

Burnout

When Pushing Through Stops Working

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Hello there and welcome.

Before you dive in, I thought it might help to introduce myself properly. I'm a psychologist. I've spent years studying how people think, feel, cope, connect, unravel a little, and then find their way again. I've worked in clinical settings, sat with people in crisis, and walked alongside individuals and families through some of the hardest seasons of their lives. And somewhere along the way, I noticed something. Psychologists hold a vast amount of knowledge about the human mind, how it works, why it spirals, how it heals, but so much of that information stays in therapy rooms, journal articles, or university lectures. It doesn't always reach the people who could use it most. So this series is my attempt to change that.

Before psychology, I was a police officer and detective. That role taught me things no textbook ever could. I saw what happens when people don't have the tools to make sense of what's happening inside them. When conversations are avoided. When emotions get misread or bottled up. I saw how struggles left unexamined don't stay contained, they ripple outward into families, workplaces, and communities.

What's happening inside us has a way of showing up everywhere else. In how we live. How we lead. How we love. How we speak to ourselves. How we respond when things don't go to plan. And how we show up for the people who matter most.

Here's the hopeful part. When people understand what's happening inside them, when they have language for their experiences and practical tools to work with them, things can start to shift. We can change the outcome.

My hope is that these eBooks bring some of that understanding out into the real world. To you. That they show you your thoughts and feelings are more normal than you think. That they give you practical tools you can actually use. And that they remind you that change is possible and you can create the life you want.

I'm really glad you're here.

Tenneille Quin





Let's start here

Emma's alarm went off at 6:07 on Monday morning. By 6:09, she was thinking about dinner. She was wondering whether there was enough chicken in the fridge, whether one of the kids had eaten the last yoghurt, whether she'd signed the school form on the kitchen bench, and whether today was library day. She hadn't put her feet on the floor yet. Beside her, James was still asleep.

Emma reached for her phone and checked the time again, which was pointless since the alarm had just told her what time it was. Then she saw three work emails, a message from the school WhatsApp group and a calendar reminder for an appointment she'd completely forgotten about.

Excellent. The day had begun.

Several hundred kilometres away, Tom was also awake. He worked FIFO and had been on site for four days. His alarm wasn't due to go off for another twenty minutes, but his brain had decided it was done sleeping. He checked his phone: two work messages, the weather, his bank account and an email he could absolutely have dealt with later. He answered it anyway.

Tom had been tired for months, although he wouldn't have called it that. If you asked how things were going, you'd usually get, "Good. Busy." Or, during particularly hectic weeks, "Yeah, mate. Flat out." Things had been flat out for quite some time.

Neither Emma nor Tom thought they were burning out. Why would they? They were functioning. Emma got everyone out the door, went to work, remembered the form and produced dinner that night after discovering the chicken was still within its use-by date. Tom went to work, did his job well, went to the gym, ate dinner, had a laugh with the guys and set his alarm for the next morning. Nothing had fallen apart.

We tend to imagine burnout as the point where someone can't get out of bed, bursts into tears at work or finally announces, "I can't do this anymore." It can get there. It can also build while you're still doing everything you've always done, with less energy, less patience and very little left for anything else.

Emma noticed the exhaustion first. Sleep didn't seem to fix it, and she increasingly wished nobody would ask her to do one more thing. Tom was becoming more detached. People at work irritated him. Meetings felt pointless. Small problems generated far more internal commentary than they deserved.

**Burnout can
begin while
you're still
getting
everything done.**



Still functioning. Still **burning out.**

Research on burnout describes three experiences that tend to build over time: exhaustion, growing cynicism or detachment, and a declining sense of effectiveness or meaning. They don't always arrive together or in the same order.

For now, Emma was just busy. Tom was just tired. Probably.

Humans are good at adapting. We cope, adjust, find another gear and keep moving. It gets us through difficult periods. It can also mean we get used to lives that are costing us too much. The new level of tired becomes normal. So does the shorter temper, checking work before you're properly awake, cancelling plans because you can't face them, or scrolling in bed when it's the only part of the day nobody wants anything from you. Eventually, you stop asking whether you feel good and start asking whether you're still getting everything done.

Emma was very good at getting everything done. Tom was doing well too. Good job. Good money. Fit. A house of his own. Neither felt particularly good.

