



TIM CASSERLEY • DAVID MEGGINSON

LEARNING FROM BURNOUT

**Developing sustainable leaders and
avoiding career derailment**

This book is a wake up call for all leaders, HRD executives and coaches who hold responsibility for young high flyers and those who themselves run the danger of “losing the plot” in the unreflected pursuit of high performance.

RALF SCHNEIDER, Partner and Global Talent Management Leader, PricewaterhouseCoopers



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Butterworth-Heinemann is an imprint of Elsevier



Butterworth-Heinemann is an imprint of Elsevier
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA

First edition 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-7506-8387-6

For information on all Butterworth-Heinemann publications visit our website at www.elsevierdirect.com
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Printed and bound in Great Britain

09 10 11 12 13 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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TO OUR MOTHERS

Peggy Casserley, 'the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably effusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts'.

Jean Megginson, who went on giving, until there was nothing left to give.

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Acknowledgements

Of all the people involved in this book, it has been the 100 high flyers we interviewed that have been the most influential and important in the writing of it. Your willingness to share your hard fought understanding of your lives made this book possible. Your generosity in talking about the inner struggle on the path to leadership was an inspiration for us. We hope you find the meaning that you are searching for. In order to preserve your anonymity we have changed your name, together with organizational and other details that might reveal your identity.

We are indebted to those who opened doors into their organizations and allowed us to interview their high flyers. In particular we'd like to thank Alex Fergus whose support at a difficult time in the research brought the project back on track.

This book would never have appeared without the talented contribution and persistence of our research team. Pauline Whiting and Mary Malecaut travelled the length and breadth of 'greater Europe' conducting interviews during the initial stages of the research, and spent many long days and nights trying to make sense of the vast amount of data we collected. Pauline's cool advice helped to steer the project away from the rocks during the early days. Robert Wylie's tireless and steadfast work on the majority of the research interviews, and his invaluable insights into some really complex issues of interpretation made the research sing.

Richard Mansfield's unswerving encouragement for the project has been a central feature throughout the research. He has been the power behind the quantitative aspects of the study, designing surveys built from our own research – including the Work Stress Survey – running analyses and helping to interpret the data we accumulated. His patience and generosity, and gentle questioning of some of the more arcane aspects of the qualitative study have been invaluable.

Dr John Briffa wrote the appendix on the physiological consequences of burnout and helped us to understand burnout from the body's perspective. We also want to thank those colleagues who have helped us to develop our ideas on leadership learning, coaching and psychology: fellow Edge Equilibrium Board members: John Leary Joyce, who helped us develop the three-phased impact of burnout on the organization in Chapter 3; Ellen Dunne, who wouldn't let us forget it had to be written; Gill Thewlis, whose idea it was to make the financial impact of burnout calculable; David Lane, who helped to start the thing; Bill Critchley, who broke the shell of our understanding; Victoria Cassells, who challenged our thinking; and Jerry Hyde, personal guru extraordinaire, whose unflagging support and wondrous knowledge of the works of Hunter S Thompson gave this book its distinctive edge. Prahbu Gupta hosted us at UBS Wolfsberg and, unbeknown to him, helped us to write the final chapter. Our many, often passionate, conversations with each of you have enhanced the value of the ideas in this book. Our much missed colleague David Casey has hugely informed our thinking and the way we approach coaching and leadership learning. Our thanks also go to Robert Bell, who helped to smooth out the vagaries of a somewhat frantic writing style at various stages in the book.

We'd also like to thank Frits and Inge Janum and Greg and Rachel Sinfield for their practical support and bountiful spirit which literally made it possible for us to finish the writing of this book.

Although this book is dedicated to our mothers, it is the other women in our lives who have provided the love, tolerance and compassion, and who have helped us overcome the many ordeals involved in the creative struggle – Charlotte Janum Casserley and Vivien Whitaker.

Introduction

This book has a colourful history. Its early life was distinguished by a struggle to form its own distinct identity. For a while it seemed that the authors would not be the progenitors of their own book. Other people had strong opinions about the book's purpose. They wanted to bestow upon it their own meaning. They had a version of the book's identity which they held in their heads and wanted to see in the world. There was a struggle over authorship. Was it to be the authors', or was it to be those who wished to control what the authors wrote?

In a sense, this book's 'story' is similar to that it tells of young high flyers that burn out in their jobs. Like them, this book has struggled to live its own life rather than the one others wanted for it. It is also similar in as much as the writing of it was a self-defining act: it was written not because the authors harboured illusions of fame or recognition, but because its message was personally meaningful for them.

