

How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation

I couldn't figure out why small, straightforward tasks on my to-do list felt so impossible. The answer is both more complex and far simpler than I expected.



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“I tried to register for the 2016 election, but it was beyond the deadline by the time I tried to do it,” a man named Tim, age 27, explained to New York magazine last fall. “I hate mailing stuff; it gives me anxiety.” Tim was outlining the reasons why he, like 11 other millennials interviewed by the magazine, probably wouldn’t vote in the 2018 midterm election. “The amount of work logically isn’t that much,” he continued. “Fill out a form, mail it, go to the specific place on a specific day. But those kind of tasks can be hard for me to do if I’m not enthusiastic about it.”

Tim goes on to admit that some friends had helped him register to vote, and he planned to probably make it happen for the midterms. But his explanation — even though, as he noted, his struggle in this case was caused in part by his ADHD — triggered the contemporary tendency to dunk on millennials’ inability to complete seemingly basic tasks. *Grow up*, the overall sentiment goes. *Life is not that hard*. “So this is the way the world ends,” HuffPost congressional reporter Matt Fuller tweeted. “Not with a bang but with a bunch of millennials who don’t know how to mail things.”

Explanations like Tim’s are at the core of the millennial reputation: We’re spoiled, entitled, lazy, and failures at what’s come to be known as “adulting,” a word invented by millennials as a catchall for the tasks of self-sufficient existence. Expressions of “adulting” do often come off as privileged astonishment at the realities of, well, *life*: that you have to pay bills *and* go to work; that you have to buy food and cook it if you want to eat it; that actions have consequences. Adulting is hard because life is hard — or, as a Bustle article admonishes its readers, “everything is hard if you want to look at it that way.”

Millennials love to complain about other millennials giving them a bad name. But as I fumed about this 27-year-old’s post office anxiety, I was deep in a cycle of a tendency, developed over the last five years, that I’ve come to call “errand paralysis.” I’d put something on my weekly to-do list, and it’d roll over, one week to the next, haunting me for months.

None of these tasks were that hard: getting knives sharpened, taking boots to the cobbler, registering my dog for a new license, sending someone a signed copy of my book, scheduling an appointment with the dermatologist, donating books to the library, vacuuming my car. A handful of emails — one from a dear friend, one from a former student asking how my life was going — festered in my personal inbox, which I use as a sort of alternative to-do list, to the point that I started calling it the “inbox of shame.”

It's not as if I were slacking in the rest of my life. I was publishing stories, writing two books, making meals, executing a move across the country, planning trips, paying my student loans, exercising on a regular basis. But when it came to the mundane, the medium priority, the stuff that wouldn't make my job easier or my work better, I avoided it.

My shame about these errands expands with each day. I remind myself that my mom was pretty much always doing errands. Did she like them? No. But she got them done. So why couldn't I get it together — especially when the tasks were all, at first glance, easily completed? I realized that the vast majority of these tasks shares a common denominator: Their primary beneficiary is me, but not in a way that would actually drastically improve my life. They are seemingly high-effort, low-reward tasks, and they paralyze me — not unlike the way registering to vote paralyzed millennial Tim.

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Tim and I are not alone in this paralysis. My partner was so stymied by the multistep, incredibly (and purposefully) confusing process of submitting insurance reimbursement forms for every single week of therapy that for months he just didn't send them — and ate over \$1,000. Another woman told me she had a package sitting unmailed in the corner of her room for over a year. A friend admitted he's absorbed hundreds of dollars in clothes that don't fit because he couldn't manage to return them. Errand paralysis, post office anxiety — they're different manifestations of the same affliction.

For the past two years, I've refused cautions — from editors, from family, from peers — that I might be edging into burnout. To my mind, burnout was something aid workers, or high-powered lawyers, or investigative journalists dealt with. It was something that could be treated with a week on the beach. I was still working, still getting *other* stuff done — of course I wasn't burned out.

But the more I tried to figure out my errand paralysis, the more the actual parameters of burnout began to reveal themselves. Burnout and the behaviors and weight that accompany it aren't, in fact, something we can cure by going on vacation. It's not limited to workers in acutely high-stress environments. And it's not a temporary affliction: It's

the millennial condition. It's our base temperature. It's our background music. It's the way things are. It's our lives.

That realization recast my recent struggles: Why can't I get this mundane stuff done? Because I'm burned out. Why am I burned out? Because I've internalized the idea that I should be working all the time. Why have I internalized that idea? Because everything and everyone in my life has reinforced it — explicitly and implicitly — since I was young. Life has always been hard, but many millennials are unequipped to deal with the particular ways in which it's become hard for us.