You can have a good life and still be struggling inside it. You can love your children and feel exhausted by being needed. You can be grateful for your job and dread Monday. You can earn good money and resent what earning it requires from you. You can love your partner and want everyone in your house to stop speaking to you for approximately twenty minutes. Gratitude doesn't cancel depletion.

Emma couldn't remember the last book she'd finished. She used to read all the time, and there was still a novel beside her bed, optimistically holding its place beneath a thin layer of dust. Most nights she picked up her phone instead. Reading required concentration. Scrolling required a thumb. Tom still owned a guitar. He'd played a lot in his twenties, never particularly well, but that hadn't seemed important then. These days it sat against the wall in his spare room. Every few months he thought about picking it up again. He never did.

You probably wouldn't find either of these things on a burnout checklist. They matter anyway. Burnout can show up in what gradually disappears: the friend you keep meaning to call, the hobby that now feels like effort, the Saturday morning you once enjoyed but now use to catch up, or the parts of yourself that were easiest to sacrifice when life got full. This book is about how that happens, and what helps us find our way back.

Burnout doesn't necessarily happen because somebody couldn't handle their life. Sometimes it happens because they could. They handled it. And handled it. And handled it. Until handling everything became the problem. On that Monday morning, neither Emma nor Tom knew that yet. They were still getting on with things.

The Warning System

Why burnout can build before you realise anything is wrong

Tom had been home for three days before he noticed he wasn't particularly good at being home. For two weeks, he'd been looking forward to it. No early starts. No long days. No roster. Just his own bed, his own kitchen and several days where nobody needed anything from him.

By 7:04 on his first morning home, he was awake. He stayed in bed for a while, mostly because getting up felt like admitting defeat. By eight, he was at the gym. By ten, he'd been to Bunnings. By lunchtime, he was working on the deck.

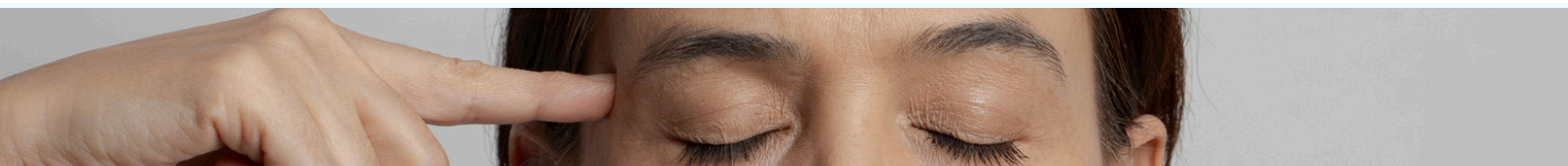
Tom had been redoing the outdoor area himself for the past few months. The old paving was coming up, he was building a deck, and there were plans for garden beds once everything else was finished. Paying someone seemed ridiculous when he could do most of it himself, and working on it during his weeks home saved him a decent amount of money. It would be great when it was finished. Somewhere to sit outside, have a few mates over and relax. So far, Tom had spent a fair portion of his time off building it.

He liked keeping busy. Lately, he didn't seem to know how to do anything else.

Emma's days had a different rhythm. There was no obvious point when her day stopped because the demands simply changed location. Work finished and home started: dinner, homework, washing, forms and someone calling "Mum?" from another room with the unmistakable tone of a person who had made no attempt to solve their own problem first. By the time the house was finally still, Emma was exhausted.

Yet she didn't go to sleep. She sat in bed scrolling, sometimes far longer than she intended. She wasn't particularly interested in what she was watching. It was simply the first part of the day that felt like hers, and she was spending it watching a woman she'd never met reorganise a pantry.

Burnout goes further than needing a few decent nights of sleep. Our bodies are built to respond to stress. When something demanding happens, we focus harder, find another gear and get through it. Then, ideally, the pressure eases and we recover. When it doesn't, recovery keeps getting pushed back. Researchers use the term *allostatic load* to describe the cumulative wear and tear of repeatedly asking our stress-response systems to keep adapting. And we do adapt. A life that once would have felt exhausting starts to feel normal.



That's why the warning signs can be easy to explain away

You're more irritable because work is busy. You're waking early because there's plenty on your mind. Things you used to enjoy feel like effort because you're tired. You'll deal with it when things settle down.

And there it is again. When things settle down.