Having made a parallel between our book's journey and that of the talented burnouts we describe, it is important to say that we have been helped and challenged by a talented team at Elsevier and in particular by Ailsa Marks, who has been with us every step of the journey. We are also grateful to the reviewers, whose sometimes trenchant comments have helped us to forge our ideas more clearly.

We were inspired to write this book both for reasons of personal biography as well as professional practice. The biographical reasons concern one of us burning out in their early thirties while working as a high-flying human resources executive for an IT company. Nowadays we both consult to organizations on managing and developing their leadership talent, so the reasons of professional practice concern our work in this area, particularly among high flyers with symptoms of burnout. We noticed an increasing trend among this population towards action addicted, adrenalized working lives and what appeared to be – based on the number who

were burning out – unsustainable approaches to the pursuit of career. At the same time we recognized that organizations were becoming increasingly more demanding and absorptive, and as a consequence, work and workplaces increasingly more all-consuming. Like the high-speed internet connections that serve our offices and our homes, work seemed to be always on. It had become a seven-day-a-week preoccupation which was always there, brought into every facet of human life through the wonders of the Blackberry and the mobile phone. Work, it seemed, never slept, and those enslaved to it were sleeping a great deal less than they used to.

Burnout was the inevitable consequence of this heady combination of addictive behaviour and organizational greediness, or so it seemed to us. But when we referred to the literature on burnout we discovered that the leading authorities in the field believed burnout was largely caused by organizations, rather than both the organization and those who work for them. We thought this rather odd. It did not resonate with our own experience of burnout, or with what we were seeing among high flyers with whom we were working. Nor, apparently, did it resonate with leading authorities in the field of occupational stress research. For example, Cary Cooper and his colleagues noted the absence of the individual dimension in most explanations of burnout, commenting that ‘Despite the obvious relevance of personality issues, relatively little attention has been given to these variables in empirical research, and evidence for their association with burnout is inconclusive’.¹

In addition nearly all the literature talked in fervent, almost biblical terms of banishing or preventing or otherwise casting out burnout. Burnout, it seemed, was the seed of the devil and it needed to be exorcized, preferably using as many colourful exhortations as possible. This equally did not resonate with our experience. Almost no one mentioned anything about the possibility of good coming out of bad. Our personal experience of burnout was transformational. Why did no one refer to the learning that might emerge as a result of burnout? The nearest we could find was literature on the connection between trauma and personal change. But most of this concerned the psychological trauma that ensued from serious physical events such as wars and road-traffic accidents.

It was this sense of something not being quite right about what we were being told, that sent us off on our research journey into burnout. In the intervening five years we have recorded, transcribed and analysed in-depth interviews with 100 high flyers, made up of 29 different nationalities, working in 21 different countries. We have conducted survey research with this group as well as a much larger group using our own and others’ survey instruments. We have subsequently re-interviewed half of

the high flyers a year after they were first interviewed, to track the incidence of burnout among them. We have led numerous focus groups and workshops with business leaders, human resource executives and coaches to explore perceptions of burnout, its causes and ways of dealing with it. We have explored our findings with the organizations that participated in our research, to both reality test our claims, and to progress our sense-making of the causes and consequences of burnout.

At this point the attentive reader will no doubt be wondering about the connection between high flyers and burnout. What makes them so special? Surely anyone can burn out? And indeed, in the popular currency of our time, anyone can. To many people burnout is little more than a colloquial term with little explicit meaning beyond having had a bad day at the office. Popular psychology and self-help books have reinforced this indiscriminate use of the term by claiming that burnout can occur to anyone, in any context, at any stage of life. As a result, burnout has become a universal, context-free phenomenon – it is not necessarily related to work but can happen anywhere. Apparently you are equally vulnerable to burnout whether you're an over-stressed baby boomer, in a bad marriage, having a mid-life crisis or a female indoor sex worker.² Seen through this lens, burnout is 'no longer an unusual event' but has become 'part of a normal life cycle'.³

And yet the overwhelming weight of 25 years of serious, scholarly research on the subject says that burnout is a work-related phenomenon that occurs largely to those at the early stages of their careers. These are people who are more likely to be in their twenties than thirties or forties, who are restlessly ambitious, career-orientated and achievement-focused. In most organizations such individuals, if they are not formally identified as high flyers, will be perceived as such.

