php[**architect**]

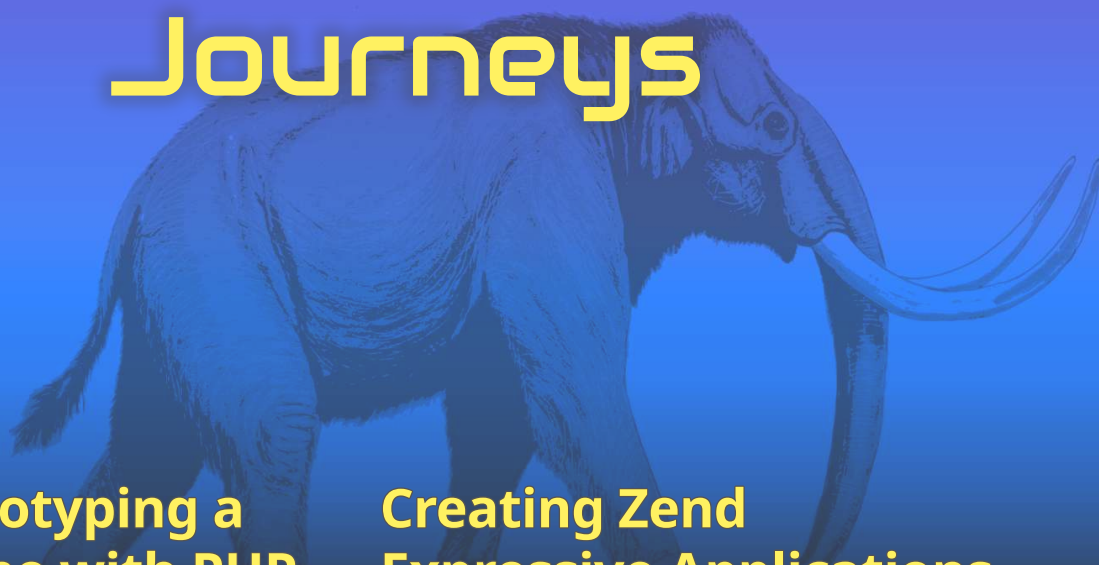# Internal Journeys

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Burning Out

Chris Tankersley

The tech industry is a double-edged sword. On the one side, we (generally) have well-paying jobs with nice perks, but on the other, we can easily slip into not only boring, repetitive work but figurative death marches. The former is used by most companies as an offset to the latter, but that rarely works out well. This leads many developers to come face-to-face with burnout.

Burnout in humans is much like it is in rocketry—we work hard and sometimes fast to achieve our goals, but in the end, we are completely spent. We are exhausted not only emotionally but physically, and all of our motivation can disappear. Instead of rocket fuel, the life inside of us dwindles down, and we feel empty, used, and tired. This is not uncommon for developers.

That's all you have to look forward too. Enjoy!

Okay, okay, it is not all dreary and horrible. Burnout is a serious issue we must watch out for and combat. As an industry, we must learn to notice when burnout is happening, and help each other when it happens. Burnout is unhealthy for any individual, but it will kill your team's productivity, increase turnover, and make it harder to recruit as people learn about the environment at your company.

Detecting Burnout

There are a few signs you or someone on your team may be experiencing burnout. Once we know what to look for, we can deal with the burnout issue itself.

The biggest indicator is a lack of motivation or engagement at work. To you as a lead developer, this should be a glaring indication of burnout. When burnout starts to hit, one of the first outward signs to other people is a drop in performance or attention to their work. You may notice small issues are taking longer than normal, or larger more complicated issues are not being thought through like before.

Lack of motivation can be caused by less visible, more emotional signs.

Things like worrying over small details, or feeling like there is never enough time to finish work. These feelings can end up manifesting in dour thoughts, and those thoughts can easily turn into low motivation at work. These feelings can be overshadowed by real-world situations where there is not enough time to finish something. In an environment where deadlines can be unrealistic, it may be hard to figure out if the feelings are real or just the beginnings of burnout.

