Extra 2

Someone You Love, Running on Empty

A short guide to hand to your partner or family



When Someone You Love Is Running on Empty

A short guide for partners and family

Someone close to you is worn out, and has been for a while. Maybe they're the one who handed you this guide. Maybe you found it on the kitchen counter. Either way, it was written for you: the person who lives with them, loves them, and isn't sure what to do.

It's short on purpose. You can read it in one sitting, or one section at a time. You don't need to read the book they're using. This guide tells you what you need to know about burnout, what helps to say, and how to help at each stage of the plan they're following, without taking it all on yourself.

> **Before you start.** This guide is for information only. It is not medical, mental health, or legal advice, and it does not diagnose, treat, or cure any condition. Exhaustion, low mood, and poor sleep can have many causes, so the person you love should talk to a doctor or a licensed mental health professional about what they're going through. If they, or you, are in crisis or struggling with mental health, you can call or text **988** in the U.S., any time. If someone is in immediate danger, call **911**.

What's inside

1. What burnout is, and what it isn't
2. Why rest alone hasn't been enough
3. Things that hurt to hear, and what to say instead
4. The four stages, and how to help in each one
5. The bad week: when they show you their page
6. Concrete things you can take on
7. What to say to the kids
8. When to encourage professional help
9. You get tired too
10. A page to fill in together

1 · What burnout is, and what it isn't

The World Health Organization describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon linked to chronic workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed. It comes with three things: exhaustion, a growing mental distance from the job, and a sense of getting less done. It is not classified as a medical condition. That doesn't make it small. It means it's tied to work and to how work has been going for a long time.

Burnout researchers point to six areas of work where a mismatch between a person and a job raises the risk of burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Covering two roles since someone left is workload. Plans changing with no say is control. Staying late and nobody noticing is reward. So if what the person you love is going through is burnout, it isn't simply a personal weakness. Much of it has to do with how their work is set up.

It's also common. In a 2024 survey by the American Psychological Association, 67% of U.S. workers reported at least one sign linked to burnout in the past month, such as low energy or lack of motivation. That's not the same as saying 67% are burned out. It does mean the person you love is far from the only one feeling this way.

What burnout isn't:

- **It isn't laziness.** Many people who burn out are the reliable ones, the ones everyone counts on.
- **It isn't weakness or a flaw in their character.** Burnout researchers tie it to a mismatch between a person and their job, not to a flaw in the person.
- **It isn't about you.** The short fuse, the quiet at dinner, the falling asleep on the couch at eight: these can be signs that their tank is running low. They are not a verdict on your relationship.

It isn't always only burnout, either. Burnout, depression, and anxiety are related but distinct. That's why it makes sense for the person you love to check with a doctor or therapist about what they're experiencing. You don't have to work out which is which. Section 8 of this guide covers when to nudge.

> **If you want to read more,** Chapter 1 of the book explains burnout in more depth. You could read it together.

2 · Why rest alone hasn't been enough

You may have watched this happen. A long weekend, a week at the lake, a few sick days. They came back a little better, and within days it was as if they'd never left.

That isn't their imagination. Research on vacations suggests the benefits for health and well-being are real but tend to fade soon after people return to work; one 2023 analysis of vacation studies found that the boost in well-being had largely faded after the first week back.

So when they say, "I rested, and it didn't help," believe them. Rest still matters. It just can't do the whole job on its own when the week they come back to is the same week that wore them down.

This is why the plan they're following doesn't ask them to stop working or take months off. It works inside the week they already have, ten minutes a day, and it changes a few things along the way, at home and sometimes at work. It also plans for bad weeks, because bad weeks are common along the way.

What this means for you: **"Just take a vacation" won't land, even if you mean it kindly.** A better question is, "What's one thing we could take off your plate this week?"

3 · Things that hurt to hear, and what to say instead

Most of the painful things people hear come from someone who cares and doesn't know what to say. If you've said one of these, you're in good company. You can say something different from here on.

What tends to hurt	What to say instead
"Everyone's tired."	"You've been tired for a long time. I believe you."

