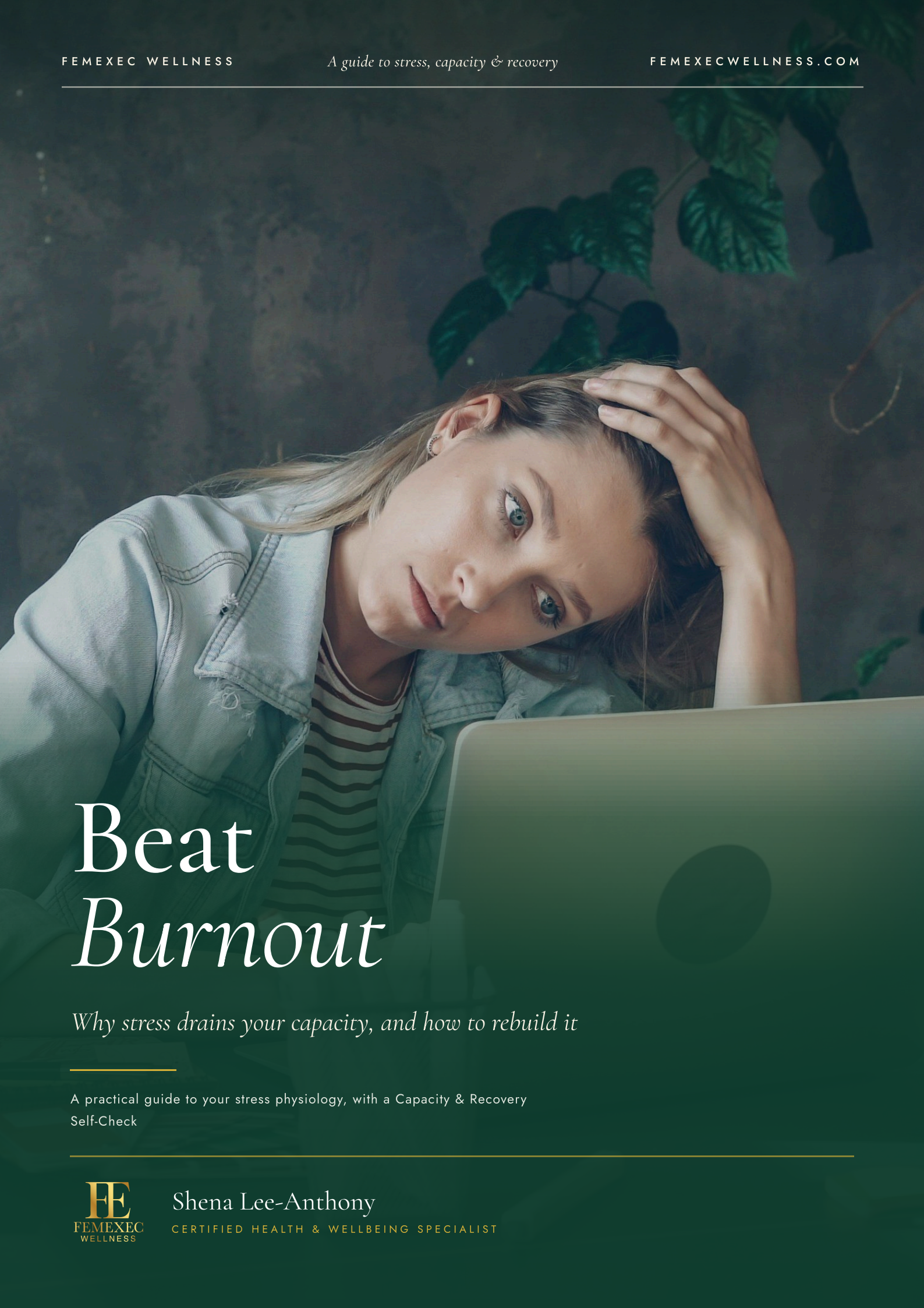




Beat Burnout

Why stress drains your capacity, and how to rebuild it

A practical guide to your stress physiology, with a Capacity & Recovery
Self-Check

WELCOME

Hello and *welcome*

If you're tired in a way
sleep and weekends no
longer fix, this guide is
for you.



