and it can be that. But it's challenging and it's also extremely rewarding.

So when we did the self-love theme in The Flow Collective, this was last year, about a year ago. The members were shocked at how challenging that month was. They was one of the most profound themes that we've ever done. And that's why when you join, it's one of the first webinars that you get access to. But kind of as I'm saying this, I'm like, we should

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definitely do it again as a group because it's really incredible to go through that together.

Anyway as I was doing all of this, I started to notice that the second half of my cycle wasn't so intense. There were still challenges but the level of regard that I had for myself meant that I would always care for myself. And sure, self-care can be about having a massage or some reflexology, scented baths, all of those things. But self-care is really all about how you treat yourself and not treats as in rewards but how you talk to yourself. What's the relationship that you have with yourself?

So for me an example of that is I will remove myself from environments that don't work for me. If the noise level of a place or a venue increases and it's a struggle for me on a sensory level, if we're over at someone's house and the kids are getting a bit rowdy and things, I'm out of there and that's okay. Whereas a few years ago I would kind of push myself, force myself through it and that would have consequences.

So suddenly I was having this very different experience of the autumn phase of my cycle which for me used to be literally from ovulation until my period started. And I know many of you listening, especially those of you with PMDD are the same in that most or all of your luteal phase is hard in some way or in all of the ways. And the first time that I was having this experience of my cycle I was properly confused. Did I ovulate later than usual? Have I misinterpreted my cycle? What's going on? Something is going on, this isn't how things usually go.

Because I get very clear indicators that I've ovulated. And this is separate from what's happening with my cervical fluid, and temperature, and all of those things. It's more to do with I am just less able to do eye contact. And I prefer to have more personal space. And I go very inwards and retreat into myself. And it's important to say that none of those things are a problem. It's not something that needs to be fixed or solved.

But I think because I was just so at peace with being this way, I was so okay with myself for these things happening, my behaviour changing, it was

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okay. Just felt so at peace with it. And I think because of that it just created space for me to have a different experience. It just softened and shifted something. And I found myself in my autumn just hanging out with Paul chatting, laughing, properly cracking up and carrying on like I'm in the run up to ovulation. What the fuck is going on here?

And then the first time this happened I was like, this is going to be a one off, maybe it's a weird cycle after all. Maybe I didn't even ovulate, maybe that's what's going on. Isn't it hilarious how we just are ourselves and try to protect ourselves by lowering our expectations? So this is what we do. I see it in my clients all the time. Their cycle improves and the first place they go to is doubt.

So when this happened to me, I asked myself, well, if I were being a 100% responsible in this what could I do to guarantee that this isn't just a one off? And I made a list of all the things that I would do if that were the case which is essentially kind of what I've shared with you. And yeah, last week's episode, all about celebrating and figuring out how you've achieved success, this is why it's so important because that's exactly what I did. I was like, okay, so I'm celebrating this, how have I achieved this, how has this happened?

And I just backtracked and found all the things, found all the gold, all the juice of what I had done, and I just continue doing it. And things just have kept improving. So all of that is to say that I no longer need to sync my life with my cycle. What? Did you ever think I'd be saying that? But I still choose to because why wouldn't I? There are still huge benefits to doing it. It doesn't always have to be about need. I don't have to anymore, which is handy when your cycle length is varying.

So last night I did the Doing Less workshop. Thank you to all of you who came, it was amazing. But I did that on day 23 which is peak possibility of dysregulation for me, peak I want to spend time on my own time. But I can plan things like that now without concern or fear. As I'm saying that I'm like, that's not quite true. Those emotions do still come up, but they don't run the show because I know how to work with them. And it makes sense that

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some fear would show up if you've got a history of losing the ability to talk at that point in the cycle.

So I don't want you to listen to this and think that these emotions are just absent from my life entirely. But when they show up, I can notice it and be like, okay, you're here, what's going on that you're showing up as an emotion for me right now? What are you here to tell me? How can I help? And the response, and by the way this is just an internal conversation between me, myself, and I. But the response from them might be, well, I'm so glad you asked. It would be really great if you could just chill at home a bit today.

And maybe you could ask Paul to pick Nelson up today so that you can rest before the workshop starts. And then I'll be like, genius, that's a great idea. Thank you so much. And the reason, by the way, I just want to point out. The reason I say ask Paul is not because it's me asking him a favour as the parent of our child. It is just because Monday is my day to usually pick Nelson up and we split the school run equally. So it would just be like, okay, can you jump in on this day? So that's what I did.