So what now? Should I meditate more, negotiate for more time off, delegate tasks within my relationship, perform acts of self-care, and institute timers on my social media? How, in other words, can I optimize myself to get those mundane tasks done and theoretically cure my burnout? As millennials have aged into our thirties, that's the question we keep asking — and keep failing to adequately answer. But maybe that's because it's the wrong question altogether.



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For the last decade, “millennials” has been used to describe or ascribe what's right and wrong with young people, but in 2019, millennials are well into adulthood: The youngest are 22; the oldest, like me, somewhere around 38. That has required a shift in the way people within and outside of our generation configure their criticism. We're not feckless teens anymore; we're grown-ass adults, and the challenges we face aren't fleeting, but systemic.

Many of the behaviors attributed to millennials are the behaviors of a specific subset of mostly white, largely middle-class people born between 1981 and 1996. But even if you're a millennial who didn't grow up privileged, you've been impacted by the societal and cultural shifts that have shaped the generation. Our parents — a mix of young boomers and old Gen-Xers — reared us during an age of relative economic and political stability. As with previous generations, there was an expectation that the next one would be better off — both in terms of health and finances — than the one that had come before. But as millennials enter into mid-adulthood, that prognosis has been proven false. Financially speaking, most of us lag far behind where our parents were when they were our age. We have far less saved, far less equity, far less stability, and far, *far* more student debt. The “greatest generation” had the Depression and the GI Bill; boomers had the golden age of capitalism; Gen-X had deregulation and trickle-down economics. And millennials? We've got venture capital, but we've also got the 2008 financial crisis, the decline of the middle class and the rise of the 1%, and the steady decay of unions and stable, full-time employment.

As American business became more efficient, *better* at turning a profit, the next generation needed to be positioned to compete. We couldn't just show up with a diploma and expect to get *and keep* a job that would allow us to retire at 55. In a marked shift from the generations before, millennials needed to optimize ourselves to be the very best workers possible.

And that process began very early. In *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*, Malcolm Harris lays out the myriad ways in which our generation has been trained, tailored, primed, and optimized for the workplace — first in school, then through secondary education — starting as very young children. “Risk management used to be a business practice,” Harris writes, “now it's our dominant child-rearing strategy.” Depending on your age, this idea applies to what our parents did or didn't allow us to do (play on “dangerous” playground structures, go out without cellphones, drive without an adult in the car) and how they allowed us to do the things we did do (learn, explore, eat, play).

Harris points to practices that we now see as standard as a means of “optimizing” children's play, an attitude often described as “intensive parenting.” Running around the neighborhood has become supervised playdates. Unstructured day care has become pre-preschool. Neighborhood Kick the Can or pickup games have transformed into highly

regulated organized league play that spans the year. Unchanneled energy (diagnosed as hyperactivity) became medicated and disciplined.

We didn't try to break the system, since that's not how we'd been raised. We tried to *win* it.

My childhood in the late '80s and early '90s was only partially defined by this kind of parental optimization and monitoring, largely because I lived in a rural town in North Idaho, where such structured activities were scarce. I spent my recess time playing on the (very dangerous!) teeter-totters and the merry-go-round. I wore a helmet to bike and skateboard, but my brother and I were the only kids we knew who did. I didn't do internships in high school or in college, because they weren't yet a standardized component of either experience. I took piano lessons for fun, not for my future. I didn't have an SAT prep class. I took the one AP class available to me, and applied to colleges (on paper, by hand!) based on brochures and short write-ups in a book of "Best Colleges."

But that was the beginning of the end of that attitude — toward parenting, toward children's leisure time, toward college selection. And not just among bourgeois, educated, stereotypical helicopter parents: In addition to "intensive parenting," millennial parents are also characterized by "vigilante" parenting behaviors, where, as sociologist Linda M. Blum describes, "a mother's unyielding watchfulness and advocacy for her child [takes] on the imperative of a lone moral quest."

Recent research has found that "vigilante" behaviors cut across race and class lines. Maybe an upper-class suburban family is invested in their child getting into an Ivy League school, while a mom in Philadelphia who didn't get a chance to go to college herself is invested in her daughter becoming the first in the family to make it to college. The goals are somewhat different, but the supervision, the attitude, the risk assessment, and the campaign to get that child to that goal are very similar.

