



# OVERCOMING BURNOUT

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N I C O L E   R O S E







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Nicole Rose



Overcoming Burnout, Nicole Rose

First printing: July 2019, Active Distribution

Cover illustration and logo illustrations by Shindy Design

Printed in Croatia

ISBN 978-1-909798-69-4

[www.activedistribution.org](http://www.activedistribution.org)

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## ***For Anna***

*I am sorry I was in so much pain and so messed up that I didn't  
love you the way you deserved. I wish I had a second chance. I hope  
you are in the sky with your favourite fallen revolutionaries.  
This book is dedicated to you.*

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## INTRODUCTION

I never thought I would write a book about burnout because I never thought I'd burnout. I thought I had enough passion and determination to last me forever. However, after years of complex trauma, prison and repression coupled with intense workaholism, my body said no. I was hospitalised in February 2016 with acute rib pain that became chronic. I started to blog about my recovery. I wanted to explore burnout, chronic illness and trauma through an anarchist lens.

From exploring how 'patriarchy makes me tired' to discussions on class, collective organising and how state violence shapes your body. I knew when I was recovering that I didn't want to abandon struggles for liberation and so I made an effort, with others, to reflect on and to change conditions in our collectives that contributed to people burning out and that led to better collective care and mutual aid.

Since writing the blogs, hundreds of people have contacted me and I've been blown away both by the support of strangers and also the sheer prevalence of burnout, physical and mental health issues, macho and oppressive attitudes to health and the loneliness in people's struggles with these experiences.

I also want to add that there is no medical definition of burnout, I believe it is a useful term for people wanting to describe their feelings, which is different for everyone. For me, it was a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.

This collection contains all the blog posts in sequence with little to no edits since they were published. I wanted to leave them raw and real and imperfect. My deepest gratitude to everyone who has helped make them happen.

# 1



## CONFRONTING DENIAL

This piece has felt hard to write, because I have prided myself on never ‘burning out’. I’ve pushed myself to exhaustion and back again, I’ve been hospitalised, collapsed into prison and wept in relief of the respite. But it’s never been prolonged. I’ve been organising since I was 10 years old and somehow managed to keep my energy as I’ve powered through campaign after campaign, experiencing quite intense personal traumas (losing people I love, prison, repression, break-ups, friends’ suicide attempts, you name it) yet somehow staying strong and focused. That’s an 18 year stretch.

This winter I felt myself unable to keep up the pace. It’s been like a slow rot inside of me. A fear in my subconscious creeping into my everyday thoughts. The dreaded ‘burnout’. The place where people disappear from our movements and never seem to return. I had never fully empathised, to be honest; I always thought if you care about something enough it will sustain you to keep going. (I know this is problematic, I’m just being radically honest). I have enough anger and rage inside me to fight this system for my next one hundred lives.

But somehow over the last couple of months, my desires and intentions just haven’t been matched by my physical ability to cope, to make decisions, to stay on task. I’ve blagged through by having the odd energetic day where I complete some key tasks, or produce some tangible results. The remaining days I’ve felt a quiet despair while I’ve struggled with basic things, like responding to emails, or listening to my voicemail.

It’s been visible to the people that care about me. Who really do beg me to rest, to slow down, to stay in bed a bit longer or cancel whatever it is that’s dominating my time. My mental health went to shit. I cried a ton. Nightmares

returned. I even hallucinated in front of some friends because I was so, completely, utterly exhausted.

I took a break at Xmas. Went to a warm country and slept for 13 hours a night for 10 days. Yet I still didn't feel like I could face the world when I returned. There was nothing but dread inside of me thinking about the endless list of next actions, and the projects and campaigns on my plate.

In January 2015 my best friend, Gilly, died. After several months of intense care relating to her broken pelvis, the pneumonia in her lungs literally took her breath away. I had no idea it was coming and the shock of it all shook me to my core. I coped the only way I knew how: to organise into oblivion. For sure it's a healthier habit perhaps than alcoholism or drug addiction. I kicked total ass, organising international camps, weeks of action, several tours and events.

**BUT I DENIED MYSELF REST, BECAUSE REST MEANT FEELING. REST MEANT GRIEF. REST MEANT ACCEPTING THAT GILLY IS NOT HERE ANYMORE, AND THAT ANOTHER PERSON I LOVED WHO HAS LOVED ME WITH ALL THEIR HEART IS GONE. IS DEAD.**

This follows the bereavement of other close friends and my Nan who've died in recent years, and the grief I feel in losing the campaign that was the centre of my life for a decade. Stopping and feeling means missing my best friend in prison. It means beginning to process the anger, and the rage, and the fear and the pain of the injustice she experiences and I bear witness to every single day in HMP.