Once the emotional signs start to hit, they can quickly turn into physical effects. Not only is there decreased motivation, they can also affect people's health. Once someone starts to worry about aspects of their job, this can lead to stress which turns into sleeplessness. Anxiety and not being able to shut off your brain at night is one of the leading causes of lack of sleep. Our bodies need sleep to recharge and allow our brains to catalog the day's events. When we do not get enough sleep, it affects us physically.

Lack of sleep can cause many physical effects—primarily, a lack of energy. When you do not sleep well, especially over weeks or months, it takes its toll on your body. You are more apt to get sick, and not with something like a cold. You can become more at risk of heart disease, obesity, and high blood pressure. The NHS[1] has a good list of things that can occur with the lack of sleep, as well as tips for better sleeping habits.

Avoiding Burnout

Now that we know what to look for, we can start to combat it before it

happens, or once we start to notice it. Everyone is different, and their burnout is different. Thankfully, there are many different ways we can help deal with burnout.

Take Breaks

The easiest thing to do is simply take a break. Our job is mentally taxing, and our brains need time to recharge, even throughout the day. When you start to feel like something is off, just take a break. Very few of us are in high-pressure situations day after day after day, so taking a 15-minute break is a good start. Get up, get a drink, take a walk around the office/neighborhood, take the dog/cat/hamster for a walk. Get up and stop thinking about what you are doing for 15 minutes.

If you want something more structured, you can look into something like The Pomodoro Technique[2]. It's a time management technique to help you manage how long you work before a break. The short of it is you work on a single task for twenty-five minutes (called a Pomodoro), take a five-minute break. Repeat until you've completed four Pomodoros then you take a longer break, like thirty minutes. All of these breaks help keep you from being overwhelmed over a long period and help you focus better on the task at hand.

Set Working Hours

Couple this with setting strict working hours. For many of us, we get to work at home or can work from home, which can make it very hard to effectively "stop working" once the day is done. For me, I tend to work from 9:00

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1   NHS: *https://phpa.me/nhs-lack-sleep*

2   *The Pomodoro Technique:*
https://phpa.me/pomodoro-technique

am until 6:00 pm, and after that time I try not to do any work what-so-ever. Before 9:00 am, I do not work. Having concrete start and stop times, even in a flex-time environment, can help make sure you stop thinking about work-related things right before bed.

Use Vacation

You and everyone on your team should be taking advantage of vacation time. If you do not use it, you are effectively throwing out a perk you probably fought for when getting hired. While not everyone can just say, "I'm off for a week, goodbye!" you should schedule times where you are gone and do not work. Many of the topics I have talked about in previous months should make it easy for you or anyone to leave for a week and not have to be interrupted on their vacation.

If you happen to work at a place that has a "no vacation limit" policy, take advantage of it (within reason). Schedule a week or a long weekend every few months, whether you think you need it

or not. Do not abuse it, but vacations and longer breaks are just as important as taking breaks throughout the day.

The People Around Us

When you start to feel like you are burning out, talk to someone. Find at least one person you can talk about things with that will listen and support you. This can be a partner, a family member, a friend, a mentor, or someone that will let you vent about whatever is going on. It sounds somewhat hokey, but it can make things better by talking about it.

These types of social interactions are good for us, as it helps strengthen friendships and bonds. We learn that we are not the first, nor the last, to suffer from the effects of burnout. We can learn how other people dealt with or avoided it. Talking about it can take the pressure off of the issues at work, and maybe even provide some insight into what is ultimately causing the burnout.

Hobbies

If you do not have a hobby, take one up. One large factor with burnout is the all-consuming thoughts that come from being burned out and focusing on the negative things at work. Having a hobby not directly related to your job will help take your thoughts away from something like programming and direct your energy into something else. For me, this is playing video games and watching professional wrestling. I can do these with or without other people, and they can help take my mind off things going on at work.