It wasn't until after college that I began to see the results of those attitudes in action. Four years postgraduation, alumni would complain that the school had filled with nerds: No one even parties on a Tuesday! I laughed at the eternal refrain — *These younger kids, what dorks, we were way cooler* — but not until I returned to campus years later as a professor did I realize just how fundamentally different those students' orientation to

school was. There were still obnoxious frat boys and fancy sorority girls, but they were far more studious than my peers had been. They skipped fewer classes. They religiously attended office hours. They emailed at all hours. But they were also anxious grade grubbers, paralyzed at the thought of graduating, and regularly stymied by assignments that called for creativity. They'd been guided closely all their lives, and they wanted me to guide them as well. They were, in a word, *scared*.

Every graduating senior is scared, to some degree, of the future, but this was on a different level. When my class left our liberal arts experience, we scattered to temporary gigs: I worked at a dude ranch; another friend nannied for the summer; one got a job on a farm in New Zealand; others became raft guides and transitioned to ski instructors. We didn't think our first job was important; it was just a job and would eventually, meanderingly lead to The Job.

But these students were convinced that their first job out of college would not only determine their career trajectory, but also their intrinsic value for the rest of their lives. I told one student, whose dozens of internship and fellowship applications yielded no results, that she should move somewhere fun, get any job, and figure out what interests her and what kind of work she *doesn't* want to do — a suggestion that prompted wailing. “But what'll I tell my parents?” she said. “I want a cool job I'm passionate about!” Those expectations encapsulate the millennial rearing project, in which students internalize the need to find employment that reflects well on their parents (steady, decently paying, recognizable as a “good job”) that's also impressive to their peers (at a “cool” company) and fulfills what they've been *told* has been the end goal of all of this childhood optimization: doing work that you're passionate about. Whether that job is as a professional sports player, a Patagonia social media manager, a programmer at a startup, or a partner at a law firm seems to matter less than checking all of those boxes. Or at least that's the theory. So what happens when millennials start the actual search for that holy grail career — and start “adulting” — but it doesn't feel at all like the dream that had been promised?



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Like most old millennials, my own career path was marked by two financial catastrophes. In the early 2000s, when many of us were either first entering college or the workforce, the dot-com bubble burst. The resultant financial rubble wasn't as extensive as the 2008 crisis, but it tightened the job market and torpedoed the stock market, which indirectly affected millennials who'd been counting on parents' investments to get them through college. When I graduated with a liberal arts degree in 2003 and moved to Seattle, the city was still affordable, but skilled jobs were in short supply. I worked as a nanny, a housemate worked as an assistant, a friend resorted to selling what would later be known as subprime mortgages.

Those two years as a nanny were hard — I was stultifyingly bored and commuted an hour in each direction — but it was the last time I remember *not* feeling burned out. I had a cellphone, but couldn't even send texts; I checked my email once a day on a desktop computer in my friend's room. Because I'd been placed through a nanny agency, my contract included health care, sick days, and paid time off. I made \$32,000 a year and paid \$500 a month in rent. I had no student debt from undergrad, and my car was paid off. I didn't save much, but had money for movies and dinners out. I was intellectually unstimulated, but I was good at my job — caring for two infants — and had clear demarcations between when I was on and off the clock.

Then those two years ended and the bulk of my friend group began the exodus to grad school. We enrolled in PhD programs, law school, med school, architecture school, education master's programs, MBAs. It wasn't because we were hungry for more knowledge. It was because we were hungry for secure, middle-class jobs — and had been told, correctly or not, that those jobs were available only through grad school. Once we were in grad school, and the microgeneration behind us was emerging from college into the workplace, the 2008 financial crisis hit.

I never thought the system was equitable. I knew it was winnable for only a small few. I just believed I could continue to optimize myself to become one of them.

The crisis affected everyone in some way, but the way it affected millennials is foundational: It's always defined our experience of the job market. More experienced workers and the newly laid-off filled applicant pools for lower- and entry-level jobs once largely reserved for recent graduates. We couldn't find jobs, or could only find part-time jobs, jobs without benefits, or jobs that were actually multiple side hustles cobbled together into one job. As a result, we moved back home with our parents, we got roommates, we went back to school, we tried to make it work. We were problem solvers, after all — and taught that if we just worked harder, it would work out.

On the surface, it *did* work out. The economy recovered. Most of us moved out of our parents' houses. We found jobs. But what we couldn't find was financial security. Because education — grad school, undergrad, vocational school, online — was situated as the best and only way to survive, many of us emerged from those programs with loan payments that our postgraduation prospects failed to offset. The situation was even more dire if you entered a for-profit school, where the average total debt for a four-year degree is \$39,950 and the job prospects postgraduation are even bleaker.