Shena Lee-Anthony Certified Health & Wellbeing Specialist, FemExec Wellness

You wake unrefreshed, run on caffeine and lie awake with your mind still working. From the outside, you're coping.

Your body is built to handle pressure, but not pressure with no let-up. When demands keep exceeding your capacity and recovery never catches up, your stress systems start to work differently. That is the physiology of burnout.

You'll learn:

- how your stress response works
- why rest stops restoring you when capacity is depleted
- a practical Recharge Plan
- a self-check to show where you're most stretched

I'm Shena Lee-Anthony of FemExec Wellness. This guide pairs with the Reset Room Audio Series, my free five-part audio series. Start with Episode 1, "Rest Isn't Working": [listen now](#).

Disclaimer: This guide is general information, not medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. For new, severe or persistent symptoms, please see your GP or a qualified healthcare professional.

THE SCIENCE OF STRESS

Signs your body is *under pressure*

Chronic stress shows up in more places than you might expect. You may notice:

Energy and sleep

tiredness that rest doesn't fix; waking unrefreshed; trouble falling or staying asleep; feeling "tired but wired" at night; crashing after work or at weekends.

Mind and mood

poor concentration; forgetfulness; decisions feeling harder; irritability; anxiety; low mood; feeling flat or detached.

Body

tension, aches and headaches; frequent colds or slow healing; digestive upsets; cravings for sugar, salt or caffeine; weight gain around the middle, or weight loss.

Hormones

changes to your periods, and menopausal symptoms that feel harder to manage.

Many of these overlap with other conditions, such as thyroid problems, anaemia, depression and perimenopause. Unexplained weight loss, fainting, or symptoms that keep getting worse always need checking by your GP.

One sign on its own means little. A cluster of them, lasting weeks, is your body asking for attention.

WHY IT SHOWS UP EVERYWHERE

Almost every cell in your body carries receptors for cortisol, which helps explain how prolonged stress can surface in sleep, mood, digestion and immunity at the same time.

OAKLEY & CIDLOWSKI, JOURNAL OF ALLERGY AND CLINICAL IMMUNOLOGY, 2013

Your two *protective systems*

Your body has two main defence systems.

The Stress Response

protects you from immediate threats. It mobilises energy so you can act fast.

The Immune System

protects you from infection and injury. It works alongside your body's constant programme of maintenance: replacing worn-out cells, healing tissue and clearing waste.

Both draw on the same limited resources, and survival comes first. During a stress response, the body temporarily shifts its priorities. Digestion, tissue repair and certain immune functions may be reduced or altered as resources are directed towards responding to the immediate challenge.

Brief stress can temporarily enhance some immune responses, while prolonged stress can disrupt immune regulation, sometimes suppressing protective responses and contributing to persistent inflammation. Research links it with slower wound healing, more frequent colds and lingering low-grade inflammation.

Stress is a whole-body state that can affect sleep, gut, hormones and immunity at once.

Sensible for a few minutes; not for months.

THE RESEARCH

In one study, Sheldon Cohen's team found that adults facing a long-running, threatening life stress had become less responsive to cortisol's anti-inflammatory signal. When later exposed to a cold virus, people showing this resistance were more likely to develop a cold.

COHEN ET AL., PNAS, 2012

How does the *HPA axis* work?

HPA stands for hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal. Together, these three form your main stress-hormone system.

- **The hypothalamus**, in the brain, monitors what's happening in and around you.

- **The pituitary**, a pea-sized gland just below it, acts as the relay.

- **The adrenal glands**, which sit on top of your kidneys, produce adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol.



Cortisol feeds back to switch the system off

Within seconds, your sympathetic nervous system signals the inner part of the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and noradrenaline. Your heart races.

Over the next few minutes, the hypothalamus releases corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH). CRH tells the pituitary to release adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) into the bloodstream. At the adrenals, ACTH triggers cortisol. Following an acute stressor, cortisol typically rises in the minutes that follow,

although the timing and size of the response vary.