Despite such strong evidence to the contrary, the evocative power of the term burnout leads many people to insist they are suffering from it. Often they do so in the absence of many of the symptoms of the phenomenon. Sometimes they claim burnout even when manifesting a different, often more immediately threatening condition. A parallel metaphor is with obesity and bulimia. Bulimics think that they have a weight or obesity problem, but at some level we 'know' they don't – they have a 'bulimia' condition. A 40-year-old may have stress, exhaustion, overload, chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, existential crisis, a psychotic episode or mid-life blues, but they are highly unlikely to have burnout.

This book presents the results of our five-year research journey. Our findings point to burnout being a function of the relationship between the individual high flyer and their work environment. Certainly,

organizations – or rather their leadership teams – create the conditions for burnout to occur. The constant scramble after growth and shareholder return, an obsession with market share and performance metrics and the resultant year-on-year raising of the performance threshold for employees inevitably leads to a culture of burnout. Boardroom decisions to increase profit margin or market share more often than not lead to more work being done by less people. But it is the individual high flyer who, through his or her own choices, determines whether they burn out or not. It is not the work situation – however dysfunctional – that is the primary cause of burnout, but the way in which people interpret and choose to handle that situation.

Both organization leadership and high flyers are implicated in causing the phenomenon, but ultimately it is the individual that is the primary driver. We've interviewed high flyers in the same office, working for the same boss, experiencing the same highly stressful work environments, and quite simply some burn out and others don't. Denying there is individual volition involved in burnout confounds attempts to tackle it at an individual level, and is, we suggest, patronising for those involved. It paints a picture of 'willing slaves';⁴ semi-sentient creatures who obediently follow an autocratic work structure, in an environment where there is no room for individual choice.

Our research indicates that more often than not, those who burn out collude with dysfunctional working environments. They choose to make work and career central to their lives. They are driven by a desire for fame and recognition, and this, together with a lack of consciousness about their lives having some theme or pattern – a story, if you will – leads them into burnout. High flyers' addiction to action and adrenalized work styles often hide an identity that is strongly externally referenced – on work and career success – rather than anything from within. There is also an element of paranoia. A belief that pushing back, asking for more time or resources or confronting unreasonable demands will adversely affect career prospects.

Some of the leading researchers in the field maintain that 'popular opinion' and 'conventional wisdom' lay the cause of burnout on the individual.⁵ This has not been our experience during the five years we have been researching the subject. We agree that it is incredibly unproductive both for individuals and organizations to view burnout purely as 'a problem of the people themselves'.⁶ And although our research didn't discover such a pervasive belief within the cultural context within which we conducted research, we can understand the need to push the spotlight back onto the organization given a different context. However, we

believe the pendulum has now swung too far the other way. The paradigm one encounters within most European businesses nowadays is that burnout is a flaw of the organization and can only be addressed through some kind of organization change initiative focusing on delivering better work/life balance. Faced with the prospect of a big change project, amidst environments which are characterized by initiative overload, all but the most enlightened leadership teams have stopped in their tracks. In addition, it is difficult to find the business case for making the organization change required when there are so many competing change initiatives. In our experience, as soon as doing something about burnout equals changing the organization, leadership teams swiftly move onto the next agenda item. Though unmistakably well-intentioned, such an approach has effectively frozen attempts to address the burnout issue in large organizations.

What about the other reason for us writing this book – the absence of almost any references to the learning or change that might emerge from burnout? Here our research uncovered a paradox. We found that the greater the degree of suffering of those who burn out, the greater the potential learning. However, learning occurred for only a few. For most, burnout froze the development of identity and the evolutionary course of the individual concerned. For the lucky few, burnout revealed its transformational learning potential. It accelerated maturity and led to systemic growth. By virtue of being a kind of personal trauma, burnout caused high flyers to confront their own fallibilities and limitations, helped them gain a sense of perspective, humility and humanity, and be clearer about their own identity. This growth was hard won, however, and at considerable cost to the individual concerned. High flyers who came by this depth of learning suffered the modern equivalent of a ‘dark night of the soul’. They were required to give up the story they had constructed about themselves – their old identity – in order to form anew. For some, giving this up was like giving up their own life.

The transformational nature of the learning also significantly benefited high flyers’ organizations. Among other things, it led to the development of wisdom, a greater sense of perspective, more grounded business decision making and a sense of duty and service to others.