And even though I'd had a really crap night's sleep and being awake from 4:30 in the morning and it was day 23, I felt great. And it was just so much fun to do. So the reason I realise this is such a perfect story to tell you today is because the topic, burnout, I want to share with you my thoughts on. There's just huge parallels between what I've just shared and recovery from burnout. And a big reason why I did the Doing Less workshop is because burnout is so prevalent. And if I could just implant the ability for you to do less I would.

And one of the most common responses from the people who attended was that the reason they wanted to stop doing so many things was because they felt burn out. So I wanted to follow up and discuss that here on the podcast. So let's be geeks for a moment and look at the definition of burnout because it's a phrase that we hear kind of banded around a lot. A lot of people, especially in the last couple of years with the pandemic described themselves as being burnt out.

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And there's a lot of practitioner burnout as well. A lot of people in the healthcare industry, in the teaching profession, plenty of parents, working parents and things as well. There's a lot of people who are experiencing burnout. So Mental Health UK describe it as a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. It can occur when you experience long term stress in your job or when you have worked in a physically or emotionally draining role for a long time.

And they say that common signs of burnout include feeling tired or drained most of the time, feeling helpless, trapped, or defeated, feeling detached or alone in the world, having a cynical or negative outlook, experiencing self-doubt, procrastinating, and taking longer to get things done, and feeling overwhelmed. So as I'm going through that I'm like, "This is largely about how you think and feel." So it's quite exciting to me to think about the impact that thought work can have on someone's experience of burnout.

And when I say that I'm not saying that it's all in your mind because environment and other factors can come into play for sure especially when we're talking about fatigue. Fatigue can be caused by all sorts of things, poor nutritional status, anaemia, low vitamin levels, things like that. Infections and exposure to mould. Blood sugar dysregulation existing in systems and environments that are oppressive especially if you're from one or more historically marginalised groups, poor quality sleep, not enough sleep.

Medications, brain injury, all sorts of things come into play. And of course your nervous system is also going to have something to say about ongoing sources of stress because when you're used to existing in a stress response that will have an impact. And stress responses aren't bad. I want to be really careful when we talk about stress responses. They serve a purpose and that's to keep us alive. So everything your nervous system does is in service of survival.

But what's meant to happen is that we have a stress response. We complete it, we go through that stress response and return to feeling safe and connected to ourselves and the world around us. But so many of us

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are just existing in a stress response for most of the day. We're just existing, getting through the day in fight or flight, feeling activated and then needing to shut down and recover.

And all of this has an impact on your hormones because in order to deal with continued high levels of stress hormones, there's a protective feedback loop that kicks in. And that can actually leave you with a dysregulated HPA axis.

So your HPA axis is just the circuit that runs between different hormonal glands, so your hypothalamus, your pituitary gland, and your adrenal glands. And when that circuit becomes dysregulated, you're going to feel it. So it can cause symptoms like fatigue, feeling burnt out, struggling to feel alert in the morning. Your energy crashing in the afternoon and then feeling tired but wired in the evening which is so unhelpful.

Sleep issues, feeling distracted and not present, low, or high blood pressure, dizziness when you stand, blood sugar issues, poor immune function, digestive issues, it just goes on and on. And if you want to read more about it, there's sections in both of my books where I cover this. It also impacts your thyroid hormones, and your progesterone receptors too because cortisol blocks those progesterone sites, just kind of plugs up those receptors so progesterone can't do its thing.

And then on top of all of this your body might just be like, well, it's pretty stressful around here right now. Maybe now is not the time to get pregnant. So let's just put a stop to ovulation and we can just focus on surviving right now because survival will always trump reproduction. And then on top of all of that, as if that wasn't enough, many of these things also cause inflammation in the body and that has consequences as well. So I feel like I'm just reading you out a really bad list.

But I want you to get a picture and as you're listening to this, I just want you to think about how, yes, there's the environmental things that come in to impact but how much mindset impacts these things. Because we can even look at how coping mechanisms for stress can cause problems. So take

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exercise for example. Exercise to relieve stress when you're feeling activated. If your stress response places you into fight or flight then safely discharging that activated energy in order to complete a stress response, that's a good thing.