As I continued through grad school, I accumulated more and more debt — debt that I rationalized, like so many of my generation, as the only means to achieve the end goal of 1) a “good” job that would 2) be or sound cool and 3) allow me to follow my “passion.” In this case, full-time, tenure-track employment as a media studies professor. In the past, pursuing a PhD was a generally debt-free endeavor: Academics worked their way toward their degree while working as teaching assistants, which paid them cost of living and remitted the cost of tuition.

That model began to shift in 1980s, particularly at public universities forced to compensate for state budget cuts. Teaching assistant labor was far cheaper than paying for a tenured professor, so the universities didn't just keep PhD programs, but expanded them, even with dwindling funds to adequately pay those students. Still, thousands of

PhD students clung to the idea of a tenure-track professorship. And the tighter the academic market became, the harder we worked. We didn't try to break the system, since that's not how we'd been raised. We tried to *win* it.

I never thought the system was equitable. I knew it was winnable for only a small few. I just believed I could continue to optimize myself to become one of them. And it's taken me years to understand the true ramifications of that mindset. I'd worked hard in college, but as an old millennial, the expectations for labor were tempered. We liked to say we worked hard, played hard — and there were clear boundaries around each of those activities. Grad school, then, is where I learned to work like a millennial, which is to say, all the time. My new watchword was “Everything that's good is bad, everything that's bad is good”: Things that should've felt good (leisure, not working) felt bad because I felt guilty for not working; things that should've felt “bad” (working all the time) felt good because I was doing what I thought I should and needed to be doing in order to succeed.

We put up with companies treating us poorly because we don't see another option. We don't quit. We internalize that we're not striving hard enough. And we get a second gig.

In my master's program, graduate students' labor was arguably exploited, but we were unionized and compensated in a way that made emerging from the program without debt possible. Our health insurance was solid; class sizes were manageable. But that all changed in my PhD program in Texas — a “right to work” state, where unions, if they existed at all, have no bargaining power. I was paid enough to cover a month's rent in Austin with \$200 left for everything else. I taught classes as large as 60 students on my own. The only people in my cohort who didn't have to take out loans had partners in “real” jobs or family money; most of us were saddled with debt for the privilege of preparing ourselves for no job prospects. Either we kept working or we failed.

So we took those loans, with the assurance from the federal government that if, after graduation, we went to a public service field (such as teaching at a college or university) and paid a percentage of our loans on time for 10 years, the rest would be forgiven. Last year — the first in which eligible graduates could apply for forgiveness — just 1% of applications were accepted.

When we talk about millennial student debt, we're not just talking about the payments that keep millennials from participating in American "institutions" like home ownership or purchasing diamonds. It's also about the psychological toll of realizing that something you'd been told, and came to believe yourself, would be "worth it" — worth the loans, worth the labor, worth all that self-optimization — isn't.



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One thing that makes that realization sting even more is watching others live their seemingly cool, passionate, worthwhile lives online. We all know what we see on Facebook or Instagram isn't "real," but that doesn't mean we don't judge ourselves against it. I find that millennials are far less jealous of objects or belongings on social media than the holistic experiences represented there, the sort of thing that prompts people to comment, *I want your life*. That enviable mix of leisure and travel, the accumulation of pets and children, the landscapes inhabited and the food consumed seems not just desirable, but balanced, satisfied, and unafflicted by burnout.

And though work itself is rarely pictured, it's always there. Periodically, it's photographed as a space that's fun or zany, and always rewarding or gratifying. But most of the time, it's the thing you're getting away from: You worked hard enough to enjoy *life*.

It's not a temporary affliction: It's the millennial condition. It's our base temperature. It's our background music. It's the way things are. It's our lives.

The social media feed — and Instagram in particular — is thus evidence of the fruits of hard, rewarding labor and the labor itself. The photos and videos that induce the most jealousy are those that suggest a perfect equilibrium (work hard, play hard!) has been reached. But of course, for most of us, it hasn't. Posting on social media, after all, is a means of narrativizing our own lives: What we're telling ourselves our lives are like. And when we don't *feel* the satisfaction that we've been told we should receive from a good job that's “fulfilling,” balanced with a personal life that's equally so, the best way to convince yourself you're feeling it is to illustrate it for others.