The reality for most of those who encountered it, however, was that burnout was a wholly destructive experience that led to the derailment of their careers. But because burnout is as much volitional as the product of the working environment, one cannot just stop it. One cannot exhort high flyers to stop burning out and expect them to do what they’re told. Only the individual at risk of burnout can take responsibility for stopping it. It is in their hands. And the simple fact of the matter is that a

large proportion of them won't stop it because they don't think there is anything to stop. Which leaves us with a dilemma. If we know that a large proportion of the high-flyer population is likely to burn out and we can't control it, what do we do about it? The proposition we explore in this book is how high flyers and their organizations can manage burnout so that it becomes transformationally developmental rather than destructive. We look at how the lessons of burnout can be assimilated so that the numbers of those who are transformed by the experience increase substantially.

But although this book is about burnout and the learning that may emerge from it, it is principally concerned with the significance of this learning for the development of high flyers and leaders generally. This learning emerges out of failure rather than success. It emerges from struggling with ordeal and resisting despair rather than strong and masterful accomplishment. It emerges from stumbling and going to the edge rather than being in control and walking tall. Many organizations have models of leadership that tend to lionize success and denigrate stumbling. Their picture of how leaders are developed is sanitized. Any notion of learning from adversity has been excised. The money is put on those whose careers have enjoyed an ever-upward trajectory, who have never stumbled (to anyone's knowledge) and who have always complied with the organization's tight, atavistic definitions of what good leadership should be. Those who do not comply, including the stumblers, are quietly removed from succession plans. The outcome is that such organizations end up with leaders who are hopelessly ill-prepared; who not only lack humanity but do not see themselves as entirely human, who act as if they were intergalactic time lords who transcend the earthly realm of us mere mortals.

Accepting the lessons of burnout requires an altogether more enlightened, more civilized and more developmental approach to leadership learning and what purports to be good leadership. Who – for example – is likely to be more emotionally robust and mature, more capable and more in tune with his or her fellow workers – the clean-shaven MBAer who has risen meteorically through the ranks without any trace of a stumble and no experience of real hardship, or the battle-scarred, succession plan outsider who has had their ups and downs and has learnt from them? Who would you trust to lead your organization? We have no hesitation in choosing the latter. We'd go so far as to say that we would actively de-select from top management succession those who have no real experience of hardship either in their professional or personal lives.

Whatever one's view of leadership, it is plain that good leadership and good leaders are not in abundance. This is in spite of the fact that year on

year millions are spent on developing leaders. Perhaps it comes down to how one defines good leadership and good leaders. And there is the problem. Because different stakeholders appear to have different views of what makes good leadership at different times. The markets applauded the strong leadership of Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling before Enron's collapse in 2001. British voters thought Tony Blair's leadership principled and strong before he plunged the country into war in the Middle East for highly questionable foreign policy objectives. Shareholders praised Lee Iacocca's charismatic turnaround of Chrysler before his obsession with furthering his personal brand led to Chrysler's stock falling 31% below the market.⁷

Since this book concerns the development of sustainable leadership – how high flyers can develop a sustainable version of themselves – we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about leadership. We believe the practice of good leadership is timeless. It is not something that needs to be handed down to us by some faddish guru, nor by business schools – who, despite their protestations to the contrary, did not invent leadership in the last 20 years. There have always been leaders and there has always been leadership. Some of it has been good.

Leadership is essentially what leaders practise – what they do rather than what they are, their praxis rather than their characteristics. Unfortunately we have become so obsessed with discerning the qualities that make leaders good or great, that we have forgotten to look at their practice. How is good leadership practised? What do good leaders do? These seem to us to be more important questions – particularly if you are on the receiving end of the leadership in question – than whether leaders are strong, charismatic, principled, visionary, results-orientated or any of the other endless attributes which are purported to be prerequisites of good leadership.

'A bequest of stories',⁸ some contained in the rich literature of our civilization from the beginning of recorded time, some simply tales which have been repeated over the ages, point to some universal and timeless practices of good leaders. We see these to be:

- forms and sustains the enterprise they are leading so that it endures over time
- brings value (more often than not, insight or learning) not just to their followers but to the wider community of which they are a part
- holds and protects their followers, providing them with inspiration to continue on the journey
- creates a climate of balance in which the collective contribution of all is sought and creativity, learning and trade can flourish

- embodies mature, vital humanity and compassion that sustains their followers through the most challenging times
- is a great source of wisdom, sound judgement and balanced decision making.

As we will see, burnout's lessons touch every one of these practices.

The purpose of this book, then, is not so much to question prevailing paradigms of burnout – although it does – but to question prevailing paradigms of leadership development and in so doing put forward a new paradigm of leadership learning.

