

"Emily and Amelia Nagoski deconstruct the stress we experience as women, and their compassionate, science-based advice on how to release it made me cry with gratitude and relief. The book is that revolutionary."  
—PEGGY ORENSTEIN

# burnout

the secret to  
unlocking  
the stress cycle

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**Discussion Guide**

# Introduction

## A User's Guide to Burnout

*“Your body, with its instinct for self-preservation, knows, on some level, that Human Giver Syndrome is slowly killing you. That’s why you keep trying mindfulness and green smoothies and self-care trend after self-care trend. But that instinct for self-preservation is battling a syndrome that insists that self-preservation is selfish, so your efforts to care for yourself might actually make things worse, activating even more punishment from the world or from yourself, because how dare you?”*

- When did you last feel emotionally exhausted? What did it feel like?
- What helps you get unstuck, so that you can go all the way through the emotion tunnel?
- Does the description of Human Givers ring true for you? Who are the givers in your life?
- Recalling the research with the cartoon mouse escaping a maze, either away from an owl or toward cheese, what is your “cheese”? That is, where would you like to end up, after reading this book?

# Part 1: Only What You Take With You

## CHAPTER 1

### Complete the Cycle

*“To be ‘well’ is not to live in a state of perpetual safety and calm, but to move fluidly from a state of adversity, risk, adventure, or excitement, back to safety and calm, and out again. Stress is not bad for you; being stuck is bad for you.”*

- What strategies help you complete the cycle? Are there some that work sometimes and others that work other times?
- What does it feel like to complete the cycle?
- Under “Why We Get Stuck,” which of these reasons felt the most like yours? 1. Chronic Stressor → Chronic Stress, 2. Social Appropriateness, or 3. It’s Safer? What about “Freeze”?
- Have you experience “the Feels” or watched someone else experience them? What was it like?
- The arts are a social loophole, where big emotions are welcome. Where do you feel safe to feel your big feelings? In a place? With a person? Doing an activity?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?



# Part 1: Only What You Take With You

## CHAPTER 2 #Persist

*“The quality of our lives is not measured by the amount of time we spend in a state of perfection. . . . The quality of our lives, day to day, is measured by our freedom to choose to stay or leave. That freedom comes when we have abundance enough and safety enough to let go of what is broken and reach for something new.”*

- When was a time you felt “foopy,” oscillating between frustrated rage and helpless despair?
- Often what women need is not more grit or motivation or persistence, but more help. Can you think of a time when, rather than persisting at doing something by yourself, you reached out for help? What made that situation different?
- When you filled out the **Redefine Winning** worksheet, how did you work out a goal that was soon, certain, positive, concrete, specific, and personal?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?

# Part 1: Only What You Take With You

## CHAPTER 3 Meaning

*“But no matter what forces oppose you, whether it’s Human Giver Syndrome or natural disasters or personal loss, nothing can stand between you and your Something Larger.”*

*“Your Something Larger lives inside you.”*

- You create meaning when you engage with Something Larger than yourself. What is your Something Larger?
- In what ways do you engage with that Something Larger, to make meaning?
- What interferes with your connection to your Something Larger? Does Human Giver Syndrome come between you and it?
- What does it feel like to lose contact with your Something Larger and thus lose a sense of meaning in life?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?

## Part 2: The Real Enemy

### CHAPTER 4 The Game Is Rigged

*“Seeing the rigged game isn’t a neutral experience; you’ll probably feel some feelings about it as you go through the world spotting the ways the game is rigged and the ways the world is lying to you about the ways the game is rigged.”*

- What are the “headwinds” you’ve faced, the adversities that have shaped the way you grew?
- Now the harder question: What “tailwinds” have you had at your back, facilitating your growth toward the sun?
- When you filled out the **Smashin’-Some-Patriarchy Worksheet**, what did it feel like to consider the ways you’re making the world better just by doing what matters to you?
- What was an important idea in this chapter for you?