Then the brake comes on. Cortisol provides negative feedback to the hypothalamus and pituitary, helping regulate and reduce further hormone release.

The HPA axis is never fully “off”. Cortisol follows a daily rhythm, rising sharply soon after waking and falling to its lowest point around midnight.

THE RESEARCH

A review of 208 laboratory studies found that tasks combining a lack of control with social evaluation, such as being judged by an audience, triggered the biggest cortisol rises and the slowest recovery.

DICKERSON & KEMENY, PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN, 2004

Fight *or flight?*

*Brilliant design
for a short
emergency: act,
survive, switch
off, recover.*

Your stress response evolved for physical danger: a predator, a fall, a fight. Within moments:

- your heart beats faster and blood pressure rises, pushing oxygen and fuel to your muscles
- your liver releases glucose for quick energy
- your airways widen
- blood is diverted away from digestion and reproduction, which can wait
- pain is dampened, so you can keep going
- your attention narrows to the threat, and the thoughtful, planning part of your brain (the prefrontal cortex) takes a back seat to fast, habitual reactions.

The catch is that your brain reacts in much the same way to a looming deadline, a difficult conversation or a 3am worry about money. None of these is solved by running or fighting, and they rarely end neatly. Worry alone can keep the response running, because your body reacts to imagined threats too.

WORTH KNOWING

Your heart rate naturally quickens a little as you breathe in and slows as you breathe out. This rhythm, called respiratory sinus arrhythmia, is widely used as a marker of the vagus nerve's calming influence on the heart. Slowing your out-breath gently slows your heart. That's why breathing exercises can help calm you.

LABORDE, MOSLEY & THAYER, FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2017

When stress doesn't *switch off*

The stress response is designed to be temporary. Problems start when it's triggered too often, runs for too long, or can't switch off properly. Over time:

*Under strain, and
able to recover.*

- **Prolonged stress can alter cortisol regulation**, but there is no single predictable pattern. Some people show higher cortisol levels, others lower levels or a flatter daily rhythm. These changes vary according to the nature, duration and timing of stress, as well as individual circumstances.
- **In some circumstances, prolonged stress can reduce the sensitivity of immune cells** to cortisol's anti-inflammatory effects, potentially contributing to persistent inflammation.
- **Prolonged stress can contribute to changes in blood pressure** and blood glucose regulation.
- **Sleep can become lighter and more broken**, and energy goes on staying alert rather than on repair.

Some researchers describe these changes as HPA-axis dysregulation, and you may also have heard the term "adrenal fatigue". Researchers are exploring how prolonged stress affects the way the brain, glands and nervous system communicate.

Burnout is recognised from your symptoms and circumstances, which tell us far more than any single test.

Demand *versus* capacity

Demand

is everything that asks something of you: work, caring, money, health, decisions, even the effort of appearing fine.

Capacity

is what you have to meet those demands *and* recover from them: energy, sleep, mental bandwidth, emotional reserves, support and time.

When demand exceeds capacity now and then, you stretch and recover. Week after week, the gap becomes a debt.

Scientists call the cumulative cost **allostatic load**. Allostasis is how your body stays stable by adapting: raising your heart rate, releasing cortisol, sharpening focus. Allostatic load is the wear and tear when those adaptations run too often, for too long, or don't switch off. Studies have shown it's associated with higher blood pressure and blood sugar, inflammation and poor sleep, and with heart disease and depression.

The World Health Organization describes burnout as chronic workplace stress that hasn't been successfully managed, marked by exhaustion, cynicism or mental distance from your job, and reduced professional efficacy. The WHO uses the term only for work, though the stress physiology behind it responds to load from any source.

FROM THE PHYSIO'S CHAIR

Being capable of doing something isn't the same as having the capacity to keep doing it and recover afterwards. In rehab, we don't just ask "Can you do it?" We ask "Can you recover from it?"

WHAT RECOVERY NEEDS

Occupational psychologists Sabine Sonnentag and Charlotte Fritz identified four experiences that help people unwind from work: psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery (taking on a challenge or learning something new) and control over how you spend your free time.