The nature of our research

Passion makes some academics and academic publishers nervous. Passion together with experience of the research area can lead to alarm. It doesn't quite gel with the positivist fantasy of the rational scientist, objectively examining 'reality' in order to define absolute truths. Researchers with first-hand experience of their subject area are perceived by some as labouring under a considerable disadvantage. Their minds are assumed to be clouded with emotion. Yet in the workaday world this experience determines a person's capability to bring value. The first thing we want to know before hiring someone to help us is what experience they have of that with which we need help. They may have read about the issue, they may even have studied it for several years, but we know that without this 'experiential knowing'⁹ they will struggle to understand our problem. As a result any ideas they might have regarding what to do about our issue will lack resonance.

We believe that social researchers have to experience what they are researching for their research to be valid and reliable. The majority of authors on burnout appear not to have this experience.

This book is based on scientific research and theory. The data are high flyers' lived experiences of performing demanding roles in high-pressure work environments over prolonged periods of time. Our study's use of talk as data will no doubt disturb academic researchers of a positivist persuasion. We mention this because the overwhelming majority of burnout research is of a quantitative nature. Most of it is based on people's self-reports of their burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) survey tool. As a result the most widely used conceptualization of burnout is the model represented by the MBI. As Schaufeli and Enzman say, 'The MBI is the instrument of choice to measure burnout. No wonder that the definition of burnout has become equivalent to the way it is measured by the MBI!'¹⁰

Many social science scholars hold the belief that only quantitative research – that which is based on numerical and statistical analysis of ‘objective data’ – is valid research. They distrust qualitative methodological perspectives. Wilmar Schaufelli and Dirk Enzmann, for instance, whose wonderfully robust and incisive work on burnout is referenced throughout this book, write that only ‘rigorously designed and thoroughly conducted *quantitative* studies’¹¹ should be considered serious contributions to burnout research. Fortunately this is not a view held by every researcher in the field. Cary Cooper and his colleagues, for instance, note that ‘Qualitative methods reflect a richness in their approach to data gathering and analysis and should be viewed as offering a number of insights into interpretation and understanding separate from those provided by quantitative methods. If a distinction is made between description (quantitative) and meaning (qualitative), then the convergence of both approaches offers a balance and draws on the strengths of both approaches to unravel the complexities of the stress process.’¹²

While for the lay reader this may all seem academically precious, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies is an important one. In the case of this study, which sought to explore the learning that emerged from burnout, and focused on understanding people’s internal response to the experience, a largely qualitative approach was more likely to generate valid and reliable data. This becomes more obvious when one realises that the research addressed, in large part, the level of reflexivity of the high flyers concerned.

The structure of this book

The conception of job burnout as total, individual psychological and emotional devastation is very much in common currency, aided and abetted by many scholarly writers on the subject, from Freudenberger (1980) onwards. Thus there is a widespread belief that, by and large, people either burn out or they don’t. Congruent with its largely qualitative and lightly held social constructionist nature, our research holds otherwise. We see total devastation (or *crashing and burning*) as one of several possible outcomes for those experiencing burnout, or exhibiting some of the symptoms of the condition. The others are a *chronic self-destructive pattern* which is repeated over the course of a person’s career indefinitely or until they find a way of breaking it; and – for those demonstrating some but not all of the symptoms of burnout – a *joyless depletion* in which careers are lived unsustainably through addictive work styles and a failure to find sufficient nourishment and balance.

Chapter 1 presents each of these ‘types’ of burnout, starting with a story of crashing and burning, followed by a story of chronic self-destruction from one of our lives, and concluding with joyless depletion. We decided to let these stories stand without commentary in Chapter 1. Somehow the thought of putting a gloss on people’s authentic experiences rather than letting them speak for themselves seemed dishonourable. In any case, we refer back to each of these experiences in Chapter 2 to illustrate the external, environmental and intra-psychic causes of burnout as well as its consequences.

In Chapter 2 we provide our research findings on the nature and symptomatology of burnout, touching briefly on causes and consequences. This chapter is useful for the reader who wants to understand our conceptualization of burnout, how it is manifest and the current state of play in burnout research. In Chapter 3 we explore the financial, reputational and risk management consequences of burnout for organizations. Readers who want to find a way of quantifying the organizational repercussions of burnout on their high-flyer populations will find guidance here.

Chapter 4 explores burnout from the perspective of the individual: how do individuals bring about burnout, or contribute to it, and what determines whether or not they do burn out? It lays out our main research findings in each of these areas. This chapter will be particularly useful to anyone who believes they may be going through burnout themselves.