What tends to hurt	What to say instead
“You just need a vacation.”	“Rest hasn’t been enough, has it? What would help this week?”
“What did you do all day?”	“Long day? Sit down. I’ve got dinner.”
“Just push through.”	“You don’t have to push through this alone.”
“Have you tried a spa day?”	“Is there one thing I could take off your plate?”
“You’re always in a mood.”	“You seem worn out. Is it a bad week?”
“What do you have to be tired about?”	“I can see this is hard, even if I don’t fully get it.”
“Should you quit?”	“Whatever you decide about work, I’m with you. There’s no rush.”

A few things that help more than the perfect sentence:

- **Ask one question, then listen.** “How was today, really?” works better than five questions in a row.
- **Don’t fix it in the first minute.** If they want ideas, they’ll ask. Often they want to be heard first.
- **Keep it short when they’re running low.** A tired brain can’t take in a speech. “I’m here. What do you need tonight?” is plenty.
- **Notice what’s going right.** “You got out for a walk today. Good.” Small things count.

One more: if they show you a page with their plan for bad weeks, read it and take it seriously. It’s one of the most useful things they can hand you. Section 5 explains why.

4 · The four stages, and how to help in each one

The plan they’re following has four stages, in order. Each one has a small daily practice of ten minutes or less, and a simple signal for when to move on. You don’t need to know the details. You only need to know what each stage is for and how to make it easier.

> **Ask them which stage they’re in.** If they’re using the tracker that comes with the book, the stage is right at the top of the screen.

Stage 1: Stop the Slide

What it is. The first goal isn’t to feel better. It’s to stop getting worse. They set a “Minimum Day”: a sleep window they guard, one real meal, and one limit they keep, even on the worst day of a bad week. They also pick two or three tiny changes that fit the hours they already have.

How you can help.

- Protect their sleep window. If their lights-out is 10:30, don’t start the big conversation at 10:15.
- Make the one real meal easier. A sandwich they can sit down to counts.
- Respect their one limit, even when it’s inconvenient. If they don’t check work email after seven, don’t hand them their phone when it buzzes.

- Don’t grade the changes. They’re small on purpose.

Stage 2: Map the Drain

What it is. For one ordinary week, they keep a short log of their energy: a number in the morning, a number in the evening, what drained them, and what gave a little back. Then they look for the drains that keep showing up, and start easing one.

How you can help.

- Let them log without comments. The log isn’t a report card, and it isn’t yours to read unless they offer.
- Some drains may be at home: chores that land on them by default, the group text, the drive to a parent’s house. If one of them is something you could take, say so.
- If they ask, tell them what you’ve noticed. “Mondays seem rough. You’re tense until lunch.” Then let them decide what to do with it.

Stage 3: Climb by Holding

What it is. When a good week comes, the pull is to make up for lost time. This stage slows that down. They stay at a level until it holds, add one step, then hold again. A level is “holding” when an ordinary week goes by and they aren’t paying for it afterward. Once a week, they answer six short questions to check.

How you can help.

- Don’t push for more on the strength of one good week. “You seem better, so let’s host Thanksgiving” is the exact trap this stage avoids.
- If they say “I’m holding at this level for another week,” that isn’t falling behind. It’s the plan working.
- If they step back to an easier level, don’t treat it as failure. It tells them where their limit sits right now.

The book is honest that this rule is borrowed: it comes from guidance for a different fatigue condition and hasn’t been tested on burnout. It’s a way to decide, not a promise.

Stage 4: Plan the Dip

What it is. Bad weeks can still come: a sick kid, a deadline, a stretch of short nights. This stage plans for them ahead of time. They write down up to five early warning signs, and a one-page plan for bad weeks. They call it their Bad-Week Page.

How you can help.

- If they ask you, help them notice their signs. Some are easier to see from the outside. You might be the first to spot that they’ve gone quiet at dinner or skipped lunch two days in a row.
- Know where their page lives, and what’s on it. Section 5 is about this.

> **Section 7.3 of the book** explains how they choose where to pick up after a bad week. Sometimes it’s the stage they were in. Sometimes it’s an earlier one. Going back a stage isn’t starting over: they keep everything they’ve learned.

5 · The bad week: when they show you their page

At some point, the person you love may hand you a single page and say something like, “This is what I do when a week goes wrong. Here’s where you come in.” That page is their Bad-Week Page.

