



BURNT OUT.

Life threw high-flyer SHANNAH KENNEDY a curveball when she suffered a serious bout of “overachiever syndrome”. Here’s how she wrested back control

There’s something to be said for growing up in a family of Dutch heritage. Those hard-work values get instilled in you from an early age, meaning there’s never any time to rest. *Wash the car! Sweep the driveway! Find something to do!* Although I grew up in a kind and loving family environment, I was definitely programmed to think this way.

When I saw the movie *Wall Street* in 1987, I was 17 years old, trying to decide what I wanted to do in life. All that power, wealth and success was hugely appealing to my adolescent self, so I committed to getting a job at a high-profile stockbroking firm — and pulled it off. But there was increasing pressure to gain a degree, and I hated studying, so after a few years I chose to pursue more life experience and began looking for my next chapter.

Aged 21, I set off to explore the world. I backpacked around Europe, the Middle East and Africa, working my way through kitchens and bars. I slept under the stars high in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, dozed on a tiny wooden boat on the river Nile, swam in the Dead Sea and waitressed in a Swiss ski resort. I hitchhiked through Spain, staying in basic rooms and the odd grand castle. After two years, I came home and returned to the stockbroking firm, but no longer felt challenged. I took up a role in a golf management company and was soon looking after 12 golfers. This was followed by a sponsorship role with [sports equipment company] Bollé, where I’d spend days negotiating contracts for 200 athletes, travelling to sport events, trade shows and the Olympics.

But at the age of 27, the headaches started. They moved into lethargy. I was sick more often than not. My body just couldn’t keep up with my brain. Chronic fatigue had arrived. I couldn’t read, as light burnt my eyes. I couldn’t bear noise, as my hearing was hypersensitive. And food simply didn’t give me energy. Just rolling out of bed became an achievement, and I teetered on the brink of depression. How could everyone else keep going while I couldn’t?

I needed help: a life coach. But instead of it being about kicking career goals, we planned minuscule baby steps. Such as walking to the letterbox every day. She taught me the importance of writing down my small ticks and mini wins so I could acknowledge them and realise things were improving ever so slowly. I was gradually on the move, though it didn’t feel like it at all — it was horrible. (Think of a massive hang-over without any alcohol involved.) She taught me to love what is — that this was a gift — and that I had to take responsibility for it.

Two years of hell passed. I realised many of the athletes I had been working with in my past life were incredible creatures, but who, when their careers came to an end or injury cut short their dreams, suffered the depression I was feeling. I had witnessed several turn to alcohol, gambling and violence to fill the void after going from being an incredibly high-achiever to the scrap heap.

Slowly, my situation started to improve, but could I return to my old fast-paced life? This enforced sea change of sorts taught me to look in the mirror and start loving what I saw. To stop proving so much to others. To be my authentic self. So I became Shannah. Not Shannah from Bollé, just Shannah. And I connected with what I’d truly become passionate about: helping athletes with their plan B and stopping the wastage I was witnessing from the talent pool around me. So I studied life coaching, and 15 years later I work with athletes as well as business owners and CEOs. It’s truly alarming to see the rising numbers of highly intelligent, motivated and inspired people not enjoying longevity in their careers due to burnout.

Burnout is when you’ve forgotten who you are and where your boundaries are. When you’ve worn out your adrenal glands and

occupied the stress zone way too long. It differs from normal stress or a temporary rough patch. Burnout is the inability to function; your tank is empty and you’ve done nothing along the way to refill it. The pursuit of success has taken over and you haven’t realised you’re sabotaging it by not taking care of yourself. You’ve pushed yourself too far to cope physically, mentally or emotionally.

A 2014 survey found one in six Australian workers suffer from some form of mental illness, including anxiety, stress and depression. If you’re guilty of using sick leave for a “mental health day”, it’s a sure sign you are on your way to being part of these statistics. The typical victim of burnout is the type A overachieving perfectionist. Second are those who aren’t necessarily the driven type but suffer from burnout as they struggle to handle technology or stress.

The first step is recognising you might be feeling tired, resentful, angry or stressed, and that you don’t have the energy for exercise, food preparation, friends or family. You are overwhelmed and starting to feel fragile and depressed. Some have heart palpitations. For others, the fun in life is gone. After you have acknowledged you’re burnt out, there are tools you can gain to bring yourself back from being a passenger in life to wresting back the steering wheel.

This isn’t a quick fix; it’s a slow journey and a commitment for life to ensure you regularly fill your physical, mental and emotional

fuel tanks. Start by focusing on the fundamentals that bring you back to self-control. Return to your own values; recognise what they are and rediscover your non-negotiables. Move your body slowly — gentle walking helps to restore the damage you have done to your adrenal glands. Challenge your thoughts — positive affirmations can start the healing process. Give yourself permission to do some inner reflection. Learn to breathe and create a little stillness, after existing with shortness. Perform one activity a day to start filling your fuel tank. Learn to start saying “no” and pull back a fraction. Regain control through better time management. It’s sad that we now see workaholism and being available 24/7 as a badge of honour. And that it’s almost a competition to see who can get by on the least sleep. I often hear people

say, “I only need four to five hours of sleep a night.” My response is, imagine how effective you could be if you had eight hours!

Technology is an incredible gift, but it comes with no rulebook. Communication devices open up the same neural pathways used during gambling and other addictive behaviours, so whenever we have a spare moment we are checking for “something”, be it breaking news or updates to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and so on. We are doing this from the minute we wake until the minute we go to sleep — and sleeping with the phone next to our bed. Our subconscious works all night wondering what’s going on in the phone, so how can we expect to sleep soundly? I’ve brought back the old-school alarm clock so I can leave my phone and other devices out of the bedroom. This is a non-negotiable.

So here’s the challenge: learn boundaries. This could be something as simple as not checking your email the moment you wake up. Or turning your phone off an hour before bed so your thoughts can settle. This helps me sleep through the night rather than waking at 2am and processing my thoughts then. I’ve also learnt that stress can be managed. I’m the one who sabotages my health, so it is up to me to take control of it. Taking full responsibility for my time, technology, health and business structures has allowed me to reap the rewards of life. If a curveball comes my way, I trust I won’t topple over. It will be my full tank that supports me. ■

The Life Plan: Simple Strategies for a Meaningful Life, by Shannah Kennedy (*Lantern*), \$40, is out now.