Tom had been saying some version of that for years. After this swing. Once the outdoor area was finished. Once the mortgage was a little lower. Emma had her list too. After this week. After the school term. Once they got through Christmas.

Recovery had become something they were both planning for a future version of their lives. Their bodies were living in the current one.

Being tired or irritable doesn't automatically mean burnout. Sometimes a terrible week really is just a terrible week. The pattern over time matters: demands stay high, recovery stays low, and you start noticing changes in how you feel, function and connect with the parts of life that matter to you.

Emma had noticed that small requests irritated her far more than they used to. Tom had noticed that people irritated him far more than they should. Neither thought, burnout. Emma thought she needed to become more organised. Tom thought he needed to get himself back on track. Which was unfortunate.

Both were about to respond to depletion by asking even more of themselves.

To understand why, we need to look at something deeper than workload — at who Emma and Tom believed they were, and what happened when being that person started costing too much.

The Identity Trap

When being capable becomes something you have to prove

Emma had always been the reliable one. At work, if something needed doing properly, there was a reasonable chance it would eventually find its way to her. She remembered deadlines, followed things up and noticed what other people missed. At home, she was much the same. It was one of the things she liked about herself. Until recently.

One Wednesday morning, Emma realised she'd forgotten to book an appointment she'd been meaning to organise for weeks. It wasn't important. The appointment would simply happen a little later than planned, but she still stared at the reminder on her phone.

How did I forget that?

Then came the thought she'd been having more often lately.

I really need to get on top of things.

So that evening, she downloaded a new planning app. Being exhausted from managing too many things had somehow resulted in another thing to manage.

Tom's response was to push harder. His training had been ordinary lately. He was tired, his numbers were down and workouts that usually felt good had started feeling like hard work. He decided he needed to get his act together: train more consistently, eat better, stop letting things slide. The outdoor area followed the same logic. He could have paid someone to do parts of it, but every time he considered it, he'd look at the cost and think, I can do that myself. So he did.

Emma liked being dependable, organised and the person people could count on. Tom liked being capable. He could work a long swing, look after himself, come home and build his own deck. There was nothing wrong with either identity. The trouble came when qualities they valued became standards they felt they had to keep meeting.

For Emma: *I'm worthwhile when I'm useful.*

For Tom: *I'm doing well when I'm capable.*

Underneath both was another rule: *I'm okay as long as I'm holding it together.*

Psychologists sometimes call this conditional self-worth: when how we feel about ourselves depends too heavily on meeting particular standards or succeeding in certain parts of life. It helps explain why doing less can feel so uncomfortable when you're already depleted. Emma could hand something over, but then someone else might do it differently. She could say no, but someone might be disappointed. Tom could ease off training, pay someone to do part of the renovation or admit work was getting to him. None of those options sat particularly well with the person he believed himself to be.

So they did what had worked for years. Emma tried to become more organised. Tom tried to become more disciplined. For a while, it helped. Emma felt more in control. Tom felt more like himself. They were treating depletion as a performance problem.

When pushing harder stopped working, they didn't ask whether they were carrying too much. They asked:

Why can't I handle this anymore?

That's where burnout can become particularly painful. The reliable person starts forgetting things. The patient person snaps. The capable person finds ordinary things harder than they used to. Instead of questioning the load, we start questioning ourselves. What if, instead of wondering why we can't handle it anymore, we asked ourselves:

Why am I carrying all of this in the first place?

For Emma, that question was about to become surprisingly literal. There was an entire layer of work in her life that was difficult to see, impossible to completely finish, and taking up far more space in her head than anyone realised. Including Emma.

The Invisible Architecture

The work of remembering everything

Emma was standing in the kitchen when James asked what time the dentist appointment was.

"Thursday at three-thirty."

"And which dentist is it?"

"Same one as last time."

"Do I need to take anything?"

"No."

"Okay. Just send me the details."

Emma looked at him. James looked back. There was nothing unreasonable about the request. He was taking their daughter to the dentist and had rearranged his afternoon to do it.

So why did Emma suddenly want to throw something? She didn't, obviously. She sent him the details.

Later that evening, James emptied the dishwasher, packed lunches and put a load of washing on. He wasn't a man who came home, placed himself decoratively on the couch and waited for dinner to appear. He did plenty. From James's perspective, they shared things fairly well. He cooked, did school runs and took the kids to sport. If Emma needed something, she only had to ask.