Planning ahead for hard stretches is a recognized practice. Mental health self-help guides from U.S. federal agencies encourage people to list their early warning signs and write down, in advance, what they’ll do when things start getting worse. One of those guides, from SAMHSA, says that when things are getting worse, a plan needs to be “very direct, with fewer choices and very clear instructions.” Their page is built that way. They wrote it on a good day, so that on a bad day they only have to follow it.

What’s usually on the page: “Drop these” (what they’ll drop for the week), the small version of their Minimum Day, “Tell someone” (who they’ll tell), one sentence to say at work, one thing that usually helps, “Get help” (where to turn), and where the page is kept.

What to do when they say, “It’s a bad week. I’m following my page”:

1. **Believe them, and don’t argue with the plan.** This isn’t the moment to discuss whether it’s really that bad.
2. **Take the thing they asked for.** Their message to you probably has a blank in it, like, “Could you take school pickup this week?” Say yes if you can. If you can’t, offer something close.
3. **Help them drop what’s in the “Drop these” row.** If takeout is on it, order the takeout without commentary.
4. **Protect the small things they’re keeping.** Their sleep window and their one real meal matter even more this week.
5. **Keep the house a little quieter, if you can.** Fewer questions, fewer plans, fewer decisions for them to make.
6. **Read the “Get help” row with them, once.** It lists the signs that mean you shouldn’t wait. If you see one, act on it (see section 8).

What not to do: Don’t take over the whole plan. Don’t ask every hour how they’re doing. Don’t treat a bad week as proof the plan failed. In a plan that expects dips, a bad week is something they already have a page for.

When the week has passed, it can help to ask, “Which part of your page helped? Anything you’d change?” Then let them update it.

6 · Concrete things you can take on

“Let me know if you need anything” is kind, and it rarely gets used. A tired person can’t think of what to ask for. One named task is far easier to say yes to.

Pick one or two from this list and offer them by name.

Around the house

- ☐ Dinner on two set nights a week

- [ ] The dishes, or one load of laundry start to finish
- [ ] The grocery order or the run to the store
- [ ] The bills, the forms, the calls to the insurance company

With the kids

- [ ] School pickup or drop-off on set days
- [ ] Bath and bedtime on set nights
- [ ] The morning routine on school days
- [ ] Driving to one practice or activity a week
- [ ] One weekend morning when they get to sleep in

With family and plans

- [ ] Being the one who says no to the next invitation
- [ ] One of the calls or visits to an aging parent
- [ ] Hosting, or deciding together not to host this year
- [ ] Keeping one evening a week with nothing on the calendar

When the house is busy

- [ ] Ten quiet minutes for them when they walk in the door
- [ ] Taking the kids out for an hour on a weekend
- [ ] Answering the group text on their behalf for a week

If you live far away, you can still take something: one weekly phone call to their parent, ordering a meal to their door on a bad week, or being the person they text when they need to vent for five minutes.

Say it this way: "I'm going to take Tuesday and Thursday pickups. Is that okay?" A clear offer, made once, is better than many offers made vaguely.

7 · What to say to the kids

Children notice when a parent is worn out. Without a reason, they may fill in their own: Mom is mad at me, Dad doesn't want to play. A few plain words can take that weight off them.

Fewer words, simple ones, and nothing to carry.

- **For a young child:** "Mom's been really tired lately. It's not because of anything you did. She's working on it, and we're taking care of things."
- **For an older child or a teenager:** "Work has worn Dad out, and he's making some changes. If he snaps, it isn't your fault. If you're worried, you can always come talk to me."

What kids don't need: details about work, money, or the worst nights. They don't need to keep it secret, and they don't need to look after anyone. Their jobs at home can stay ordinary ones, like setting the table or packing their own lunch.

If your partner snaps at the kids, you don't have to step in as the judge. Give it a minute. Later, a quiet word can help: "Want me to take bedtime tonight?" In the book, they've learned a short way to come back to a child and make it right after a snap: name what happened, say sorry simply, and move on. You can make room for that, and model it yourself.

One thing together. On a bad week, the floor with the kids can be very small: one story at bedtime, five minutes of a card game, one real question at dinner. If you're the one with more energy that week, you can carry more of the rest.

> **Kids should never be the person in the "Tell someone" row of the Bad-Week Page.** That row is for an adult, maybe you.

8 · When to encourage professional help

You can't diagnose the person you love, and you don't have to. What you can do is notice, and nudge.