In Chapter 5 we look at the lessons burnout teaches, and the learning process of those who both learn and don’t learn. We also explore the key determinants of burnout further. Those who manage high flyers, their coaches and leadership development specialists will find this chapter useful in helping them understand the learning that emerges from the experience.

Chapter 6 sets out the business case and approach for organizations to embrace burnout as a learning process. It also details the coaching model that enables learning from burnout. This chapter provides those supporting high flyers in burnout – be they bosses, coaches or HR professionals – with practical tools to capture the learning from the experience.

In the book’s final chapter we pull together those findings from our research which mark a substantial departure from prior research, outline the significance of them for high flyers, organizations and those who work for them, and set out a new paradigm of leadership learning. Those who want a sense of the main research thrust of the book and its conclusions will find them here.

We have written this book for those experiencing or at risk of burnout, those supporting them – such as bosses, coaches and mentors, human

resources professionals and family members – and those for whom burn-out among high flyers represents a strategic issue, namely CEOs and Boards of Directors. We have tried to make it readable, accessible and interesting while at the same time imparting what are, admittedly, some fairly technically complex findings. We hope we have succeeded.

Finally, we need to say something about the tone of this book. It is explicitly developmental rather than deterministic. Our experience of leadership is that it is not something that is bestowed upon us by genetic coincidence, nor is it a divine right handed to us by God. Leadership is learned through experience. Leaders are principally made and not born.

End notes

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Sitting at the ashes of the fire

It's like being lonely...like you know...sitting at the fire...sitting at the ashes.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story.

DAN McADAMS

Holger – a story of crashing and burning

Holger's story is an example of a 'crash and burn' experience because he comes to a point after one series of events following close on to each other where he ends up derailing his career and spending a long time being not employed.

Last autumn, I made the decision to go for manager. I started to make a plan to delegate more, but it wasn't easy because everybody in our group had too much to do. I didn't want to end up doing all the work myself, but I was too nice and I ended up doing most of the work myself. Maybe I should have been stronger but it didn't make me feel good thinking of one of my colleagues working from eight in the morning to three o'clock at night to finish something, when I could do it in two or three hours.

I normally go for a medical check up every two years. My last check up was the beginning of December last year. The doctor asked me some questions about my working hours and I said, 'Yes, I work a lot, I know I do'. Suddenly he said 'Stop! You need to take it easy because what you're telling me now is crazy!'. I had told him that in two weeks I was working about 250 hours. He said, 'Even if you go on holiday, forget it, because the holiday won't be long enough. You need to stress down. This is not good'.

It's easy when you have no girlfriend living here. It's easy to say 'Hey I can work until 8' and when it's 8 o'clock 'Oh I can work until 12 because

nothing's happening tonight – I'm not going training, not until tomorrow', and then suddenly you'll be sitting in the office until two o'clock at night and then you're back again at seven the next morning.

After seeing the doctor I took a long Christmas holiday and went to see my family. I started to think maybe the Doc was crazy! I'm a healthy 33-year-old, so what's the problem? But then I talked to a good friend, who said maybe he was right. He's a very clever guy, this friend of mine, I always go to him when I have problems. I think this was the first time I ever thought I might be working too much.

I didn't learn anything because I got back to work in January and started working a lot again. The first two weeks I said 'No, I don't want to work too much', but after that I forgot what I was thinking about at Christmas. I was working on a client's financial statements, nothing new, but I was working a hundred hours a week, maybe more. Some weekends too. Sometimes I would take work home with me and watch a little bit of sport on TV and work at the same time.

Everything was fine and then after two or three months I started to get a lot of headaches. At first I thought it was because I was only sleeping a couple of hours every night. I thought it would be OK if I could get enough sleep at the weekend. But these headaches got stronger and stronger and stronger and by the end of March it was impossible to work.

One day just before Easter I was playing bridge with a friend of mine and I found I couldn't remember the cards anymore. It was such a shock not remembering something so basic.

I went to see the doctor again, and he told me that I needed to take a rest. I took a long Easter holiday for two weeks. I wasn't sleeping a lot and I was very tired all the time so he gave me some tablets.

After that I wanted to get back to work because I knew my colleague had a lot of things to do and the office was very busy. I asked my doctor and he told me I could go back to work but I must not work overtime. The quality of the work I was turning out was really bad because I kept forgetting things from the headaches. It was crazy for me to go back to work after being sick like that. I feel my boss should have told me to go home but instead he gave me more and more and more work. He knew I was doing really poor work because he was reviewing it and the client was calling him to complain.