What he hadn't noticed was contained in that last sentence. Emma had to know what needed asking. Nobody had deliberately given her that role. It had accumulated over years of noticing, remembering and becoming the person who always noticed and remembered. The dentist was a perfect example. Emma had realised their daughter was due for a check-up, booked around school and work, put it in the calendar and worked out that James could take her. James was doing the appointment. Emma had been carrying it for six weeks.

That invisible thinking is often called mental load or cognitive labour: the noticing, remembering, anticipating and planning that happens before the visible task gets done. It isn't limited to families. It can happen at work, while caring for parents, in friendships, or anywhere you become the person carrying the invisible list. And the list has no natural end. There's no satisfying moment where life announces: Congratulations, Emma. Everything is now done. *Please enjoy the remainder of your existence.*

"James was doing the appointment. Emma had been carrying it for six weeks."



A few nights later, Emma and James finally talked about it. They'd realised at nine o'clock that the kids needed something for school the following morning. Both were tired, and the conversation had already gone several places neither of them particularly wanted it to go when James said:

"You should've told me. I would've done it."

Emma knew he meant it. "I know you would've."

James frowned. "So why didn't you ask?"

Emma paused. There it was. "I don't need you to help me remember everything," she said. "I need some things I don't have to remember at all."

The issue wasn't simply **Who does more?** It was **Who owns this from beginning to end?** Taking a child to the dentist is a task. Knowing the appointment needs booking, arranging it, remembering it and making sure it happens is ownership. If one person still has to notice, plan, remind and check, handing over the final task doesn't remove much from their head.

Tom's head was crowded with a different kind of list. One night on site, he was lying in bed looking at his banking app. Nothing was wrong. The mortgage had been paid, there was money in savings and his next pay was due Friday. He checked it anyway. Then he opened the mortgage calculator. If he kept doing this roster for another two years, he'd be close. Three years and he'd be comfortable. An extra swing later in the year would take another chunk off.

Then there was the outdoor area. He still needed timber for one section, the paving needed finishing, and there were the garden beds he'd get to eventually. His phone buzzed. *Coming down for a beer?* Tom typed back. *Yeah, in a minute.* Then went back to the calculator.

There was no financial emergency unfolding at 9:42 on a Tuesday night. The renovation didn't need solving from a mine site several hundred kilometres away. Tom just rarely stopped thinking about what needed doing next. Keeping an eye on things had become never taking his eye off them.

Emma carried school appointments, family logistics and the constant background hum of don't forget. Tom carried the mortgage, work, the next roster and the jobs waiting for him when he got home. Their lives looked very different, and so did their loads.

Emma was surrounded by people who relied on her. Tom relied heavily on himself. Both were carrying things nobody else could see. And carrying something in your head still takes energy, even when you're sitting perfectly still.

The Moving Finish Line

Why “once I get through this” rarely last as long as we think

Emma had been thinking about Book Week for three weeks. Not continuously — that would have been ridiculous. Just in the small pockets of her brain reserved for things nobody else was currently thinking about.

There were two costumes to organise. Her youngest had chosen a character whose outfit looked simple until Emma discovered the dress needed to be a very particular shade of peach. Not pink. Not orange. Peach. The accessories needed to match, the hair had to look right, and both children had very clear visions of costumes they had absolutely no intention of creating themselves.

Emma ordered things, returned things, found things and made things. At one point she stood in a shop comparing two almost identical ribbons and wondered when this had become her life.

Eventually, Book Week arrived. An accessory fell off, somebody's hair was wrong and a shoe that had definitely existed the night before had disappeared. Emma fixed, pinned, brushed, found and negotiated. Somehow, they made it.

At the parade, both kids were beaming. The costumes looked fantastic. One of the other parents leaned over. *"Oh my God, Emma. You absolutely nailed those."* Emma smiled. She had.

For three weeks, Book Week had occupied a small but persistent corner of her mind. Now it was done. The photos were taken, the parade was finished and even the peach looked right. Walking back towards the car, Emma felt the satisfaction of finally getting something across the line. Then her phone buzzed.

The class WhatsApp group. A reminder that the older year group would be presenting their science experiments before school the following week. Five days.

Emma's brain got to work. They needed to choose an experiment, buy whatever it required and practise it. The presentation was also on the same morning as Run Club, which she'd already paid for, while choir rehearsals were also happening because the school had clearly looked at Wednesday morning and decided it wasn't working hard enough.