SONNENTAG & FRITZ, JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY, 2007



CAPACITY

Why rest stops *restoring* you

*The answer isn't
to rest harder.*

Ever come back from holiday still tired? Here's why.

Recovery isn't simply the absence of activity. It needs your nervous system to shift from "on alert" to "rest and repair", driven by the parasympathetic system, including the vagus nerve. Heart rate slows, digestion resumes and repair gets under way.

When capacity is depleted, that shift gets harder:

- **Your body is still, but your mind isn't.** Ruminating and checking emails keep the stress response running.
- **Your nervous system learns to stay on alert.** Many people feel "tired but wired": exhausted, yet unable to relax.
- **Broken sleep means less overnight repair**, so you start each day already in debt.

Heart rate variability (HRV), the natural beat-to-beat variation in your heart rate, is often lower under stress. It varies widely between people, so it's most useful alongside how you feel and how well you recover.

What helps is reducing load and switching off mentally.

Stressors can hide in *unexpected places*

Ask a friend why she's stressed and she'll list the obvious: work, money, family. Your body keeps a fuller tally.

Psychological and life stressors

Juggling work and family; caring for children or ageing parents; money worries; illness or bereavement; and past trauma, particularly in childhood, which can leave the stress system more reactive into adulthood. Add the invisible load: the mental to-do list, being always reachable, and the effort of looking fine when you're not.

Physical stressors

- persistent pain, injury or illness
- short or broken sleep, shift work and jet lag
- under-eating or very restrictive diets
- intense exercise without recovery
- heavy reliance on caffeine or alcohol
- perimenopause and menopause
- your environment: noise, and damp or mould at home.

Alone, each may seem minor. Together, they draw on the same capacity.

WORTH KNOWING

Caffeine lingers, and research shows that how quickly it clears varies widely between people. In one study that tracked sleep at home, 400 mg of caffeine six hours before bed still cut sleep by more than an hour.

DRAKE ET AL., JOURNAL OF CLINICAL SLEEP MEDICINE, 2013

Lighten *the load*

When demands come from every direction, tackling them can feel like one more task. Start with the quickest win: take something off.

Do you have to chair the PTA, bake for the school fête, host every Sunday lunch and be the colleague who always says yes? Would anything truly fall apart if you stepped back for a few months while you recover?

Ask yourself:

- What really needs my attention right now?
- What could someone else do, or could be done differently?
- What can simply wait?

Not everything is an emergency, even when someone else's email says it is.

This isn't about giving up what gives your life meaning. Some commitments give back more energy than they take. Protect those.

Every demand you remove is capacity you get back.

IN HER WORDS

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation...”

AUDRE LORDE, *A BURST OF LIGHT*, 1988



THE RECHARGE PLAN

Rest

*Rest isn't a
reward for when
everything's done.*

Rest is how capacity is rebuilt.

Plan recovery like an appointment. Put it in your diary and protect it. Twenty minutes a day that is genuinely yours is likely to do more than one collapse at the weekend.

Switch off properly. Research shows that recovery depends on mental detachment as well as physical stillness. Set an end to your working day and turn off notifications.

Stop before you're empty. Many capable people only stop when they can't go on. Build in short breaks before you need them.

Practise switching to rest mode. Relaxation is a skill. Try this: breathe in comfortably through your nose, then let the out-breath be a little slower and longer than the in-breath. Repeat for two to three minutes. Slow, comfortable breathing can influence heart rate variability and support relaxation, although individual responses vary.



THE RECHARGE PLAN

Sleep

Most adults need seven to nine hours.

Sleep is when much of your repair happens, and research shows it supports your immune system.

Research shows that repeated short sleep can disrupt cortisol and metabolism, and that weekend lie-ins only partly make up for it. In one study, six nights of just four hours in bed raised cortisol in the evening, when it should be falling.

To help your body get the sleep it needs:

- keep regular sleep and wake times, even at weekends
- get daylight early to set your body clock
- stop caffeine by early afternoon
- go easy on alcohol, which disrupts sleep in the second half of the night
- if you're still awake after about 20 minutes, get up, do something calm in low light and go back to bed when you feel sleepy
- wind down: dim lights, screens away, a notepad for racing thoughts.