For many millennials, a social media presence — on LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter — has also become an integral part of obtaining and maintaining a job. The “purest” example is the social media influencer, whose entire income source is performing and mediating the self online. But social media is also the means through which many “knowledge workers” — that is, workers who handle, process, or make meaning of information — market and brand themselves. Journalists use Twitter to learn about other stories, but they also use it to develop a personal brand and following that can be leveraged; people use LinkedIn not just for résumés and networking, but to post articles that attest to their personality (their brand!) as a manager or entrepreneur. Millennials aren't the only ones who do this, but we're the ones who perfected and thus set the standards for those who do.

“Branding” is a fitting word for this work, as it underlines what the millennial self becomes: a product. And as in childhood, the work of optimizing that brand blurs whatever boundaries remained between work and play. There is no “off the clock” when at all hours you could be documenting your on-brand experiences or tweeting your

on-brand observations. The rise of smartphones makes these behaviors frictionless and thus more pervasive, more standardized. In the early days of Facebook, you had to take pictures with your digital camera, upload them to your computer, and post them in albums. Now, your phone is a sophisticated camera, always ready to document every component of your life — in easily manipulated photos, in short video bursts, in constant updates to Instagram Stories — and to facilitate the labor of performing the self for public consumption.

“To adult” is to complete your to-do list — but everything goes on the list, and the list never ends.

But the phone is also, and just as essentially, a tether to the “real” workplace. Email and Slack make it so that employees are always accessible, always able to labor, even after they’ve left the physical workplace and the traditional 9-to-5 boundaries of paid labor. Attempts to discourage working “off the clock” misfire, as millennials read them not as permission to stop working, but a means to further distinguish themselves by being available anyway.

“We are encouraged to strategize and scheme to find places, times, and roles where we can be effectively put to work,” Harris, the *Kids These Days* author, writes. “Efficiency is our existential purpose, and we are a generation of finely honed tools, crafted from embryos to be lean, mean production machines.”

But as sociologist Arne L. Kalleberg points out, that efficiency was supposed to give us *more* job security, *more* pay, perhaps even *more* leisure. In short, better jobs.

Yet the more work we do, the more efficient we’ve proven ourselves to be, the *worse* our jobs become: lower pay, worse benefits, less job security. Our efficiency hasn’t bucked wage stagnation; our steadfastness hasn’t made us more valuable. If anything, our commitment to work, no matter how exploitative, has simply encouraged and facilitated our exploitation. We put up with companies treating us poorly because we don’t see another option. We don’t quit. We internalize that we’re not striving hard enough. And we get a second gig.



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All of this optimization — as children, in college, online — culminates in the dominant millennial condition, regardless of class or race or location: burnout. “Burnout” was first recognized as a psychological diagnosis in 1974, applied by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger to cases of “physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.” Burnout is of a substantively different category than “exhaustion,” although it’s related. Exhaustion means going to the point where you can’t go any further; burnout means reaching that point and pushing yourself to keep going, whether for days or weeks or years.

What’s worse, the feeling of accomplishment that follows an exhausting task — passing the final! Finishing the massive work project! — never comes. “The exhaustion experienced in burnout combines an intense yearning for this state of completion with the

tormenting sense that it cannot be attained, that there is always some demand or anxiety or distraction which can't be silenced," Josh Cohen, a psychoanalyst specializing in burnout, writes. "You feel burnout when you've exhausted all your internal resources, yet cannot free yourself of the nervous compulsion to go on regardless."

In his writing about burnout, Cohen is careful to note that it has antecedents; "melancholic world-weariness," as he puts it, is noted in the book of Ecclesiastes, diagnosed by Hippocrates, and endemic to the Renaissance, a symptom of bewilderment with the feeling of "relentless change." In the late 1800s, "neurasthenia," or nervous exhaustion, afflicted patients run down by the "pace and strain of modern industrial life." Burnout differs in its intensity and its prevalence: It isn't an affliction experienced by relatively few that evidences the darker qualities of change but, increasingly, and particularly among millennials, *the* contemporary condition.

People patching together a retail job with unpredictable scheduling while driving Uber and arranging child care have burnout. Startup workers with fancy catered lunches, free laundry service, and 70-minute commutes have burnout. Academics teaching four adjunct classes and surviving on food stamps while trying to publish research in one last attempt at snagging a tenure-track job have burnout. Freelance graphic artists operating on their own schedule without health care or paid time off have burnout.

