



INTRODUCTION

The Harvard community is dealing with heightened uncertainty and unrest. Many in our community are dealing with challenges related to working remotely, new work roles or goals, work-life boundaries and emotional reactions to social injustice and institutional racism. It's a new world in which we need to get our work done. It's harder to engage in the work like we used to and easier to get overwhelmed and burnt out. This toolkit is intended for use by employees, managers, leaders, and HR professionals at Harvard in managing their own and others' engagement during these times. It's meant to offer guidance and strategies for managing work and life boundaries to curb overwhelm and promote engagement and creativity.

Prior to the pandemic the term burnout had already become a common term to describe hazards of overwork. Over two-thirds, or 69%, of employees are experiencing burnout symptoms while working from home, according to [Monster](#). Burnout results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Add to this the challenges of a pandemic, remote work, and heightened emotions in a time of tremendous unrest, it becomes increasingly difficult to feel in control of your time and your overall wellbeing. The pandemic also brings with it a sense of continued uncertainty, which contributes to chronic stress.

When you are overwhelmed, when you can neither predict nor control the forces shaping your time, when you don't even have time to think about why you're overwhelmed, much less what to do about it, you are powerless."

- Brigid Schulte, Author of *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*

Christina Maslach, professor emerita of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley is a pioneering researcher in the field of burnout. In one longitudinal study of occupational burnout, she found there to be three types of signs that you may be burnt out.

- Physical and emotional health symptoms like feeling drained, tired, nauseous, or other physical symptoms like headaches.
- Social trigger symptoms such as feeling isolated, ignored, underappreciated, or ostracized by colleagues.
- Hard on yourself symptoms such as feeling bad about not performing at your best or feeling guilty for not being as productive as you can be or as you used to be. Constant rumination



with thoughts that bounce between the extremes of hopelessness over our situation and the desire to find a solution to change our circumstances is a COVID related facet of burnout.

The burnout described here doesn't just impact the person who is burnt out. It often impacts performance and relationships as well. Performance impacts could be related to not working as many hours, not getting certain tasks or projects done, lower quality of work, or diminished problem solving and decision-making skills. Another performance factor that is especially impacted in our current world when the future is uncertain is the ability and motivation to do long-term planning, strategizing, and forecasting. Relationship impacts could be on one-on-one relationships or team dynamics if burnout translates into a lack of energy to engage with people in the same way. When feeling burnt out in a remote work world, it can be easier to "check out" and not be as engaged in interactions and meetings with others.

Many of us may be inclined to push through the stress and keep working, but that taxes us more than we may realize. In his book *The Stress Solution: The 4 Steps to Reset Your Body, Mind, Relationships and Purpose*, Dr. Rangan Chatterjee cautions against the "head down, power through" approach. "We think we can get away with burning the candle at both ends, but the reality is very different. Every day I see patients who are literally stressing themselves to an early grave." Developing strategies to adapt successfully to change and transition during this time is critical to our overall wellbeing.

STEP1: Explore the Role of Boundaries in Your Work and Life

"We have been using the word 'balance' when what we really seem to mean is 'boundaries'. Boundaries keep things in their place. Just as functional membranes (letting the right things through and keeping the wrong things out) facilitate the healthy interaction of the cells of our bodies, so do functional personal boundaries facilitate the healthy interaction of the various parts of our lives. Bad boundaries lead to either being overwhelmed or withdrawal. Good boundaries lead to wholeness and synergy."

-Michael Gilbert

This feeling of burnout is so pervasive in part because our work and life have become so entangled in this pandemic. When our workday begins and ends feet from where we sleep and



relax, our boundaries between work and life can easily dissolve. According to the Monster survey, despite work burnout, the majority (59%) are taking less time off than they normally would, and 42% of those still working from home are not planning to take any time off to decompress. It is critical that we explore strategies to help us move through the transitions this period poses as best we can. Creating and communicating boundaries can help us address burnout in our personal and professional lives.

Types of Boundaries

There are different kinds of boundaries...

- Time (carve out buckets of time for each task or priority - time blocking)
- Physical or behavioral (actual wall or removing ourselves from a place or situation)
- Mental (ways to remove ourselves in our mind)

Differentiate between Internal and External Boundaries

Think about how and when you put boundaries in place. How do you separate different times in your day? How do you protect your time for different purposes? No matter what the type of boundary (time, physical or mental), it's important to understand the difference between those you set for yourself and keep private and those you share and agree upon with others:

- Internal Boundaries: These are boundaries you have set for yourself around exercise times, sleep, work times. You have not shared these boundaries with others.
- External Boundaries: These boundaries you have shared with others in order to protect your time and space. You may have told colleagues and customers that you will not be answering emails between 7pm and 7am.

