



careergasm

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THE BURNOUT CLUB

Hey kids, let's talk about psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology!

Wait, don't leave!

I'll keep it brief. Psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology is a field of medicine that deals with the physiological manifestation of psychological stress. In other words, how stress can really mess up your body. It's hard to distill an entire field of medicine (not to mention a 13-syllable word) into a single sentence, but that's it in a nutshell.

Maybe you weren't familiar with the word *psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology* before today, but I'd be willing to bet that based only on your personal experience, you know a thing or two about the link between stress and health.

Am I right?

STRESS + YOUR BODY

Maybe you battle debilitating exhaustion when you think about making major life changes.

Maybe your eczema flares up when you think about applying to grad school.

Maybe you get strep throat like clockwork every time the busy season rolls around and you're overloaded with too much work. Again.

Maybe your digestive system goes haywire when there's a round of layoffs at your office.

Maybe, like me, your back goes out every time you push yourself to the limit.

Complete the following sentence:

I always get sick/injured when

Dude, I so hear you.

I have learned that my back is a barometer for my mental health. It would go out when I was stressed with a deadline or a big proposal, or when I took on too much or had a particularly crazy month. I remember giving my ex-husband a gift certificate for us to go rock climbing. His birthday was in October, but we couldn't actually go climbing until February because I had chronic back trouble.

But it wasn't just my back.

For a period of about four years, I saw doctors repeatedly (with no resolution) for a variety of health problems I just couldn't shake. I had unexplained hives with no apparent allergies. My back went out regularly, rendering me immobile for days at a time. I had heavy, debilitating exhaustion and had to nap throughout the day just to function. I woke up in the middle of the night with anxiety attacks. I fainted suddenly while on a subway car and spilled out the doors, face first, onto a concrete platform.

I was a mess.

I saw doctors, allergists, chiropractors, naturopaths, homeopaths, acupuncturists, and a therapist. I did physiotherapy and rounds of blood work. Once, in desperation, I even travelled hundreds of miles to see a man who I can only describe as a kind of witch doctor. No help. I experienced some temporary relief with some practitioners, but the same issues flared up again and again.

During the same four year period of chronic illness and injury, I made a radical and terrifying career change, went through a devastating divorce,

sold the only home I ever owned, tried to force myself to finish a PhD I hated, lost almost all of my money, and had a personal identity crisis (as tends to happen when there is upheaval in every area of your life).

I'm certain that this is not a coincidence, and that the link between my physical health and my mental health is a strong one.

LOOKING FOR LESSONS

Stress had basically obliterated my life. I realized there must be a lesson I hadn't learned yet. Unless I wanted to see my life go up in flames again, I had to figure out what it was. And so I combed through the ashes of my former life to look for the lessons. There were many.

I'll spare you all of the details, but two of the biggest lessons I learned were:

1. Stop pushing so goddamn hard.
2. Listen to your body.

Why am I sharing all of this personal stuff with you? Because you don't have to wait for your life to go up in flames before you learn the lessons. I did it the hard way. You don't have to.

Thank goodness, right?!

Let's examine the link between your mental and physical health. That's where the lessons are.

Obviously (but I'm going to go ahead and say it anyway), you should see a doctor for any health related concerns. Please do that. I don't want an angry letter from some dude who thinks I'm suggesting that some deep introspection will heal a bleeding head wound. *Please, sir, put this down and dial 911. Thank you. And may you have a speedy recovery.*

Okay. Now the rest of us can proceed.

Make a list of all of the crap that is going on with your physical health, especially any recurring issues. There are a couple of ways to do this. You can list symptoms you're *currently experiencing*, or you can list any symptoms you *have experienced* for the past little while, even if you're not experiencing them now. Your choice.

Crap that is going on with my physical health:

Good. Only you and your doctor can determine what might be causing these symptoms. But if you have an unresolved chronic issue, or recurring health issues, or multiple health issues like I did, it's possible that some of that is rooted in some neglected stress.

If you sense that this might be the case, go ahead and consider what some of those root stressor issues might be. They may include fear about the future, financial strain, crappy job, uncertainty, perfectionism, unhappy relationship, overwhelm, working too much, or any number of things. List your stressors.

My root stressors:

If it's difficult for you to make that link, let's try this from another angle.

Take a deep breath. Say the following sentence out loud and fill in the blank with the very first thing that comes to mind:

The thing my body knows that I don't want to acknowledge is

Good. That exercise can be difficult. Especially if you just realized something you've been hiding from yourself for a while.

Maybe your body knows that you need to quit your job, or start your own business, or move across the country, or leave your relationship, or have a child, or stop trying so hard to be liked, or do your MBA, or quit your MBA and go to film school instead.

Whatever personal insight you glean from your body, resist the urge to push it back down.

Your body is wise. It has been trying to tell you something. Listen.

LISTEN

There is nothing more painful than realizing an uncomfortable truth and then trying to repress it. That genie won't go back in the bottle.

Fortunately, you know what the problem is.

Unfortunately, that means you have to do something about it.

Figuring out how to do that will likely take some time. If you know exactly how to make it happen, do it. If not, that's okay. Remember, we're just connecting with your truth and desire right now. One step at a time. You're getting there.

My body says I need to do something about

One baby step I can take to address this issue is

The next section is going to help you move forward by using your knowledge of the mind-body connection to help guide your future decisions.