It's worth encouraging a visit to a doctor or therapist when:

- the exhaustion has gone on for months and rest doesn't seem to touch it;
- their mood keeps sinking, or they seem to feel nothing much about things they used to enjoy;
- the bad weeks are coming closer together, or one isn't lifting;
- you're worried about their health, their drinking, or their sleep.

A good way to say it: "I'm not saying something's wrong with you. I'd just feel better if a doctor took a look, because being this tired for this long can have more than one cause." That's true: burnout, depression, and anxiety are related but distinct, and a professional can help sort out what's going on.

Two calls can make it easier. Many employers offer an employee assistance program, or EAP; their HR department or benefits materials will say. And if they have health insurance, the number on the card can tell them what mental health care the plan covers and how to find someone in the network. If they're too tired to make the call, offer to sit with them while they do it, or to find the numbers.

Some signs mean you shouldn't wait. Help them reach out right away, or reach out yourself, if they:

- talk about hurting themselves, or about not wanting to be alive;
- can't get through the basics of the day, like getting up, eating, or looking after themselves or the people who depend on them;
- are using alcohol or other substances to get through the day;
- are getting worse quickly.

In the U.S., you can call or text 988, any time, to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. You can call for them, or for yourself if you're worried and don't know what to do. **If someone is in immediate danger, call 911.**

You don't need to be sure it's "bad enough" to make that call. Being unsure is reason enough.

9 · You get tired too

Supporting someone who is running on empty takes something out of you. You may be picking up more at home. You may be worried in a way you can't quite say out loud. You may feel guilty for being frustrated, or lonely in a house where the other adult has nothing left at the end of the day.

All of that is normal. None of it makes you a bad partner.

A few things to keep in mind:

- **You're not their therapist.** Your job isn't to fix this or to watch over them. It's one task, one pair of eyes, and a place on one row of their page. That's a size you can keep up.
- **Keep one thing for yourself.** A walk, a friend, an hour on a Saturday. If you go under too, nobody is holding the floor.
- **Say what you can and can't take on.** "I can do pickups, but not pickups and dinners" is honest, and it helps them plan.
- **Talk to someone.** A friend, a family member, a counselor. If either of your employers has an EAP, ask whether it covers family members.
- **Watch your own signs.** Short nights, a short fuse, the Sunday dread starting early. They apply to you as well.

Once a week, ask yourself three questions. It takes a minute, and you can do it in the car.

1. What did I take on this week, and is it a size I can keep up?
2. Did I get one thing for myself?
3. Is there something I need to say out loud, to them or to someone else?

If the answers keep coming back heavy, that's information too. Say so, and adjust what you've offered. Taking on less is better than burning out beside them.

If you find yourself struggling, the same help is there for you. You can call or text **988** in the U.S., any time.

What the way back can look like. It often isn't a straight line. There may be good weeks and bad weeks, and a bad week after a good stretch can feel like going back to the start. Even when they pick up from an earlier stage, it isn't the same as starting over: they go back with their log, their signs, and a page written for exactly this. And now you have a plan too. Small signs count: a laugh at dinner, a walk taken, a weekend that wasn't spent recovering. Notice them, and say so.

10 · A page to fill in together

Sit down together on a good day, with ten minutes and a pen. Fill in what you can. Leave the rest for another day. Then keep this page where you'll both find it, next to their Bad-Week Page.

The early warning signs I might notice first (from their list):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What I'll do when I notice one:

☐ Ask, "Is it a bad week?" ☐ Take one task without being asked ☐ Other: _____

The message they'll send me on a bad week:

"It's a bad week. I'm following my page. Could you take _____ this week?"

What I can take on, every week:

_____

What I can take on during a bad week:

_____

What I can't take on right now (it's okay to say):

_____

Where their Bad-Week Page lives:

☐ Printed copy: _____ ☐ Photo on their phone ☐ A copy with me

If the week isn't lifting, we call: _____ at _____

Right away, if things get worse fast: call or text **988**, any time. In immediate danger: **911**.

One thing that helps me keep going:

_____

Last updated: _____

> **This guide and the book are not a substitute for care from a qualified professional.** They offer general information, make no promise of any result, and don't replace a doctor, a therapist, or legal advice.