## Part 2: The Real Enemy

### CHAPTER 5

### The Bikini Industrial Complex

*“Many of us have grown into world-class ignorers of our own needs, just as we were taught to be. We don’t even notice that we’re ignoring our needs. Our bodies are sending us all kinds of signals, but we live from the neck up, only attending to the noise in our heads and shutting out the noise coming from the other 95 percent of our internal experience.”*

- How did you feel, reading about the science that says weight doesn’t have the relationship to health that the Bikini Industrial Complex insists it does? Relieved? Skeptical? Something else? Imagine a life where you can be exuberantly healthy—eating healthy food, moving your body joyfully—yet never change the size that you are today. How do you feel about that image?
- Learning to love your body doesn’t mean the rest of the world will do the same. How might you practice living with the tension between loving your body and living in a world that still punishes women for the shape of their bodies?
- What was it like to see beauty in bodies, including your own, that might not conform to the aspirational ideal? Was it easier to see beauty in yourself, or in others?
- What might it be like to begin a daily practice—maybe as the first thing you do after you wake up or the last thing you do before you go to bed—asking your body, “Hi, honey. What do you need?”
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?

## Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

### CHAPTER 6

### Connect

*“We need both connection and autonomy. That’s not a contradiction. Humans are built to oscillate from connection to autonomy and back again.”*

- The Bubble of Love is where energy is created, fueling you for your fight against Human Giver Syndrome, the Bikini Industrial Complex, and all the other manifestations of systemic misogyny. Who are the most important people in your Bubble of Love?
- Trust can be broken and repaired. In a relationship of yours where trust was broken and successfully repaired, how did you and the other person heal together?
- Which style of “knowing” characterizes you best, connected knowing or separate knowing? If you have a partner, which style characterizes them?
- With whom, or in what context, can you be fully authentic? What are the benefits to being able to put on a social mask? What are the costs?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?



## Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

### CHAPTER 7

### What Makes You Stronger

*“Sometimes we mistake our guilt about resting for our passionate commitment to the people and ideas we cherish most. But in reality, the status quo thrives in a context where people who want to change the world believe that sleep is a sign of weakness and that rest is the enemy.”*

- How comfortable are you with daydreaming and being entertained by your own thoughts? Do you find yourself getting impatient or needing distraction? What low-demand activities might facilitate your ability to daydream?
- Do you, like Emily’s students, feel guilty about getting enough sleep? Have you ever felt a little bit proud or noble for being sleep deprived? How do those feelings about rest benefit you? How do they harm you?
- When you filled out the **24/7 Worksheet**, what did you notice? Were there times where you could insert more rest?
- How much sleep do you need? How much do you get? What obstacles—external and internal—stand between you and more sleep?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?

## Part 3: Wax On, Wax Off

### CHAPTER 8 Grow Mighty

*“Again and again, women describe their madwoman as an uncomfortable, even unpleasant person . . . and they describe her fragility, vulnerability, or sadness.*

*“This uncomfortable, fragile part of ourselves serves a very important function.”*

- What is your “madwoman” like, and how would you describe your relationship with her?
- When you did the **Get to Know Your “Madwoman”** worksheet, could you find the vulnerability behind the critical, mean voice in your head? What was it like to try to befriend, rather than silence, your inner critic?
- Have you ever felt your madwoman take over in a situation where you felt something was being expected of you that was unfair? Or when you fell short of your own expectations for yourself? If you go back to that moment and ask your madwoman what she was feeling then, what would she tell you?
- Imagine that your practice of self-compassion—that is, compassion for the madwoman—helped you to heal and grow mighty. What would you do with that strength? How do you feel about that possibility?
- What was one important idea in this chapter for you?

# Conclusion

## Joyfully Ever After

*“To need help feeling ‘enough’ is not a pathology; it is not ‘neediness.’ It’s as normal as your need to assure the people you love that they can trust themselves, that they can be as tender and compassionate with themselves as you would be with them. And this exchange, this connection, is the springboard from which we launch into a joyful life.”*

- What does it feel like, when you connect with other givers and give them the gift of “You are enough”? What does it feel like to receive that gift?
- What was one really important idea in this book, an idea you’ll take away and use in your life?
- These are the final thoughts in the book. How true do they feel to you? Is there one phrase or idea that you would most like to share with someone you care about?

**Trust your body.**

**Be kind to yourself.**

**You are enough, just as you are right now.**

**Your joy matters.**

**Please tell everyone you know.**