Emma closed her eyes. Book Week had been finished for approximately four minutes.

Tom's finish lines came with numbers attached. For months, he'd had a figure in his head for the mortgage. Once he got below it, he'd relax a bit. Maybe stop checking the balance so often. Maybe turn down an extra swing without immediately calculating what it would cost him.

Then one evening, he opened his banking app and saw it. He'd reached the number. It felt good. Years of work, long swings and sensible decisions had got him there. The mortgage was coming down, he had money in savings and the outdoor area was taking shape. He should have closed the app.

Instead, he looked at the balance and thought: If I keep going like this, I could get it down another twenty grand by Christmas. There was the next finish line.

Our brains adjust quickly to the things we achieve. What once felt exciting or relieving becomes familiar, and familiar becomes the new normal. Psychologists call this hedonic adaptation. It becomes a problem when the feeling you're chasing keeps moving. Rest, security, the permission to stop — these get attached to whatever isn't finished yet. And there's always something that isn't finished.

Once I get through this, I'll relax.

Once I earn that, I'll feel secure.

Once the kids are through this stage, I'll have more time.

Once I get on top of everything, I'll feel better.

Emma was chasing the feeling of finally being on top of things. Tom was chasing the point where he would feel secure enough to ease off. Neither goal was unreasonable. They just weren't very good at staying finished. There would always be another school event, another work target, another bill, another section of the outdoor area, another thing that could be improved. Ambition wasn't the issue. Neither was caring about doing things well. It becomes exhausting when rest, security or feeling okay are always waiting on something else being finished first.

Emma and Tom had been waiting for life to be under control before giving themselves permission to slow down. Life, as it turned out, had other plans. And even when they did finally stop, they discovered something else. Neither of them was particularly good at resting.

Rest That Isn't Rest

Why stopping and recovering aren't always the same thing

Emma had two hours to herself. James had taken the kids out, nobody needed picking up and there was nowhere she had to be. She stood in the kitchen for a moment, almost suspicious of the silence. She could read. She could sit outside with a coffee. She could do absolutely nothing.

Instead, she put a load of washing on. She was home anyway. Then she remembered something she needed to return to the shops. If she was going out, she might as well grab groceries, and while she was there she could pick up the birthday present she needed for Saturday. By the time Emma pulled back into the driveway, she had eleven minutes left. She carried the groceries inside and wondered where the two hours had gone.

Tom had considerably more than two hours. He had an entire week. For most of his swing, he'd been thinking about getting home — sleeping properly, catching up with mates, maybe doing very little for a couple of days. On his first morning home, he was at the gym before eight. Then Bunnings.

By late morning, he was back outside working on the deck. There was always one more section he could finish, something he needed from the hardware store or another job that made sense to do while he was at home. He checked his work messages a couple of times too. By the third day, Tom was restless. He had time off. Why didn't he feel better?

Stopping and recovering aren't always the same thing. When the nervous system has been running on demand for long enough, it doesn't simply switch off because the diary clears. The body stays ready. The mind keeps scanning for what's next. Sleep, breaks and holidays matter — but a few hours or days without work won't necessarily restore everything that's been depleted, especially when the habit of doing is still running underneath.

Emma wasn't at work, but she was still organising her time around what needed doing. Tom wasn't on site, but he was still working his way through a list. Emma's two free hours had immediately produced the question: *What needs doing?* She'd almost forgotten to ask: *What do I feel like doing?*

Tom had more freedom, but he wasn't doing much with it that didn't have an outcome. Train. Get organised. Finish another section. Make good use of the week. He'd meant to catch up with a couple of mates too, but by Thursday he'd postponed one beer and ignored another message. He'd see them next break. Neither Emma nor Tom had decided to stop doing things they enjoyed. Those things were simply easier to sacrifice than everything that felt necessary. The weekend became time to catch up. The walk became a chance to return calls. The holiday became the thing that would finally fix everything. Even leisure started acquiring a job description.

Recovery can be active, social, creative or completely unremarkable. What matters is whether some part of your life gives something back rather than simply filling the space before the next demand arrives. Emma had spent years getting very good at keeping everything going. Tom had spent years making good use of his time. Neither had given much thought to what they'd do if they weren't.

That was the part neither of them had figured out yet.