One of the ways to think through the mechanics of millennial burnout is by looking closely at the various objects and industries our generation has supposedly "killed." We've "killed" diamonds because we're getting married later (or not at all), and if or when we do, it's rare for one partner to have the financial stability to set aside the traditional two months' salary for a diamond engagement ring. We're killing antiques, opting instead for "fast furniture" — not because we hate our grandparents' old items, but because we're chasing stable employment across the country, and lugging old furniture and fragile china costs money that we don't have. We've exchanged sit-down casual dining (Applebee's, TGI Fridays) for fast casual (Chipotle et al.) because if we're gonna pay for something, it should either be an experience worth waiting in line for (Cronuts! World-famous BBQ! Momofuku!) or efficient as hell.

Even the trends millennials have popularized — like athleisure — speak to our self-optimization. Yoga pants might look sloppy to your mom, but they're efficient: You can transition seamlessly from an exercise class to a Skype meeting to child pickup. We use Fresh Direct and Amazon because the time they save allows us to do *more work*.

This is why the fundamental criticism of millennials — that we're lazy and entitled — is so frustrating: We hustle so hard that we've figured out how to avoid wasting time *eating meals* and are called entitled for asking for fair compensation and benefits like working remotely (so we can live in affordable cities), adequate health care, or 401(k)s (so we can theoretically stop working at some point before the day we die). We're called whiny for talking frankly about just how much we do work, or how exhausted we are by it. But because overworking for less money isn't always *visible* — because job hunting now means trawling LinkedIn, because “overtime” now means replying to emails in bed — the extent of our labor is often ignored, or degraded.

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The thing about American labor, after all, is that we're trained to erase it. Anxiety is medicated; burnout is treated with therapy that's slowly become normalized and yet still softly stigmatized. (Time in therapy, after all, is time you could be working.) No one would've told my grandmother that churning butter and doing the wash by hand wasn't *work*. But planning a week of healthy meals for a family of four, figuring out the grocery list, finding time to get to the grocery store, and then preparing and cleaning up after those meals, while holding down a full-time job? That's just motherhood, not labor. Millennial burnout often works differently among women, and particularly straight women with families. Part of this has to do with what's known as “the second shift” — the idea that women who've moved into the workplace do the labor of a job and then come home and perform the labor of a homemaker. (A recent study found that mothers in the workplace spend just as much time taking care of their children as stay-at-home mothers did in 1975.) One might think that when women work, the domestic labor decreases, or splits between both partners. But sociologist Judy Wajcman found that in heterosexual couples, that simply wasn't the case: Less domestic labor takes place overall, but that labor still largely falls on the woman.

The labor that causes burnout isn't just putting away the dishes or folding the laundry — tasks that can be readily distributed among the rest of the family. It's more to do with what French cartoonist Emma calls “the mental load,” or the scenario in which one person in a family — often a woman — takes on a role akin to “household management project leader.” The manager doesn't just complete chores; they keep the entire household's schedule in their minds. They remember to get toilet paper because it'll run

out in four days. They're ultimately responsible for the health of the family, the upkeep of the home and their own bodies, maintaining a sex life, cultivating an emotional bond with their children, overseeing aging parents' care, making sure bills are paid and neighbors are greeted and someone's home for a service call and holiday cards get in the mail and vacations are planned six months in advance and airline miles aren't expiring and the dog's getting exercised.

Women have told me that reading Emma's cartoon, which has gone viral many times over, brought them to tears: They'd never seen the particular work that they do described, let alone acknowledged. And for millennials, that domestic work is now supposed to check a never-ending number of aspirational boxes: Outings should be "experiences," food should be healthy and homemade and fun, bodies should be sculpted, wrinkles should be minimized, clothes should be cute and fashionable, sleep should be regulated, relationships should be healthy, the news should be read and processed, kids should be given personal attention and thriving. Millennial parenting is, as a recent New York Times article put it, *relentless*.

The media that surrounds us — both social and mainstream, from Marie Kondo's new Netflix show to the lifestyle influencer economy — tells us that our personal spaces should be optimized just as much as one's self and career. The end result isn't just fatigue, but enveloping burnout that follows us to home and back. The most common prescription is "self-care." Give yourself a face mask! Go to yoga! Use your meditation app! But much of self-care isn't care at all: It's an \$11 billion industry whose end goal isn't to alleviate the burnout cycle, but to provide further means of self-optimization. At least in its contemporary, commodified iteration, self-care isn't a solution; it's exhausting.



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“The modern Millennial, for the most part, views adulthood as a series of actions, as opposed to a state of being,” an article in *Elite Daily* [explains](#). “Adulting therefore becomes a verb.” “To adult” is to complete your to-do list — but everything goes on the list, and the list never ends. “I’m really struggling to find the Christmas magic this year,” one woman in a Facebook group focused on self-care recently wrote. “I have two little kids (2 and 6 months) and, while we had fun reading Christmas books, singing songs, walking around the neighborhood to look at lights, I mostly feel like it’s just one to-do list superimposed over my already overwhelming to-do list. I feel so burned out. Commiseration or advice?”