When I got back to the office from my Easter vacation I met with my boss and told him about what the doctor had said about no overtime and that I could only work eight hours a day. I started work at eight and needed to go home at four. At three-thirty my boss sends me an email giving me a new piece of work and tells me the deadline is tomorrow morning. It was

about three or four hours' work. I was angry but I thought, OK I'll do it. It was very, very important for the client because they were going to raise their stock portfolio, and it was a lot of money for them. I guess I didn't do it for my boss but for the client. But I should never have done it.

I don't think my boss cared, it's that simple, he just didn't care. There's always someone else who can do your work. If you quit, there isn't a problem, they'll just find a new one. Somebody should have told me to go home, because the work I was doing was so bad. They knew about my situation and they should have seen that.

I don't remember much of the weeks after that. I was doing stuff but I was doing it badly. Clients would call to say I had to fix something, so I'd fix it. Then they called back and told me I had forgotten a whole load of stuff. I was physically at work but I wasn't really there at all. Then one day I thought, no, this is no good! Even for me it's no good! It's no good for my boss because it's a client and I'm not doing my work properly. So I got up from my desk and said 'Sorry, you have to do this. I have to go. I can't be here anymore'. I called my doctor. He said to me, 'OK if you feel like this, quit today, stop working right now' and I did stop. I stopped working two or three days before a lot of deadlines. I had to apologise to colleagues, 'Sorry it's too much, I'm not here anyway really...'

I went for a lot of tests and the doctor told me not to go back to work for six weeks. I started to feel really good again and by the beginning of September I had a lot of new energy. I met up with my boss in the office who asked how I was. I said I hoped to be starting work again after this break. He said, 'Maybe it's better for you and for us, when you're healthy again, that you quit'. At the time I thought it was OK for him to say that, but later I realised it was about them protecting their reputation by making sure I was healthy before I found a new employer. So first they wanted to build me up and then they wanted to break me down.

But I did go back to work, and everything was OK for two or three weeks. I wasn't working much overtime, but during the third week the headaches came back. I started to feel frightened again that I wasn't going to be able to deliver my work. Anyway, the doctor put me on cortisone and I've been off work ever since.

I've tried to analyse what went wrong. Was it the kind of work I was doing or was it that things were wrong in my work? I'm starting to think maybe I burnt out or maybe I was just very, very tired of the work and I needed to change it. I just couldn't go back to working for those guys anymore because they didn't support me when I needed them.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm not here anymore. It's really hard for me to get out of this downward spiral. I really want to find a new job as soon as

possible because I'm thinking the longer I stay here, the more difficult it's going to become.

I've learnt that work is not everything, and that I'm never going to work a hundred and twenty hours a week again. I'd rather have less salary and a good life. I think money is not everything and work is not everything. The most important thing is feeling good about yourself. Maybe the thing I've learnt most this last year is that friends mean more than anything else....

Tim – a story of chronic self-destruction

Tim's story is a case of chronic self-destruction in that it takes place over a 10 year period and has episodes of extreme symptoms interspersed with times when he was able to cope with, at least, the work aspects of his life.

If only I had burnt out. I mean really burnt out. Maybe I would have become a goat herder or the owner of a beach bar or, even, a psycho-therapist. Maybe I would have found the real, integrated me a lot quicker. Maybe my life would have been a lot happier and freer. Maybe. I'll never know. I crashed but I didn't burn. I crashed without realising it, destined to walk through life for the next 10 years repeating the same self-destructive pattern, time after time. Until finally I did burn. And then things changed forever....

We spill out of the basement restaurant in Mala Strana and weave our way down the precipitous cobbled streets towards the Charles Bridge and our hotel in Wenceslas Square. I savour the feeling of exhilaration as the wintery Eastern European air mixes with the alcohol in my bloodstream and works its magic. I feel like there's never been a more beautiful night than the one I am experiencing right now. Although barely known to me, my companions now seem like old friends who I should gift with my insights about the beauty of this night. I do so and they laugh like drains. I feel like I'm floating over the cobblestones, like I could leap into the night sky and – like Neo from the Matrix – fly up amongst the stars. Maybe my personal life is in ruins, but here, at work, I am someone. I have more than 30 people reporting to me in 15 different countries, I have a multi-million dollar budget and I'm a respected member of the leadership team. I've earned that respect by working 70-hour weeks and delivering on 10 different projects at any one time. And I've done all that with inadequate resources and against a background of constant backstabbing and dirty politics. I'm a one hundred per cent, genuine corporate hero and they ought to give me a bloody medal!

