



INTRODUCTION

How to keep working when you're dying on the inside

By Rebekah Lambert

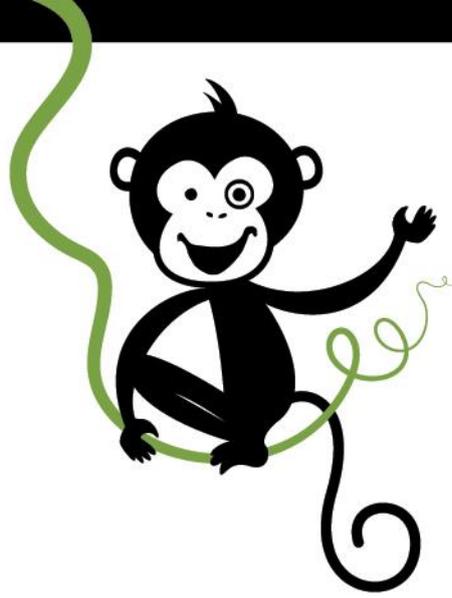


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INTRODUCTION

One day, Rod got in his car to go to work. He sat there, unable to turn the key. After sitting in his car for several hours, it was then he realised something was seriously wrong. It took him 6 months before he could even contemplate having a job again.*

That's the grinding to a halt version of dying on the inside. If you are there, you need a GP and a psychologist. Now. Please. Do not mess about with this moment because you deserve so much better than to feel like that.

Are you not quite ready to join Rod in the car but scared you might get there if things keep going?

I hear you because I have been there too.

How I died on the inside

Burn out is an insidious sensation. It sits in your marrow like a decay that's barely under the surface.

My ground zero was not at all that dramatic. It was a slow burn. It was a slow screeching of tyres on the track. It looked a lot like someone actually having a decent race.

First of all, satisfaction started to wane. I joked a lot about how I could do what I was doing standing on my head with a banana shoved in my ear. The joke started sounding desperate as the boredom cascaded in.

I mucked around on social media and wrote a lot of half chewed blogs that remain unpublished. Those half-formed blogs were particularly dark and negative in flavour. I took a lot of notes for projects that probably won't ever materialise.

The inability to finish began to weigh heavily on me. I accumulated commercially viable ideas and a host of good intentions. All the while, I was feeling increasingly out of love with any of them.



It did occur to me on occasion that perhaps, I should stop procrastinating with the work. That I should maybe get out of my way. To stretch myself. But it was easier to get distracted and treat client work like a last-minute university assignment than be smart about my use of time.

You could say my second clue was I felt less inclined to create something of my own and more inclined to consume everyone else's ideas.

I marketed air.

All I did was procrastinate, ruminate, worry, and avoid creating. As I have anxiety, I spent a lot of time staring at the work I was trying to make imagining cruel jibes, social media rejection and Mean Girl moments from my peers.

It became a habit that gave a short, brief high and a metric tonne of guilt.

Things that didn't seem to bother me before became increasingly difficult to deal with.

I had a client that absolutely sucked at time management and seemed directionless, despite having a kick arse business idea. I could feel the frustration rising with each increasingly nonsensical request.

Instead of being honest with them and tell them their sixth personnel hire or third go-round with the website wasn't about to change things, I gave in and gave up. Apathy and a lack of energy made me shut up and take the money. This was a crossing of a moral boundary and sat uncomfortably with me.

A so-called colleague spent all her time telling me in various different forms any good I did didn't mean much as I had failed to translate it financially. My sense of accomplishment, always derived from helping people, was kicked to the ground. They offered to help me with things and then repeatedly let me down. I was their ailing, failing renovation project. When I stepped away from or rejected their help, they had a unique ability to make me completely accountable for the situation. It was proof I was too sensitive, clueless and couldn't handle the truth about myself. They thought it was OK to heckle me to friends and online.



At a time of sincere vulnerability, this person's wrecking ball approach downright demolished my sense of self. And I felt like I couldn't speak out because I didn't have the tools to articulate what I was experiencing.