That’s one of the most ineffable and frustrating expressions of burnout: It takes things that should be enjoyable and flattens them into a list of tasks, intermingled with other

obligations that should either be easily or dutifully completed. The end result is that everything, from wedding celebrations to registering to vote, becomes tinged with resentment and anxiety and avoidance. Maybe my inability to get the knives sharpened is less about being lazy and more about being too good, for too long, at being a millennial.

That's one of the most ineffable and frustrating expressions of burnout: It takes things that should be enjoyable and flattens them into a list of tasks.

There are a few ways to look at this original problem of errand paralysis. Many of the tasks millennials find paralyzing are ones that are impossible to optimize for efficiency, either because they remain stubbornly analog (the post office) or because companies have optimized themselves, and their labor, so as to make the experience as arduous as possible for the user (anything to do with insurance, or bills, or filing a complaint). Sometimes, the inefficiencies are part of the point: The harder it is to submit a request for a reimbursement, the less likely you are to do it. The same goes for returns.

Other tasks become difficult because of *too* many options, and what's come to be known as "decision fatigue." I've moved around so much because of my career path, and always loathed the process of finding family practitioners and dentists and dermatologists. Finding a doctor — and not just any doctor, but one who will take your insurance, who is accepting new patients — might seem like an easy task in the age of Zocdoc, but the array of options can be paralyzing without the recommendations of friends and family, which are in short supply when you move to a brand-new town.

Other tasks are, well, boring. I've done them too many times. The payoff from completing them is too small. Boredom with the monotony of labor is usually associated with physical and/or assembly line jobs, but it's widespread among "knowledge workers." As Caroline Beaton, who has written extensively about millennials and labor, points out, the rise of the "knowledge sector" has simply "changed the medium of monotony from heavy machinery to digital technology. ... We habituate to the modern workforce's high intensity but predictable tasks. Because the stimuli don't change, we cease to be stimulated. The consequence is two-fold. First, like a kind of Chinese water torture, each identical thing becomes increasingly painful. In defense, we become decreasingly engaged."

My refusal to respond to a kind Facebook DM is thus symptomatic of the sheer number of calls for my attention online: calls to read an article, calls to promote my own work, calls to engage wittily or defend myself from trolls or like a relative's picture of their baby.

To be clear, none of these explanations are, to my mind, exonerating. They don't seem like great or rational reasons to avoid doing things I know, in the abstract, I want or need to do. But dumb, illogical decisions are a symptom of burnout. We engage in self-destructive behaviors or take refuge in avoidance as a way to get off the treadmill of our to-do list. Which helps explain one of the complaints about millennials' work habits: They show up late, they miss shifts, they ghost on jobs. Some people who behave this way may, indeed, just not know how to put their heads down and work. But far more likely is that they're bad at work because of just how much work they do — especially when it's performed against a backdrop of financial precariousness.

We are beginning to understand what ails us, and it's not something an oxygen facial or a treadmill desk can fix.

In recent years, new scientific research has demonstrated the “massive cognitive load” on those who are financially insecure. Living in poverty is akin to losing 13 IQ points. Millions of millennial Americans live in poverty; millions of others straddle the line, getting by but barely so, often working contingent jobs, with nothing left over for the sort of security blanket that could lighten that cognitive load. To be poor is to have very little mental bandwidth to make decisions, “good” or otherwise — as a parent, as a worker, as a partner, as a citizen. The steadier our lives, the more likely we are to make decisions that will make them even steadier.

But steadiness isn't a word we use to describe contemporary American life. And depending on your religion, immigration status, ethnicity, and sexual identity, chances are that the election of Donald Trump has only made one's future, and safety, and employability, *less* stable. Health care and coverage of preexisting conditions is seemingly always in question and/or in peril, as are women's reproductive rights. War with North Korea looms. We've never recognized social media and smartphones as more toxic and more necessary. Our primary concern with the incredibly volatile stock market is how its temperament affects our day-to-day employment. The planet is dying.

Democracy is under serious threat. American adults report being 39% more anxious than a year ago, and what is anxiety if not the condition of trying to live under these conditions?

Pundits spend a lot of time saying “This is not normal,” but the only way for us to survive, day to day, is to normalize the events, the threats, the barrage of information, the costs, the expectations of us. Burnout isn’t a place to visit and come back from; it’s our permanent residence.