So I tell myself I'm not burnt out. I'm just feeling very legitimate, understandable emotions that are inevitably going to affect my abilities to function. This gives me permission to not address my workload. To not scrutinise the impact of organising against the prison industrial complex, and the emotional weight that involves carrying. I remain addicted to the archetype of the infallible Nicole Rose, who people don't seem to understand, because she seems to have unending energy. My mum calls me 'Little Miss Whirlwind'. My energy has been probably what I've been most proud of. I share tips with others about the herbs I use, the food I eat, my strategies for managing my time and promises.

Yet that energy is zapped. Like a spiral of erosion. My last speaking tour in

Europe was a physical nightmare, as I spoke at ten events while struggling with a chest infection. I've strained the muscles in my ribcage (the intercostals) - it basically hurts to breathe in and out. I've lost five days of work and two prison visits. I'm lifeless, tearful and in pain. I have no idea how I'm going to get back 'up to speed' and get through the ever growing list of tasks that I'm responsible for.

I always remember Andy Langford from Gaia University saying that the main thing about burnout is not about being burnt out, or pushing yourself hard, it's about your capacity to recover. I arrogantly used this as a way to justify my intense workload, because I always thought I'd bounce back. For the first time in my life I'm doubting my capacity, or at least I'm not trusting my innate reserves. It's time for interventions. The following blogs are going to track my journey through this process.

**THERE IS ONE THING I AM CLEAR ABOUT, I AM NEVER EVER LEAVING THIS STRUGGLE FOR A FREER WORLD. BUT I KNOW THAT IF I'M GOING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS STRUGGLE, BE OF USE AND HAVE IMPACT, I HAVE TO NOT ONLY TAKE CARE OF MYSELF BUT LET OTHER PEOPLE LOVE AND SUPPORT ME.**

I have to let some things go and accept, for once, that I really can't do everything. This isn't the first time I've explored these issues; I've not burnt out in 18 years thanks to a lot of wisdom and self care. But for now, I'm admitting defeat and I'm taking the bravest step I can – disclosing what's happening and re-designing my life so I can nourish my health, regain my strength and return to kicking ass as soon as possible.

## 2

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### WHEN DID I GET SO MEAN?

Last week I posted my first blog post about burnout, admitting to the world how I'm feeling. I've been blown away by the response. Countless comrades and friends messaging and emailing me saying how much my words resonated, or how they were in tears. Just disclosing my feelings and smashing the mirror that was lying to me every morning (the mirror being myself, my own worst enemy) has made me feel lighter and one step closer to recovering.

When someone shows me kindness, like people have been this week, it really moves me. Quenches an emotional thirst as if I've been denied it for so long. It's made me reflect on how kind (or unkind) I am to others and to myself.

And it's left me asking myself, when did I get so mean? When did I start demanding such hard work, high standards and physical effort of myself and other people? When did I get so judgemental and critical of myself? Since when did I value people's worth based on their productivity or levels of commitment?

**A BIG PART OF MY WORK IN OVERCOMING BURNOUT, I HAVE RECOGNISED, IS ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES OF MY BEHAVIOUR. AS AN ANARCHIST THAT CONSTANTLY SEEKS TO DRAW BACK ATTENTION TO SYSTEMIC FACTORS AND ROOT CAUSES OF ISSUES.**

I know I have to try to find the source. This for me means looking at the underlying beliefs and worldviews that are driving me.

I tried listing some of my long held beliefs related to organising, or more generally work and life. I know a lot of you will cringe at how problematic these

are, but like I said, radical honesty is how I roll:

- **Struggle demands commitment and dedication.** And hard work. They wouldn't call it struggle if it was easy.

- **This isn't meant to be easy.** It's going to be hard/gruelling/challenging. If you think it's meant to be easy you may as well stop now.

- **There would be less X (animals abused, women assaulted, refugees dying etc) if people took struggle more seriously and actually got off their asses.** If everyone that lazed around watching Netflix organised, pushed themselves, fought back, got off Facebook, X number of animals would be liberated etc.

- **This isn't a game.** This is life and death. This is a war.