Think of a few of these rules or boundaries that you have shared with others and those you have not. Give examples of when these boundaries have been violated or relaxed.



Situation	Boundaries
My colleague emailed me at night even though I'd prefer she didn't	Others violating internal boundaries
My colleague emailed me at night even though I'd asked her not to	Others violating my external boundaries
I told myself I would not work on that project before bed, but I did anyway...	Ignoring my internal boundaries
I told my manager I would only work on the project during the day but...	Ignoring my external boundaries

By recognizing these boundary violations, you can begin to recognize how best to protect your time and focus going forward.

Consider your assumptions about boundaries.

It may feel uncomfortable to put boundaries in place. Many of us carry beliefs about when and how we can protect our time. Consider assumptions you may have about maintaining boundaries. You may find yourself thinking about one or more of the following.

- Establishing boundaries is selfish.
- What if I set up boundaries that aren't workable?
- People will reject me if I set up boundaries.
- I should be able to do it all perfectly.

Challenge each assumption and think about how you could reframe it. For example:

- Assumption: "Establishing boundaries is selfish."
- Challenge: It is about caring for others but not at the expense of self and caring for self but not at the expense of others.
- Reframe: Boundary setting will help me give my best for longer.



Current Thought	Challenge It	Reframe It

STEP 2: Evaluate Your Assets and Liabilities for Navigating Changing Times

Adapting to new conditions, good or bad, is fundamentally stressful. Much of the stress we are feeling right now comes from having to adapt very quickly to a totally new, if temporary, normal. Adult learning expert Nancy Schlossberg has studied transitions for more than four decades. She defines transitions as *any event or nonevent that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world*. Transitions require a change in one’s behavior as well as roles, responsibilities, routines, and relationships. Adapting to transition is a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating its impacts into their life. Schlossberg outlined a framework to help people understand and navigate difficult transition. She suggests taking time to identify your assets and liabilities in transition and developing a strategy to leverage your assets and mitigate your liabilities. When your assets outweigh your liabilities in each of the four areas below, you are better equipped to navigate the changes we are encountering during this time. Use the grid on page x to record your thoughts about each of these areas.



- **Situation.** Your unique set of circumstances
- **Self.** Your personality traits, values, and behaviors
- **Supports.** Where and from whom you receive assistance
- **Strategies.** Your go-to coping mechanisms

SITUATION:

Situation: Consider the unique circumstances that are impacting your roles and routines during this time.

ASSETS:

How are you set up for work at home? Do you have physical spaces that are designated for focused work time? If you get along well with your manager and colleagues, that is a huge asset. Is your workload staying the same generally? Are you motivated by the nature of the work?

List your assets here:

COMMON ASSETS:

- No other concurrent stressors
- Manageable workload
- Clear and comfortable workspace

LIABILITIES:

Are current events making you feel physically unsafe? Does your workspace feel cluttered or restrictive instead of comfortable? Do you have caregiving concerns that interrupt your workday? Has your workload grown considerably? Do you feel uncertain about your job stability?



List your liabilities here.

COMMON LIABILITIES:

- Concurrent Stressors
- Uncertainty re: Role/Manager

SELF:

Your unique demographic background, personality traits, values and behaviors.

ASSETS:

Consider your personality, your values, and your behavior. Are you adept at navigating change? Do you take time for yourself to unwind and celebrate the little wins? Do you have a fulfilling spiritual practice?

List your assets here:

COMMON ASSETS:

- Strong Sense of Self (self-esteem)
- Self-Awareness
- Good Self Care
- Resilience



LIABILITIES:

Do you tend to be self-critical and anxious? Do you struggle with change? Do you feel particularly vulnerable during this time given your demographic background?

List your liabilities here:

COMMON LIABILITIES:

- Self-Blame
- Easily Stressed or Anxious
- Don't Adjust Well to Change

SUPPORTS

Supports: The supports that are available to you in this critical time.

ASSETS:

Do you have strong connections to family and friends? Do you have close colleagues at work with whom you can connect on work and personal matters? Are you connected to external communities that provide reassurance?



List your assets here:

COMMON ASSETS:

- Good work friends
- Supportive Friends and family
- Personal Support Network
Personal/Religious
Community

LIABILITIES:

Are you physically and emotionally isolated from your support networks? Do you have people in your network who often share difficult updates or recommendations which you find disturbing? Are your typical supports too affected by things to offer their empathy and support right now?

List your liabilities here:

COMMON LIABILITIES:

- Isolation
- Misguided Support
- A support that isn't available right now



STRATEGIES

Strategies: The coping responses you may use to modify the situation, control the meaning of the problem, aid in managing the stress in the aftermath of transition.

ASSETS:

Are you flexible in your response and adapt easily to change? Are you proactive in creating solutions and plans? Do you have a good sense of humor? Are you a good negotiator?