But just like anything, when it's done to excess, exercise can go from being a great solution to a problem. And this is also where you can stop ovulating. So this can be due to excess exercise. And that doesn't just apply to professional athletes, I've met plenty of people who have experienced this and not always running too much, you can over-yoga, you can over-CrossFit, you can over whatever other types of exercises. And it can also happen because of undereating, not getting enough nutrient dense foods, high levels of stress.

So as I was considering kind of how this unfolds and how you might see this happening in your life. I was just putting together a picture in my mind of a typical scenario that I have seen in various forms in my clients over the decades. So this is a broad picture that's an amalgamation of everyone I've ever worked with. But you might hit all the points here. So you might wake up feeling stressed or anxious about the day. You just might start scrolling on your phone.

You might not be getting enough food or eating enough nutrient dense foods. So you might just be having cereal for breakfast or having salad for lunch that has no source of protein in it. You might be relying on sugar and caffeine to get through the day or overloading your calendar, feeling unable to say no to the requests that are made of you. And because of all of that, rushing to get things done.

Spending time worrying about what other people think of you, not taking proper breaks. And taking a break because you've hit a wall and you really need to rather than just one that's planned and part of your day. And then when you do take one, you don't take a proper one, you stay at your desk or you kind of still scroll on Instagram and you don't actually rest.

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We can also consider exposure to daylight, that has an impact. If we're inside all day, even if you work next to a window that doesn't compare to actually being outside. And daylight exposure just impacts the body so much. If you're eating late dinners, that impacts the timing of the signals from and to your body that it's time to sleep.

And of course if you're trying to wind down or relieve your levels of stress by using alcohol, eating sugary things, scrolling, online shopping, all of those things, that will have an impact, as will the blue light exposure from scrolling at night and using screens, working late as well. Just getting your brain going when it wants to be winding down. And then going to bed worrying about all the things you haven't done and still need to do, or the things you didn't do perfectly. And just replaying conversations and events or imagining the ones that might happen in the future in an unhelpful way.

What a list. Take a deep breath. And so many of these behaviours impact your body in all sorts of ways, even down to your mitochondria. So you might remember from science lessons back in school that your mitochondria are these powerhouses in your cells that make energy. But they're also involved in the production of your hormones.

So this is why I'm always talking about managing your mind, processing your emotions, working with your nervous system because think about how many of those things I've just listed as we've kind of charted the course of an average person's day. How many of those things could change if you had tools that helped you to reduce sources of perceived stress and to respond to your body when you are experiencing stress of any kind? But often it is perceived stress.

So perceived stress is basically you creating a source of stress in your mind like imagining what your boss is going to say in the meeting you've got with them tomorrow. It's when you imagine the worst case scenario which is what human brains are really great at doing, yours and mine. And then you have a stress response. And then your mind starts to spin, and you overthink, and go down a tunnel of doom and despair. Ask me how I know.

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But the great news is that we can change this. You can use diet supplements, herbs, other forms of treatment and really amazingly you can literally rewire your nervous system. How freaking cool is that? Your brain can literally adapt, change, and modify its structure and its function throughout your life and in responses to experiences. So it can make new connections, neural pathways can change their connections in response to new information. What's the source of information? Your thoughts.

And you can partner with your nervous system and tend to those stress responses in a way that's helpful and kind. You can develop awareness of your thoughts, awareness of your feelings, you can explore them, you can process them. The same way I've done. Consider all of this in terms of the story I shared with you at the beginning and of my journey over the years, and the difference that this has all made. I just really want you to know that this is possible. I hope you can hear it in my voice, just that sense of possibility.

And I can hold that level of belief for you if you can't because when you do this what happens is, that you'll have a greater awareness of when you're in a stress response and of what part of your nervous system that you're in. And you'll know how to care for yourself whilst you're in it. And listen, if you do that, if you do nothing else other than that you will have a different experience of your life, I guarantee it. Then what will happen from there is that you'll start noticing that you're in a stress response earlier and earlier.

So basically instead of noticing after you've already flipped your lid or withdrawn because it all feels too much and too stressful, you'll just notice a bit earlier, and then a bit earlier, and a bit earlier. And instead of feeling completely hijacked by a stress response you'll come into relationship with your nervous system and that is an incredible shift. And of course getting good quality sleep, getting enough of it is important as is eating great nutritious foods, eating enough of them to nourish and sustain you, getting sufficient rest.