- **This isn't a lifestyle choice.** I'm sick of people interacting with this struggle like it's a hobby. Like they can choose which campaign to fight, or maybe fight is the wrong word, they can choose which campaign to be associated with and most likely do jack shit and use their involvement to score social points, get laid or whatever. And it's mostly middle class people that interact with struggle like this. You're never going to actually surrender any privilege for this struggle.

- **Careerists can get in the sea.** I think it's disgusting how you use this struggle for professional gain.

- **Why aren't people more angry?** Why don't people want to fight harder? I don't understand the desire to take drugs/party/laze about etc.

- **People don't know the meaning of hard work.** People prioritise their creature comforts, their looks, their lifestyle over eradicating domination. People don't want to surrender their privilege or risk anything to actually work towards liberation.

- **People use low self esteem/mental health issue X as an excuse to not push themselves/take risks/organise.** Literally just sort your shit out and get on with it. Everyone has bad mental health in capitalism. Jesus you should have experienced some of this shit I've gone through or my best friends in prison that have been to hell and back in their lives that you can't even comprehend. They don't moan or complain, they fight to survive and resist with all they have.

- **Prison is just part of struggle.** People going to prison is inevitable. People need to accept this and just get on with it.

- **Do people really think we're gonna bring down such an oppressive, violent system without hard work?** Like this shit is going to



magically change overnight without any effort, struggle, sacrifice on our part? Like we'll just challenge the state and capitalism while still having nice picnics and watching shit on the internet in the evening?

- **Being effective, achieving things, takes grit.** Takes hard work and perseverance. People that drop out/whine/moan are weak and pathetic.

- **Pushing yourself does mean missing out on certain things.** It may mean risking your emotional or physical health. But it's a necessary part of struggle.

- **What I experience is nothing** compared to the animals/ refugees/black folk getting shot by police etc.

So there you have it. Grim, ain't it?

Writing these and reading these, yes I do cringe, I do feel shame. I can totally recognise that they are all problematic in multiple ways. Yet I feel them. And they taint my interactions with people. My comrade that cancels on me for a fundraiser because of period pains (default thoughts – half the people on the planet get period pains. Just take a painkiller/herbs and suck it up. You blatantly didn't want to come and cook for 50 people anyhow, and just cancelled last minute and used your period pains as an excuse. Slower compassionate thoughts – aww mate I'm so sorry I totally understand. Rest up and get a hot water bottle!).

And then there are some of the above beliefs, that I still, well, agree with. I do hate it when people interact with radical politics like it's a game, or a hobby, or a lifestyle choice. And my meanness/judgement seems to be for the selected few. I don't feel judgemental when I organise with working class people, or when I'm supporting new people to get involved. I think it's the self-identifying anarchists which generate my most internal commentary. And unfortunately, this means very close friends and comrades, and I end up hating myself for my thoughts.

It is clear that right now, none of these beliefs are serving me or the struggles

**SO I FEEL LIKE JEKYLL AND HYDE. AND THEN I HATE MYSELF FOR HATING  
ON PEOPLE, FOR JUDGING AND CRITICISING PEOPLE.**

I organise in. They are not helping me organise more sustainably, or be a nicer person, or enjoy my interactions with my friends and comrades. They stink of

protestant work ethic, and instead of the church, I'm serving the non-existent gods of anarchism.

As part of addressing these beliefs I'm going to try and:

- Identify the values I hold which might be underlying the belief e.g. I value hard work, honest communication, persistence and so forth.
- Identify where I may have collected this belief. Maybe it was a role model in my life as a kid, or in a political book/zine.
- Identify the harm this belief or worldview causes in movements and struggles.
- Re-frame this belief positively, deconstruct and reconstruct so that it is nourishing and useful. And try and find some new beliefs/statements about organising that value people and their energy.

I've also been trying to meditate, only 15 minutes a day, but at least to try and cultivate some mindfulness so my emotions aren't so raw and reactionary, and I can find some distance from them before hurting people I love and care about.

And to anyone who has been on the receiving end of my judgement, who has felt they weren't doing enough and lessened their self-esteem because of comparing themselves to me and my unsustainable way of life, or to anyone who has left a group because I set a brutal pace... I'm sorry with all my heart for the harm I've caused. That includes you Nicole Rose, you have received years of this self-battering, internalised oppression, never-doing-enough, complete bullshit. It's time to change.