List your assets here:

COMMON ASSETS:

- Good Negotiation Skills
- Proactive approach
- Goal Setting
- Rearranging Priorities
- Mindfulness
- Time Management
- Humor
- Assertiveness

LIABILITIES:

Do you struggle with adaptation to changing circumstances? Do you struggle to relax? Do you have a regular loop of negative self-talk that makes it hard for you to calm your mind?



List your liabilities here:

COMMON LIABILITIES

- Poor Relaxation Skills
- Negative Self Talk
- Stressful Outbursts

Please use the following grid to map your assets and liabilities in this transition. After doing so, consider strategies for leveraging assets and mitigating liabilities. Use the list of tips below to help you pull your plan together.

4-S Systems	Key Assets	How to leverage	Key Liabilities	How to mitigate
Situation				
Self				
Supports				
Strategies				



Situational Tips:

- Adapt your workspace: If your workspace is not defined, create a defined space for the work instead of using your entire home, if possible. If your current space is disrupted by noises from outside, find ways to create quiet to help you focus. Spend extra time making your nest and or workspace feel comforting and clutter free. Makeover a dedicated room to work.
- Paint the wall you face when working in your bedroom
- Create physical dividers for a shared space (screens, curtains, small standing bookcase, floor plant).
- Use a white noise machine or listen to music through headphones to mask sounds of housemates, family, pets, or outside noise.

Self-Tips:

- Attend to your activities of daily living. At times of great upheaval, we may forget to do the most basic tasks. Make sure that you are aware of and attending to your overall health. Take the time to get enough sleep, eat nutritious food, and remember to change out of your pajamas. It will make a big difference.
- Recognize the need for self-care. If you find yourself often forgoing self-care or moments of pause, enlist the help of others to hold you accountable.
- Pause the self-judgment: Make a conscious effort to observe your thoughts, and when you find yourself being your own worst critic, journal your feelings, talk to someone you trust, or do something else to press the reset button.
- Monitor your emotional health: If you find that you're still having difficulties adjusting or your mood has dropped significantly, monitoring your emotions and physical responses throughout the day can be a good way to determine when you might need professional help.
- In moments of tremendous emotional overwhelm, the TIPP technique can help. TIPP includes the following four steps:
 1. Temperature. Place an ice pack or cold compress over your eyes and let it rest there for at least 15-30 seconds.
 2. Intense exercise.
 3. Paced breathing. Take a break to focus on your breath. (Inhale for 4 seconds & exhale for 5 seconds.



4. Progressive muscle relaxation. Start with the top of your body - become aware of your muscles and the upper back and deliberately tighten them for five seconds. Then let go to relax them.

Support Tips:

- **Overcommunicate.** Overcommunication is essential to good collaboration, especially during a time of social distancing and increased isolation. Clarify your availability and expected response times with your manager. If you feel overwhelmed by your workload or you're struggling to make connections in a remote setting, talk to your manager and look for solutions together. Proactive communication can help prevent internal and external disappointment and frustration down the road.
- **Connect with others.** Avoid isolation by regularly scheduling ways to connect socially. Teleworking works best when you have some face-to-face contact. When you're by yourself completely, it can be very isolating. Personal connections outside of work are fundamental too. Take time to reach out to friends and family.

Strategy Tips:

- **Create a clear schedule.** Outline your schedule to clarify where and when you will be working. Define your actual working hours, whether it's working straight through the day or breaking it up to take care of family or personal matters.
- **Adopt routines.** Adopting new, temporary routines will help to reduce overall stress. COVID-19 has upended many regular routines and increased stress around making decisions. Even the smallest decisions can be taxing. By creating routines, we can reduce the number of decisions we make each day. Even if you're not heading into the office or commuting, you should still design your day in professional and personal blocks.
- **Take regular breaks.** Be sure to schedule regular breaks throughout your day and hold yourself accountable to those rest times by putting them in your calendar.
- **Create transition times.** Create cues for yourself to know when it's time to begin working and when it's time to stop working. For some people, [mimicking a commute](#) might be helpful. If you're used to driving to work, consider taking a brief walk around the block each morning to help you set your intentions for the workday and another walk in the evening to help you clear your mind. Implement an end of the day transition too. This could include a podcast you listen



to, reading time with your kids, a workout you complete daily at 6 p.m. or even the mere act of shutting down your computer.

- **Monitor Progress.** Check in with yourself as frequently as you'd like to hold yourself accountable for new systems and routines. Progress may come slowly at first, but with patience you can build habits that can help you find strength in this difficult time.

Our current reality poses a constellation of challenges and stressors that surpass anything many of us have experienced in our lifetimes. It is incumbent upon each of us to attend to our own needs, so that we can continue to support each other, staff, administrators, faculty, and students across Harvard.



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