And having meaningful connection with others and so on, and so on. But it's far easier to do all of those things when you know how to be kind to

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yourself, you know how to regulate your emotions and your stress response, and you can manage your mind. And the other aspect of this when we're considering burnout as a topic that I really want to mention before we finish up is something that I would love for you to watch out for.

And this is on my mind because I know it's going to apply to several of my clients in The Flow Collective. You know who you are who are in this phase of recovery from burnout. And this is what I want you to be cautious with, or at least what I'd invite you to be cautious with. Be mindful that you are not making experiencing burnout part of your identity.

And this also applies to those of you who are recovering from hypothalamic amenorrhea which is when you stop ovulating and you stop having periods. And it's caused by exercising too much, not eating enough, and being under too much stress. So the reason I mention this is because whilst burnout is a medical diagnosis it's also a thought. And most of the time when we're talking about burnout, we mean that we're stressed, and tired, and feeling overwhelmed.

If you haven't listened to my podcast about tiredness by the way, I think it was one of the first 10 or 20 that I did on the podcast. So make sure you listen to that because it's going to be really helpful if you're feeling tired. But even if you have received burnout as a medical diagnosis I want you to consider if thinking that you're burnt out is helpful because being burnt out is one thing.

But when you add on a whole heap of thoughts about how burnt out you are, that's likely to result in a compound effect of creating more experience of burnout, more overwhelm, more feeling helpless, and trapped, and defeated. And that's going to feel like crap. It also won't help you to take a step forward of some kind because the plan is for things to get better, isn't it? The plan isn't to always be this way, to always be burnt out.

And a way that you can consider this is instead of thinking about how burnt out you are, what if you thought, I'm taking exceptional care of myself? Such a difference and we're not denying what's going on for you in your

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experience or anything of that kind. But it's just how can you frame it in a way that is actually helpful because I see a lot of folks getting stuck in their recovery from burnout. They have experienced a physical and mental crash of some kind. They've gone through the acute phase of recovery and now they're beginning to emerge from that.

You're feeling better but there's a nervousness, or apprehension, or a degree of caution about kind of getting back in the swing of things. And you don't have to get back in the swing of things by the way. You can do things differently which I recommend if you've ended up in burn out, you can definitely do things differently. Because whilst you certainly want to respect what your body isn't up for, at the same time there are times in which you're remaining in an identity of being burnt out because maybe you think that you need to protect yourself.

So that's something you can ask yourself, are you remaining in an identity of being burnt out because you're thinking that you need to protect yourself? And maybe at one point this was really important and helpful. And isn't it amazing that you did that for yourself? For me, when I would lose my verbal skills that was awful. So I protected myself by taking care of myself, reducing my commitments, saying no to people. Thank goodness I did that for myself.

And for you it may have been necessary and helpful at one point but is it helpful now? And only you will know. I have no idea, but you will know. And is it still useful for you to think this way or is it time to update how you're thinking about your recovery and you as a person? Because thinking that you need to protect yourself can start off being really helpful and be such a kindness. But then further down the line it may not be because it can end up actually holding you back, holding you back from recovery.

And as you recover, I'm going to suggest that you work on building trust that you do have the capacity for doing things whilst also paying attention to kind of when you're approaching the line or maybe you've gone past the line. The line by the way is just something that maybe depletes you in some way. But even then, that could just be a thought, or at least if you thought

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differently about something, you could find that it energises you rather than depletes you.

I'm not experiencing illness of any kind, I'm not in burnout, but me playing with my son, it's either exhausting or it's great fun and it's got nothing to do with what we do and everything to do with who I am and how I'm thinking. Recovery from burnout can take a while, there can be challenges involved, it can be one step forward two steps back.

I'm not disputing any of that but it's worth considering if you are recovering from burnout or if you have recovered because you can be recovered and still be mindful about not ending up being burnt out again. It doesn't have to be one or the other. But how you think about yourself will make a difference.

Alright folks, plenty for you to consider there. I hope you found it helpful, and I will see you next week.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of the *Period Power* Podcast. If you enjoyed learning how to make your cycle work for you, head over to maisiehill.com for more.