



A BALANCED CANDLE WON'T BURN OUT

Hanukkah, the festival of lights, is one of the warmest holidays in Judaism, meant to be spent immersed in the love of friends and family. But for many caregivers, preparation for this holiday and all of its material expectations can become overwhelming and stressful. Whether they're parents, teachers or healthcare providers, they can feel overextended to a dangerous degree. This feeling is only exacerbated by the fact that so many of us are culturally inclined to not see our own well-being and ability to function as a priority. Rather, the modern individual is pressured to "achieve" and "hustle," leaving very little room for rest. [This perspective is disastrous to our mental health and inevitably leads to burnout.](#)

The concept of burnout isn't new; it has been a major part of workplace culture for years. But burnout doesn't only occur in the workplace; it can happen to anyone going through periods of constant stress. Yet like so many other aspects of mental health, burnout carries its own level of stigma, leading to less public education about its symptoms, risks and treatments, and leaving many people in the dark. Without a complete understanding of what they are going through, people experiencing burnout may simply feel they are inadequate and keep their struggles to themselves. This stigma can also lead to judgment and a lack of understanding by friends, family and co-workers. So it is important to find a balance between accomplishing everything that needs to be done and taking care of ourselves, especially during the busy season of giving. That means recognizing and honoring our limits. If we fail to achieve that balance, we run the risk of our own candles burning out.





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What is Parental/Family Burnout?

Parental or family burnout is an exhaustion syndrome where one feels physically and mentally overwhelmed. It often leads to becoming emotionally distant from your children and loved ones and a general sense of being a poor or ineffective caregiver. This all can take a severe toll on your mental health and may, depending upon severity, affect you in ways that include:

- Brain fog
- Limited tolerance (shorter temper)
- Confusion
- Forgetfulness
- Increased stress levels
- Depression
- Feelings of isolation
- Poor sleep
- Obsessive-compulsive tendencies

Physically, burnout can affect you through increased stress hormones, lack of libido and poor sleeping habits. It also can lead to an increased risk of physical health conditions like heart disease and metabolic disorders.

The most visible signs of burnout often manifest in our behavior. A caregiver experiencing burnout can be short-tempered, inattentive or forgetful. A burned-out parent also may struggle with being fully present for others.





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What Can We Do?

The best tool against burnout is finding balance, which can be achieved in a variety of ways.

Mindfulness

One of the most common strategies to manage internal stress, anxiety and burnout, mindfulness combines physical relaxation techniques such as breathing, muscle relaxation and cognitive restructuring or challenging and then changing unhelpful or negative thoughts. Together, these activities can help reduce stress hormones in our bodies and unhelpful thoughts in our minds, allowing us to get the true rest we need.



Social Support

Having a network of trusted friends and relatives reduces isolation, provides feedback on our own functioning and serves as a resource when we need help.



Set Boundaries

Sometimes the best thing to do is to NOT do anything. Cultivating the ability to recognize limitations, to learn to say no and to prioritize rest and healing is a skill that takes practice, but the more you set limits, the more comfortable you will get doing so.



Some levels of burnout may require more than the above strategies can provide. For someone struggling with moderate or severe burnout, reaching out to a support group or qualified mental health professional is likely necessary.



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It bears repeating that regardless of where or why the burnout occurred, it is NOT because of personal weakness, laziness or a character flaw. Like all mental health challenges and disorders, the cause is complex and not the fault of the one who suffers. We all have our limits, and attending to signs of burnout can protect us from further damage, serious harm or illness.

Fighting and preventing burnout should be a priority all year round, but Hanukkah is an especially good time to pay attention to it — both because of the extra stress and pressure the season brings and the way some of the holiday's traditions help us to focus on ourselves and on how to keep our flames lit. The Talmud records a debate between two early Jewish thinkers about the appropriate method of lighting the Hanukkah candles, with one believing we should start the holiday with eight candles and work our way down to one; and the other believing we should start the holiday with one candle and work our way up to eight. Today, we follow the second opinion. *Perhaps the lesson we can take is that just like on Hanukkah, we can't light all of our candles at the same time; instead, we need to take our lives day by day, slowly using energy and resources over time rather than expending all of our energies at once.*





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Activity One: Finding Your Base

The idea of finding a baseline isn't any kind of "official" mental health concept; however, the human population experiences enough individual differences that one's struggle may be another's full function. A person's baseline is their acceptable range of "typical" functioning. This definition will vary depending on one's age, cultural background, gender and other physical, genetic and environmental factors. If you take the time to understand your normative levels of functioning as well as likely triggers and other risk factors, you are much more likely to be cognizant of when you feel "off." You can start to establish a baseline by asking yourself the following questions:

How do I feel in the morning when I have gotten enough rest? How long can I go without adequate sleep?

Is movement something that energizes me? Is it draining? What do fatigue and exhaustion feel like in my body?

How much time do I need to be spending alone? With others? How does my level of social energy affect my relationships?

When I notice I am _____, that is a sign I need to take a break or ask for help.

What are some things I can do when I notice I am feeling low in energy (physically, emotionally, spiritually)?

Hanukkah serves as a wonderful time for this reflection. There is a Jewish practice where we sit by the light of our Hanukkah candles, reflecting on the miracles in our lives. You may also like to use this time to consider the questions above and think about the ways you keep your own candles burning. How can you keep them better lit?



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Activity Two: Adjust the Lighting

All the tools listed in this resource have been collected to help us achieve true rest when faced with burnout. Below is a list of additional strategies you can incorporate into your candle-lighting routine to make the lighting ritual one of wellness and comfort.

As you light your candles, consider practicing a breathing exercise. Calming and regulating your mind and body down is a skill that takes practice and muscle memory to be effective, and Hanukkah provides you with eight days to try and stretch that muscle. If you only try to relax and rest when you are agitated or exhausted, it won't be as effective.



Turn one night of Hanukkah into "Pajamakkah." Before lighting the menorah, start your bedtime routine. Wash up, brush your teeth and get into your comfiest PJs. Then, sit down by the candles or curl up in bed with a favorite book, a podcast or some music, knowing your day is complete.