To a larger extent, find something with a social aspect. Meeting new people, or even getting together with a group of friends, is an excellent diversion from what is going on at work. Many communities now have Facebook groups you can look for that share common interests. Check with your local library about groups that meet there and see if anything piques your interest. Meet up with friends and hang

out, or do a structured activity. Every few weeks I meet with my friends to play tabletop roleplaying games. We may complain about our respective jobs, but really, we are so far disengaged from work we ignore it.

Get Healthy

Burnout can cause a lot of health-related side effects, but many of these can be exacerbated by overall poor health. A job where we sit all day and flex our mental muscles does not exactly make for the most healthy of professions. It is nice to have a kitchen filled with snacks, but those snacks can be the enemy.

If you are not already, you should be doing at least some basic exercise. This can be something as simple as going for a walk every day on your break. When the weather is nice, I take my dogs on a walk twice around a section of our neighborhood. That ends up being a mile worth of walking in about twenty-five to thirty minutes. I do that for the first half of my lunch break, and then have lunch in the second half. If you do not have dogs, look for ways to take a walk during your breaks instead of sitting at the computer.

If you have the time, start a real exercise routine. For the last few weeks, I have been making sure to go to the gym every morning, and I have a specific routine I follow. It does not have to be something where you work out for an hour, but you can drop in and do something on a schedule. My Wednesday routine only takes me about 40 minutes to complete, compared to Monday which normally takes an hour.

If you do not want to get a gym membership, there are plenty of online tools you can sign up for that will help you work out at home, and many workouts do not require you to spend lots of money on equipment. For a long time I used an online yoga program, but ultimately I am more consistent when I leave the house to work out. Each person is different, so find what works for you.

Diet is another big factor. Eating fast food every day can take a toll on your health, and not just in the way *Super Size Me* showed. Sugars, fats, and all the stuff that goes into fast food can have a negative impact on our bodies. I love me some Chick-fil-A, but I should not eat it every single day. Try some small steps like cutting out soda, or swapping out candy for more healthy snacks like fruit. Even a simple change can have a big impact on your overall health.
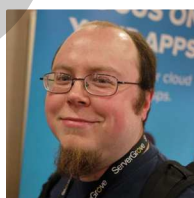
Burnout Versus Depression

On a more serious note, many signs of burnout can also be signs of depression. Exhaustion, having trouble sleeping, concentration issues, all of these can be signs of both depression and burnout. Bad thoughts can also be attributed to both, as you start to worry about the facets of your job or the project you are working on.

Depression tends to be much more general in nature. Work may be a factor in a multitude of things leading to depression. Burnout tends to affect just work (most of the time), but depression tends to take its toll on many different aspects of your life. With burnout, you may not want to go to work but want to do your hobbies. With depression, you don't want to do anything.

If you think you are suffering from depression, get help. If you are not sure where to start, Ed Finkler started an organization called Open Sourcing Mental Illness[3], which is directly targeted at the tech industry. It is run and supported by awesome members of the PHP community as well as doctors who understand our industry.

OSMI has a ton of great resources which can help someone start to find help and deal with depression, and if you think your burnout is something more or is turning into something that is affecting your life overall, please check out OSMI.

Getting Better

When it comes to burnout, some small changes and breaks can be more than enough to start to break free from the issues that burnout creates. If you are reading this article and notice some of it rings true for members of your team, check up on them. Most people do not come right out and say, "I'm burned out, so just give me a few days." Sometimes, it takes someone else to notice.

If you notice yourself starting to burn out, take action. Take a break, find a hobby, do something to take your mind off of work for at least a little while. If it is a serious work situation, talk with management or supervisors about making your environment less conducive to burnout.

And no matter what, stay healthy, both physically and mentally.

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3   *Open Sourcing Mental Illness:*
https://osmihelp.org/

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Related Reading

- *Level Up: Procrastination and Burnout* by David Stockton. June 2016.
  https://phparch.com/magazine/2016-2/june/
- *Level Up: How to Burn the Candle at Both Ends* by David Stockton. July 2015.
  https://phparch.com/magazine/2015-2/july/