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In his writing about burnout, the psychoanalyst Cohen describes a client who came to him with extreme burnout: He was the quintessential millennial child, optimized for perfect performance, which paid off when he got his job as a high-powered finance banker. He’d done everything right, and was continuing to do everything right in his job. One morning, he woke up, turned off his alarm, rolled over, and refused to go to work. He never went to work again. He was “intrigued to find the termination of his employment didn’t bother him.”

In the movie version of this story, this man moves to an island to rediscover the good life, or figures out he loves woodworking and opens a shop. But that’s the sort of fantasy solution that makes millennial burnout so pervasive. You don’t fix burnout by going on vacation. You don’t fix it through “life hacks,” like inbox zero, or by using a meditation

app for five minutes in the morning, or doing Sunday meal prep for the entire family, or starting a bullet journal. You don't fix it by reading a book on how to "unfu*k yourself." You don't fix it with vacation, or an adult coloring book, or "anxiety baking," or the Pomodoro Technique, or overnight fucking oats.

The problem with holistic, all-consuming burnout is that there's no solution to it. You can't optimize it to make it end faster. You can't see it coming like a cold and start taking the burnout-prevention version of Airborne. The best way to treat it is to first acknowledge it for what it is — not a passing ailment, but a chronic disease — and to understand its roots and its parameters. That's why people I talked to felt such relief reading the "mental load" cartoon, and why reading Harris's book felt so cathartic for me: They don't excuse why we behave and feel the way we do. They just describe those feelings and behaviors — and the larger systems of capitalism and patriarchy that contribute to them — accurately.

To describe millennial burnout accurately is to acknowledge the multiplicity of our lived reality — that we're not just high school graduates, or parents, or knowledge workers, but all of the above — while recognizing our status quo. We're deeply in debt, working more hours and more jobs for less pay and less security, struggling to achieve the same standards of living as our parents, operating in psychological and physical precariousness, all while being told that if we just work harder, meritocracy will prevail, and we'll begin thriving. The carrot dangling in front of us is the dream that the to-do list will end, or at least become far more manageable.

But individual action isn't enough. Personal choices alone won't keep the planet from dying, or get Facebook to quit violating our privacy. To do that, you need paradigm-shifting change. Which helps explain why so many millennials increasingly identify with democratic socialism and are embracing unions: We are beginning to understand what ails us, and it's not something an oxygen facial or a treadmill desk can fix.

Our capacity to burn out and keep working is our greatest value.

Until or in lieu of a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, how can we hope to lessen or prevent — instead of just temporarily stanch — burnout? Change might come

from legislation, or collective action, or continued feminist advocacy, but it's folly to imagine it will come from companies themselves. Our capacity to burn out and keep working is our greatest value.

While writing this piece, I was orchestrating a move, planning travel, picking up prescriptions, walking my dog, trying to exercise, making dinner, attempting to participate in work conversations on Slack, posting photos to social media, and reading the news. I was waking up at 6 a.m. to write, packing boxes over lunch, moving piles of wood at dinner, falling into bed at 9. I was on the treadmill of the to-do list: one damn thing after another. But as I finish this piece, I feel something I haven't felt in a long time: catharsis. I feel *great*. I feel *something* — which is not something I've really felt upon the completion of a task in some time.

There are still things to tackle after this. But for the first time, I'm seeing myself, the parameters of my labor, and the causes of my burnout clearly. And it doesn't feel like the abyss. It doesn't feel hopeless. It's not a problem I can solve, but it's a reality I can acknowledge, a paradigm through which I can understand my actions.

In their writing on homelessness, social psychologist Devon Price has said that “laziness,” at least in the way most of us generally conceive of it, simply does not exist. “If a person’s behavior doesn’t make sense to you,” they write, “it is because you are missing a part of their context. It’s that simple.” My behavior didn’t make sense to me because I was missing part of my context: burnout. I was too ashamed to admit I was experiencing it. I fancied myself too strong to succumb to it. I had narrowed my definition of burnout to exclude my own behaviors and symptoms. But I was wrong. I think I have some of the answers to the specific questions that made me start writing this essay. Yours are probably somewhat or substantially different. I don’t have a plan of action, other than to be more honest with myself about what I am and am not doing and why, and to try to disentangle myself from the idea that everything good is bad and everything bad is good. This isn’t a task to complete or a line on a to-do list, or even a New Year’s resolution. It’s a way of thinking about life, and what joy and meaning we can derive not just from optimizing it, but living it. Which is another way of saying: It’s life’s actual work. ●