“Even leisure started acquiring a job description.”



There You Are

Coming back to yourself

Emma didn't have a breakthrough. She had an argument about school lunches.

It started on a Thursday night when James asked whether there was anything he needed to get from the shops for the kids the following week. Normally, Emma would have run through the list in her head, told him what they needed and probably reminded him which child had recently decided they no longer ate the yoghurt they'd specifically requested the week before.

Instead, she said, *"I don't know."*

James looked at her. *"You don't know?"*

"No. We agreed you're doing lunches now. You know what they eat."

There was a pause. It wasn't a particularly romantic moment in their marriage. But it was useful. The conversation they'd had about the dentist hadn't changed everything overnight. Emma still carried far too much in her head. They had, however, started moving some of it.

James was doing lunches now. All of them. Shopping included. At first, Emma still checked. Then she caught herself checking. Eventually, sometimes, she didn't.

Tom's version looked different. One afternoon at home, he walked outside to work on the deck. There was a section he'd planned to finish before going back to site, and he had everything he needed to do it. He stood looking at it for a moment. It could wait.

Tom went back inside. This was considerably harder than it sounds. For years, he'd treated almost every decision as though it belonged on a scoreboard — more money was good, more training was good, paying the mortgage down faster was good, getting things done on his week off was good. He'd become very good at finding the next thing worth doing. Leaving one there took practice.

Emma had her own version. She'd read when everything was done. See friends when things settled down. Take some time when nobody needed her. Everything was never done.

So one Sunday afternoon, Emma made a coffee and picked up the novel beside her bed. There was washing in the basket. She left it there. For twenty minutes, she read. She wasn't trying to improve her concentration or establish a healthy new habit.

She wanted to know what happened next

Tom's guitar took a little longer. One evening, he walked past it, stopped and picked it up. His fingers felt clumsy. He'd forgotten part of a song he used to know and had to start again twice. A few years earlier, he might have decided he should practise properly. This time, he played badly for a while. And enjoyed it.

There you are.

The book and guitar mattered for what they represented. Burnout had gradually reduced both lives to their functions: work, organise, earn, remember, provide, finish, repeat.

Recovery made room for something else. That room didn't always appear by itself — Emma had to stop carrying some things that James could own, and Tom had to leave some things unfinished. Both had to tolerate the discomfort of doing less when doing more had been part of how they understood themselves.

Emma still had busy weeks. Tom still checked his bank account. James still occasionally asked a question that made Emma stare at him for slightly longer than necessary. They were still themselves — Emma reliable, Tom driven. Those qualities had served them well. They were learning that being capable didn't require being endlessly available, and that a good life needed more in it than the things they could get through.

For a long time, the question had been: *How much more can I carry?*

Another question was beginning to matter more: *What do I want my life to have room for?*

Before You Go

If you've recognised yourself somewhere in Emma or Tom, there may be a temptation to finish this book and immediately start fixing things. Make a plan. Set some boundaries. Sort out the mental load. Schedule proper rest. Become extremely good at recovering from burnout.

Which would be a fairly fitting way to miss the point.

You don't need to overhaul your life by Monday. Maybe you start by noticing what keeps taking from you, what you keep postponing until things settle down, and what you've been carrying simply because you've always carried it.

The book. The guitar. The friend you keep meaning to call. The Saturday morning that used to be yours. The things you once did simply because you liked them.

Burnout can make life smaller without making it look smaller. From the outside, everything may still be there:

work, family, friends, responsibilities, plans.

You may still be turning up and getting things done. But getting through your life and being present inside it are not quite the same thing.

Recovery takes time, and sometimes it requires more than changes we can make ourselves. If exhaustion, irritability, detachment or feeling unlike yourself is persisting, affecting daily life or becoming harder to manage, it may be worth talking with your GP, psychologist or another appropriate health professional.

Emma will probably download another planning app at some point. Tom will almost certainly check the mortgage calculator again. James may still ask Emma where something is while standing directly in front of it. They're still themselves — Emma reliable, Tom driven, James entirely James.

The aim was never to become different people. It was to notice when being capable became carrying too much, and when pushing through stopped being worth the cost.

For a long time, the question was:

How much can I handle?

Perhaps a better one is:

How do I want to feel living the life I've worked so hard to build?

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☐ work
☐ life

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**Impacting 10
Million Lives
in 10 Years**