If you've struggled to sleep for three months or more, speak to your GP. Cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the recommended first-line treatment.

Exercise

Research shows that regular exercise lifts mood, eases anxiety and improves sleep, and there is some evidence it can make your stress response less reactive.

When you're depleted, though, more isn't better. Moderate to hard exercise pushes cortisol up, so long or intense sessions can become one more demand.

- **Favour gentle to moderate, rhythmic movement:** walking, swimming, cycling or easy jogging.
- **Try yoga or tai chi,** which pair movement with slow breathing.
- **Build up gradually.** The UK guideline for adults is at least 150 minutes of moderate activity a week. If you're depleted, start well below that.
- **Break up sitting.** Set a reminder to stand up and move for a minute or two every 30 minutes or so.
- **Check the next day.** Energised or settled is the goal. Wiped out means it was too much.

FROM THE PHYSIO'S CHAIR

In rehabilitation, we don't build a programme around what someone could do six months ago. We start with what they can manage today, and whether they can recover from it, then build gradually. Do the same for yourself: a good day isn't a signal to spend everything.





THE RECHARGE PLAN

Eat

*A stressed body
needs steady fuel.*

Your body rebuilds itself from what you eat.

Don't diet right now. There is some evidence that strict calorie restriction, such as three weeks on 1,200 calories a day, can itself raise cortisol. Recovery is not the time to cut back.

Eat every 3 to 4 hours. Three meals, plus a snack if there's a long gap, keep your energy steady.

Add protein to every meal. If you eat meat: chicken, fish, eggs or lean meat. If you're vegetarian: beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, eggs, Greek yoghurt or cheese.

Fill the rest of your plate with vegetables, fruit and whole grains, and go easy on ultra-processed foods and sugar.

Drink 6 to 8 glasses a day: one with each meal and one or two between meals. Water, milk, tea and coffee all count. Pale straw-coloured pee means you're drinking enough.

Sit down and eat slowly. Digestion works best in rest mode, not at your desk.

Watch the props. There is some evidence that caffeine can raise cortisol, even in regular coffee drinkers, and it can disturb sleep; alcohol disrupts the second half of the night. Cut back gradually.

If you have digestive symptoms or suspect a food intolerance, talk to your GP before cutting out whole food groups.

Calm your stress response

Small, regular habits can help regulate your stress response and support recovery. Most are free.

Music. Studies have shown that music can ease the stress response. Make a settling playlist.

Connection. Good social support helps buffer the effects of stress.

Singing. There is some evidence that group singing can lower cortisol and lift mood, with connection built in.

Something that's just yours. A hobby that absorbs you completely can be genuine recovery.

Slow breathing. Breathing slowly, at fewer than ten breaths a minute, with a longer out-breath, can help your nervous system shift towards rest.

Laughter. There is some evidence that a good laugh can lower stress hormones.

Nature. Studies have shown that time in green space is linked with lower cortisol and a calmer heart rate.

Mindfulness. Research shows that mindfulness practice can reduce stress in healthy adults. Start with five minutes a day.

Choose one or two. Consistency beats doing them all.

THE RESEARCH

Early research suggests that “cyclic sighing” (a double inhale through the nose, then a long, slow exhale through the mouth) may help. In a small, month-long Stanford trial, five minutes a day lifted mood and reduced anxiety.

BALBAN ET AL., CELL REPORTS MEDICINE, 2023

Ask for help

Basics in place for several weeks and still exhausted? Don't push harder. Get support.

See your GP. Ongoing fatigue has many treatable causes. Ask whether checks for thyroid function, iron levels, vitamin D, B12 and blood sugar would be appropriate, and mention any perimenopausal symptoms.

Talk about your mood. Burnout and depression overlap. If you feel persistently low, hopeless or numb, tell your GP. If you ever have thoughts of harming yourself, contact your GP or NHS 111, or call Samaritans free on 116 123, day or night.

Use support at work. Occupational health or a trusted manager may help adjust your workload.

