EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Understanding Anxiety & Burnout

Make sense of overload without expecting yourself to push through it.

Anxiety can alert us to uncertainty or perceived threat. Burnout describes the impact of prolonged unmanaged work stress. Both can affect sleep, concentration, emotions and the sense of having enough capacity for everyday life.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Recognise common patterns of anxiety and overload
- Identify supportive steps without overpromising quick fixes
- Know when further medical or mental health input matters

Take your time

You can read this guide in one sitting or return to the exercises whenever you need them. No worksheet needs to be completed perfectly.

UNDERSTAND

What this can look like

Anxiety is more than worry

Anxiety may involve spiralling thoughts, muscle tension, restlessness, stomach changes, sleep difficulties, irritability or trouble concentrating. Some physical symptoms also have medical causes; do not assume every symptom is anxiety.

Burnout has a specific meaning

The World Health Organization uses burnout for chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, often involving exhaustion, cynicism or mental distance, and reduced effectiveness. People also use the word informally for wider exhaustion.

Capacity is not a character trait

If your system is overloaded, simply “trying harder” may not help. Practical support can include reduced demands, sensory adjustments, recovery time, boundary changes and appropriate treatment.

Different causes need different care

Depression, sleep problems, anaemia, medication effects, thyroid conditions, autistic burnout and ME/CFS can overlap with anxiety or exhaustion. Persistent, severe or new symptoms deserve medical assessment.

Notice with curiosity

These are explanations, not labels or tests. You do not need to recognise yourself in every example for the guide to be useful.

PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

Three things to try

Look for the pattern

For one week, note when you feel most overwhelmed, the demands just before it, and anything that provides relief. Keep the record light and optional.

Make one demand smaller

Choose a realistic adjustment: a shorter meeting, a quieter environment, help with one task, or fewer commitments. Sustainable change is more useful than a heroic burst of effort.

Return attention to the present

Try orienting gently: notice your feet against the floor, look around for three familiar objects, or name one thing that helps you feel safer. If a technique feels unpleasant, choose another.

An important reminder

If you have ME/CFS with post-exertional malaise, do not follow generic “gradually increase exercise” advice. Activity planning should respect your limits and appropriate clinical guidance. If you feel at risk of harming yourself, seek urgent local help.

IN REAL LIFE

Words and actions to practise

Thought spiral

“I am having the thought that everything will go wrong. What do I actually know right now?”

Overloaded schedule

“I need to move one non-essential task and create a quieter hour.”

Asking for support

“I am struggling with anxiety and exhaustion. Can we discuss what needs to be checked and what support could help?”

Start smaller than you think

Choose one example that feels safe, doable and relevant. Practising a small change consistently can be more useful than attempting everything at once.

REFLECTION & PRACTICE

A few gentle questions

1. What has been draining me, and what has been replenishing me?

2. Which symptoms need a healthcare conversation?

3. What is the smallest pressure I could reduce this week?

Permission to pause

You can reflect privately, talk through a question with someone safe, or leave it unanswered. There is no “correct” response.

BRING IT TOGETHER

Small steps are still progress

Notice

Choose

Practise

TRY THIS WEEK

1. Notice a time or environment that increases anxiety.
2. Choose one realistic support or adjustment.
3. Tell one trusted person what would be helpful.
4. Book a healthcare review if symptoms are persistent, changing or severe.

Keep safety in view

If you have ME/CFS with post-exertional malaise, do not follow generic “gradually increase exercise” advice. Activity planning should respect your limits and appropriate clinical guidance. If you feel at risk of harming yourself, seek urgent local help.

FURTHER READING & REFERENCES

NIMH, Generalized Anxiety Disorder
https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad

WHO, Burn-out as an occupational phenomenon
https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases

NICE NG206, ME/CFS guidance
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng206/chapter/Recommendations