



## How to Minimize Burnout by Practising Self-Reflection

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One Sunday evening a long time ago, I found myself staring blankly at the image of myself in a full-length mirror. Although I was fully clothed, I remember the feeling of being completely naked. I felt like I was seeing myself for the very first time. During that phase of my life, I was working full time as a dental hygienist and experiencing some symptoms of burnout. I was also a single mom with shared parenting and had experienced yet another failed relationship. It was in that moment that I realized I was in a state of conscious incompetence to some degree and that, in order to experience things differently, I would have to approach things differently. I had to make a choice about how I was going to live my life moving forward. What did I do? I embarked on an intentional journey of self-reflection.

### WHAT DOES “SELF-REFLECTION” MEAN?

Self-reflection is a noun meaning the act of giving serious thought to one’s character and actions. “Self-reflective” is the adjective.

### CAN SELF-REFLECTION ALLEVIATE SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT, STRESS OR SIMPLY FEELING UNHAPPY WITH YOUR LIFE?

Dr. Christina Maslach, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, has been studying burnout since the 1970s. Maslach and her team came up with six factors in the workplace environment that can contribute to burnout:

-  Workload
-  Control
-  Reward
-  Community
-  Fairness
-  Values<sup>1</sup>



She claims that we end up with burnout when one or more of these areas of our work no longer match our needs. I agree. How can we analyse these six points and create some awareness of them to allow us to understand what we really need and what actions (if any) need to be addressed? The answer: a journal, five minutes a day, and an openness to honest self-reflection.

### THE BENEFITS OF JOURNALING



For those of you who have already embraced journaling, you have a keen sense of how putting your thoughts on paper is vastly different from just “thinking” about them. Journaling is your chance to connect honestly with your way of being—your current YOU—and possibly to gain insight into a new way of being—a more reasonable future YOU! Journaling provides focus, productivity, and good mental health when put into consistent practice. It allows you to dig deeper into the details of what has happened today—what you experienced and felt—and to gain more clarity about and comfort with yourself, the choices that you make, and what affects you. You may be more able to clarify your core values and become more intimate with your thoughts and feelings. Journaling is one of the most compassionate and generous self-care practices you can undertake. It’s amazing what can happen when we challenge ourselves to answer tough questions honestly about where we are and where we are headed.

There are limitless ways to journal. Create your own questions or simply Google “self-reflection questions” to get you on your way. Here are a few examples from one of my journals:

I am excited about \_\_\_\_\_ People/things that sparked joy today \_\_\_\_\_

I am concerned about \_\_\_\_\_ What I did to spark joy in someone else’s day \_\_\_\_\_

What I learned today \_\_\_\_\_ Goals/Ideas for a better today/tomorrow \_\_\_\_\_

My latest read, *Conscious Business* by Fred Kofman, had me thinking more about the buzz of mindfulness and awareness and what consciousness looks like. I mentioned at the beginning of this article that I was in a state of conscious incompetence. Let me explain more about that. In my early days as a dental hygienist, I learned about this from my first employer, Dr. Ray Jones, who quoted the work of Noel Burch, telling me that “there are four stages of psychological states to consider as you move through your personal and professional life.” These are “unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence.”<sup>2</sup>

- **Unconscious incompetence:** we are not aware that a skill or knowledge gap exists.
- **Conscious incompetence:** we are aware that a knowledge gap exists, and we also understand the importance of acquiring the new skill. It is in this space that we are open to learning.
- **Conscious competence:** we are able to use the skill or perform the task but doing so involves incorporating awareness, mindfulness, and practice.
- **Unconscious competence:** we are now experienced enough with the skill and can perform it so easily that, in essence, it is carried out from an unconscious state.

From a professional standpoint, understanding where you are on a conscious level is key to having a successful career. It will allow you to look at the various aspects of your dental hygiene practice and determine if any pieces require development of skill. It will also give you the ability to review your effectiveness rather than unconsciously going about your day not knowing what or why you did things and how that might be affecting your work life and its success. Incorporating self-reflection into your journaling can help you examine these states effectively. “What gets measured, gets managed.” Peter Drucker said.<sup>3</sup> It’s all about what went well, what didn’t, and what different options are available to allow for a better today and an even better tomorrow.

### A FEW WORDS ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance means something different to everyone you talk to and in every Google search. And there is also the question of whose responsibility it is to create and maintain that balance. There are many employers who try to ensure that they take on some of the responsibility for creating an environment to support a happier team and lessen the stress and symptoms of burnout. I believe that employees also have a responsibility to carve out some time during our 24-hour day that solely belongs to us. We have the choice to say “I don’t have time” or rather to say “I’ll make time.” Whether it’s early in the morning before the rush or in the evening after the kids go to bed, remember to take time to do whatever brings you joy. Down the road you’ll have more options as your family grows and become more independent. Work-life balance will never be perfect. There will be times when life is more demanding in one particular area and less demanding in another.

Take a moment to reflect once again on Dr. Christina Maslach’s six points: **workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values**. Are all those needs being met? What area requires attention the most? How can that be addressed? Who can you count on to support you?

Becoming our best selves involves confronting and solving problems. It can be a painful process and one that most of us attempt to avoid, including me. However, this typically results in greater pain and an inability to grow mentally and spiritually. To quote Baylor Barbee, “I don’t care who you were, I care who you are and I’m more concerned with who you’re working to become.”

#### References

1. Maslach C, Leiter MP. *The truth about burnout: How organizations cause personal stress and what to do about it*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1997.
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3. Drucker PF. *The practice of management*. New York, NY: Harper & Row; 1954.