Share the load at home. It frees capacity for your recovery.

Get structured support. Changing deep-rooted habits is often easier with guidance.

See how I can support you

BOOK A VITALITY RESET CALL

calendly.com/shenaleeanthony/vitality-reset-call



*Asking for help
isn't failure.*

IF YOU NEED
SUPPORT NOW

Samaritans: **116 123**,
free, day or night
NHS: **111**

CONNECTION

Pooling 148 studies and more than 300,000 people, researchers found that those with stronger social relationships were 50% more likely to survive over the studies' follow-up periods.

HOLT-LUNSTAD, SMITH & LAYTON, PLOS MEDICINE, 2010

Capacity & Recovery Self-Check

Use this self-check to see where your capacity is under most strain.

Tick one box per statement. Think about the last two to four weeks, not your worst day and not your best day.

		0 Rarely	1 Sometimes	2 Often	3 Almost always
AREA	STATEMENT	0	1	2	3
<i>Energy & body</i>	I wake feeling unrefreshed even after sleep	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I rely heavily on caffeine or sugar to function	☐	☐	☐	☐
	My body feels tense, heavy or exhausted most days	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I physically crash after work	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>Brain & cognition</i>	I struggle to concentrate	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I forget things more easily than usual	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Small tasks feel mentally overwhelming	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Decision-making feels harder than before	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>Emotional state</i>	I feel emotionally flat or detached	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I feel irritable more easily	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I feel guilty resting	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I feel like I am running on empty	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>Nervous system</i>	I struggle to switch off mentally	☐	☐	☐	☐
	My sleep feels broken or restless	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I feel constantly "on alert"	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I struggle to properly relax	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>Life load</i>	I rarely have genuine recovery time	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I spend most of my time caring for others	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I ignore my own needs until I crash	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I feel pressure to always keep going	☐	☐	☐	☐

Add the twenty scores. Maximum 60. Then notice which of the five areas ran hottest. That pattern usually matters more than the total.

My total _____ / 60 Highest area(s) _____

Filling this in on screen? Click one box per line and type in the boxes above. In Adobe Acrobat Reader your total adds up automatically; in other viewers, add up your ticks yourself.

Reading your pattern

NOT A DIAGNOSIS

These bands are a rough guide only. They are not validated cut-offs and they are not equivalent to Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) scores. Use them to decide where to look, not what to call yourself.

RANGE	A USEFUL WAY TO READ IT
0 to 15	Load is present. Recovery may still be doing enough of its job.
16 to 28	Recovery is thinning. Worth protecting sleep, load and off-time before this becomes normal.
29 to 42	Capacity looks strained across more than one system. Recovery needs a plan, not a weekend.
43 to 60	High strain pattern. Treat this as a signal to act and, if needed, to speak to your GP or occupational health, especially if mood, health or your safety have significantly deteriorated.

Scores of 29 or higher may indicate that several areas of your life are under strain. Whether you need support depends on your symptoms and how well you recover, not the total alone. If you are struggling or your symptoms persist, professional support may help.

If one area is high and the others are quiet, start there. A high “life load” with a quieter body is a different conversation from a body that cannot switch off.

WORTH REMEMBERING

“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.”

ANNE LAMOTT, TED, 2017



Shena Lee-Anthony FemExec Wellness

YOUR NEXT STEP

Book your *Vitality Reset Call*

LISTEN

Listen to the Reset Room Audio Series

Five short, free episodes for capable women who keep saying they're fine. Start with Episode 1, "Rest Isn't Working". [Listen now](#)

Burnout is what happens when demand outstrips capacity for too long. The good news: capacity can be rebuilt.

For some readers, the Recharge Plan will be enough. If your self-check highlights several areas of strain, or one area is particularly challenging, personalised support may help you identify what is driving your difficulties and develop a realistic recovery plan.

In a confidential Vitality Reset Call, we'll talk through your self-check, what's driving your pattern and the first steps that will make the biggest difference.

BOOK YOUR VITALITY RESET CALL

calendly.com/shenaleeanthony/vitality-reset-call



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