

FRAYED TO FLOURISHING

Checklists for Identifying Burnout in
Yourself, Your Unit, and Your
Institution



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Introduction

NAMING REALITY

The World Health Organization (2019) defines **burnout** as “a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” In this definition, the word “syndrome” indicates that burnout is not a mental illness *per se* but instead a collection of symptoms that can negatively impact mental health. The definition also points out that burnout is the result of chronic *workplace* stress, making it a culture problem not a personal one that individuals bring into their workplaces.

The definition goes on to define the three dimensions of burnout needed for diagnosis:

1. Significant exhaustion – mental, emotional, physical
2. Depersonalization of people you work with or cynicism toward the job
3. Reduced professional efficacy – real or perceived.

Burnout isn't a personal failure — it's a signal of misalignment between you and your overly stressful work environment. Maslach and Leiter (2022) identify six areas where these misalignments often emerge, and I use these as the foundation for our exploration in *Frayed*: workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values. As you move through this workbook, notice which of these areas feel most resonant for you and your experience right now.



Burnout Early Warning Checklist

Burnout rarely appears all at once. This checklist helps leaders identify early warning signs in themselves so you can intervene before burnout becomes crisis.

INDIVIDUAL WARNING SIGNS

Emotional & Cognitive

- ☐ Persistent exhaustion not relieved by breaks
- ☐ Noticeable irritability, cynicism, or emotional flatness
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- ☐ Expressions of hopelessness, futility, or “what’s the point” thinking

Behavioral

- ☐ Withdrawal from colleagues or unit activities you once enjoyed
- ☐ Reduced participation in meetings or committees
- ☐ Avoidance of students or increased frustration with student needs
- ☐ Missed deadlines or decreased follow-through

Physical

- ☐ Frequent illness or chronic health complaints
- ☐ Tension held in the body causing discomfort or pain
- ☐ Visible fatigue or changes in appearance
- ☐ sleep disruption or chronic stress symptoms

Transition

FROM SELF TO SYSTEM



When women leaders feel stretched thin, depleted, or misaligned, it's usually because the environment around them is operating in ways that make sustainable work difficult.

By shifting your lens to the systemic, you can begin to see burnout as a signal of deeper misalignments in workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values. As you move forward, consider what your reflections reveal about the culture you work within.

This next section invites you to zoom out and look at the broader systems influencing your well-being: your department, your institution, and the cultural norms that define “how things are done.”

Burnout Early Warning Checklist

Use the checklist to notice where your unit's culture, expectations, or structures may be contributing to burnout.

UNIT-LEVEL WARNING SIGNS

Workload & Control

- ☐ Service, advising, or emotional labor is unevenly distributed
- ☐ Chronic understaffing or unfilled lines increase everyone's load
- ☐ New initiatives are added without removing existing responsibilities
- ☐ Workload policies are unclear, inconsistently applied, or outdated

Rewards & Community

- ☐ Faculty express feeling undervalued, unseen, or unappreciated
- ☐ Positive feedback or recognition is rare, inconsistent, or inequitable
- ☐ Psychological safety is low; people hesitate to speak honestly
- ☐ Invisible labor (mentoring, care work, DEI efforts) goes unrecognized

Fairness & Values

- ☐ Promotion, merit, or workload decisions feel inequitable or unclear
- ☐ Certain faculty shoulder disproportionate burdens
- ☐ Departmental actions conflict with stated values around equity or care
- ☐ Faculty feel misaligned with the department's direction or priorities

Burnout Early Warning Checklist

These categories reflect how institutional policies, norms, and practices shape the conditions in which faculty work. Use this checklist to notice broader patterns that may be influencing how people experience the institution.

INSTITUTIONAL WARNING SIGNS

Workload & Control

- ☐ A culture of urgency, constant pivoting, or perpetual crisis response
- ☐ Workload expectations that exceed available staffing or resources
- ☐ Norms that unintentionally reward overwork or constant availability
- ☐ Shifting priorities without corresponding support or adjustment of duties

Rewards & Community

- ☐ Limited recognition or celebration of faculty contributions
- ☐ Inconsistent or unclear communication from senior leadership
- ☐ Inadequate mental health, caregiving, or workload support resources
- ☐ Faculty reporting low morale, disconnection, or lack of belonging

Fairness & Values

- ☐ Women and faculty of color carrying disproportionate service loads
- ☐ Invisible labor not acknowledged, compensated, or considered important
- ☐ Institutional values (equity, care, student success) not reflected in practice
- ☐ Faculty feeling pressure to prioritize institutional needs over personal well-being



Checklist

ACTION STEPS

If these indicators feel familiar, it may signal that your department or institution is operating in ways that make burnout likely. This awareness is powerful. Step back, look at the bigger picture, and consider where meaningful cultural shifts could begin.

1

Which patterns point to deeper cultural or structural misalignments, and what story do they tell about how your unit is functioning?

2

Where do you have influence, formal or relational, to begin conversations, clarify expectations, or model healthier norms?

3

What small but strategic shifts could move your department or institution toward greater alignment with its stated values?

About REBECCA



I'm Rebecca Pope-Ruark, PhD, author of *Frayed: Leadership Burnout Among Women in Higher Ed* (Johns Hopkins 2026) and *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal* (Johns Hopkins 2022) and a national voice on faculty burnout, compassionate leadership, and culture change in higher education. I partner with institutions that are ready to move toward cultures of alignment, care, and sustainability. I offer

- **Keynotes & Campus Events** Research-informed, story-driven sessions that spark awareness and open space for honest conversation.
- **Leadership Workshops and Retreats** Interactive experiences that help department chairs, deans, and emerging leaders build skills for navigating burnout, culture, and change.
- **Strategic Consulting** A limited number of short-term partnerships focused on aligning values, expectations, and practices across units.

If this workbook surfaced patterns you want to explore more deeply, I encourage you read *Frayed* and reach out to see how we might partner to achieve your goals for faculty and leadership well-being and success.

SCHEDULE A CALL

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