We enter Town Square. In the corner is a bar playing loud dance music, young people spilling out onto the street. I immediately make towards it,

urging my friends to join me. They hesitate then politely demur, using the excuse of needing to be on the ball for tomorrow's conference. I try to persuade them but they refuse. Finally, I shrug, bid my goodnights and make my way into the melee.

I wake the next morning to discover myself fully clothed and booted, lying face down on my hotel bed. I have no recollection of how I got there. I have only very vague and shadowy recollections of the moments immediately after I walked into the bar the previous night. I move my head and realise to my surprise I do not have the usual symptoms of headache and nausea that I associate with a bad hangover. A series of confused and disconnected thoughts pass through my mind. Maybe this has something to do with being on antidepressants? What happened last night anyway? Think I made a pass at some girl. Can't remember. Did she hit me? How did I get here? I look at my watch. I am over an hour late for the conference which I should be facilitating. I undress and walk into the shower feeling like the world is made of cotton wool.

I arrive at the conference room. My colleague, Sue, has started proceedings and now the delegates are working in small teams on separate projects. I apologize to her profusely. She asks me what happened and I explain, as best I can. She fixes me with a steely glare. I apologize again. She says something about looking so unprofessional. I agree. I realize I am still drunk. I also realize I am feeling very attracted to Sue. I make a mental note to act on this at a suitable moment.

We reach the point in the conference when the teams report back their findings. One or two of the senior players have decided to take over the orchestration of proceedings, reducing Sue and my role to that of mere spectators. They choose to ignore both the process and the outcomes we have mapped out for them. I sit writing notes, unable to disguise my utter contempt for the way in which the event has been sabotaged by the incompetence of these over-paid buffoons. I begin to realise how much I hate these people. They're emotional eunuchs that are incapable of self-examination. And they obviously dislike me. More than that, they're ridiculing me by screwing up this process by reducing it to an intellectually moribund debate. I realize I have to leave before I explode. I stand up, walk over to Sue and explain – in less than sotto voce – that I have to go and walk out of the room.

'What have you done?' These words, spoken by my boss, echo the voice inside my head. He appears more despairing than angry. Close to tears, I pour out the events of the last year, grinding to a halt every now and then to control the spasms of emotion running through me. I tell him about the job, being consumed with the work and what that's meant for

my personal life. I tell him about my girlfriend leaving me and how the only place I find peace right now is at the bottom of a bottle. I tell him about the antidepressants. I don't tell him about the talking therapy or the promiscuity or the drugs. Kind and fair man that he is, he tells me my reputation may never survive this, that I am going to have to start over, that things will never be the same again. But he doesn't fire me. He wants me to see a psychiatrist.

I see the shrink; am terrified by the experience. The assessment of my mental health becomes the responsibility of another person. I no longer have influence on what is judged to be normal, sane behaviour. I lie in bed that night and every night for the next six months, repeating the Lord's Prayer over and over again, pleading with God to save me, the tears rolling down my cheeks as I realize what I have become. The lowest point comes one quiet Sunday afternoon when I come close to suicide, but after several hours realise I do not have the courage to end my life.

Twelve months later...

- 'I feel like I'm in uncharted territory at the moment...'
- 'Yes, I think that's a good description of where you are right now...'
- 'Everything is so uncertain for me. I really have no idea, not the slightest, what the future will bring. I'm fumbling my way along in the dark here. I am filled with the sadness of the life I have been living. I haven't had the warm glow of someone who is happy to be himself for so long. I've had more a sense of identity and purpose in my professional life than anywhere else. I've bottled up my true feelings and my needs. I lost a sense of joy in my life; lost a sense of my heart's desires. Until now. 10 years later, I wake up... All this time. Working like a dog to cover up my real needs, masking my feelings, using it as an addiction. I've got to the point where I can spend a whole year, where only 15% of my working life gives me an experience of being alive.'

Ten years earlier...

Midnight on a damp Sunday night in the middle of spring. I am cocooned in intense silence, interrupted only by the muffled footsteps of passers-by on the pavement outside our North London flat. On the dining room table in front of me reams of notes written in my own hand to prepare me for tomorrow's workshop. The words swim in front of my eyes as I attempt to learn my opening lines for the next day. My head feels as if it has