I was really sad. My apathy was so thick, I couldn't carve through it. I sat beneath it, whining to friends, powerless to make a change, and adding to that sense of my work being utterly meaningless.

Mentally, I felt continuously besieged. I was sick of people telling me what I should be doing for them without recognising anything I already did. Their gratitude was absent. My gratitude was non-existent. My attitude became bitter.

Yes, I knew freelancing and advocacy was thankless. I also knew that generally, not hearing from people is a great sign because it means there is nothing to complain about. I knew for every *"what about this?"* and *"why won't you let me do this?"* whine, there were nine other voices that would back me up and understand the vision.

Still, it rankled me. It was starting to downright piss me off that people would make helpful suggestions about what else I could do for them.

Wasn't everything else enough?!

It became difficult to find enough petrol to kickover my mental engine.

Good people went on mute. It's much easier to dismiss people who care about you when you've forgotten to care about yourself. Instead, the hurtful voices in my head that goad me to *"do more, be more, be better, be all the things"* abounded.

After years of having my business threatened over online bullshit, my rage was borderline violent. I hovered over the delete key and toyed with the idea of burning down my websites, my communities, everything.

I wanted to fantasise about the void my freelance business and the Freelance Jungle's absence would create. Would it teach people a lesson? I wanted comfort, but I dreamt of vindication.

Yet my courage abandoned me here, too. It seemed far more likely some faceless jerk, nameless critic or back-channelling opportunist would benefit from my



withdrawal. Mockery would ensue. They'd tell me I'd proven I wasn't cut out for community management. Or would move right in and do it 1000 times better.

It caused me to go from cheerful and hopeful to cut into thin, bloody slices by the smallest disruption.

My sense of humour, often the best protection, had become bleak and accusatory.

I recognised things had to change. Mainly because I felt horrendous.

I contemplated suicide, running away to farm yaks in Mongolia, and blowing everything up in equal measure.

Thankfully, my body stepped in, gave me a major health crisis and sent me off to doctor after doctor in search of answers. That was several months' worth of perspective altering searching in the realm of medicine. This culminated in months of work to fix my iron levels, a hysterectomy and 3 months off work. I continue to be held in check by facing two other surgeries (for my feet) as well as a renewed collection to my purpose for taking all this wonderfully (at times painful) risk.

Not the punchline you were expecting, right? In life, it rarely is.

I call myself lucky because I was forced to-

1. Re-evaluate the relationships with my clients and projects
2. Delegate running my major side project to the helpful hands of others completely
3. Stop being a martyr and giving all the time and ask for some remuneration in return
4. Audit the friendships and working relationships I had in my life
5. Relax and stop trying to be all things to all people
6. Go back to basics related to health, stress management and life direction
7. Reconnect with my purpose...although somewhat imperfectly

This isn't some success story about coming out of the blocks and saying I got my health back. It's not a success story that since I changed my business model, I'm now making millions of dollars.



What I have gotten back is feeling like work and I are friends again. We've spent the last twelve months since then getting reacquainted and a lot of that's not been easy. I had to look hard at myself. A lot of what I saw, I wasn't happy to see. But I also got the opportunity to understand why that was. I could see how I had ended up miserable with work. And what I was going to do about it.

The aim became making sure you don't follow me.

It doesn't matter if you are only flirting with ground zero or you are doing the turn circles outside the pit in the ground, asking to fall in. You can disrupt the magnetic pull before you hit gravel. You don't have to ache like I've ached. Or if you do, you don't have to feel quite so alone while you do it.



What is dying on the inside?

Dying on the inside to me means burn out in the early stages, before it becomes a land of collapse. Or it's those barren working wastelands where we've started to disconnect, but we can't quite put a label on it.

It's that gnaw of possibility that you cannot quite get to. The stretched feeling on your head and the back of your neck of being obliged to people. And that sense of obligation of a growing crush of unceasing tasks. All with no chance to play or explore.

The first indication that things aren't quite right is that jobs you used to do easily become far more difficult. Work that gave you joy no longer provides satisfaction. Work that was part and parcel of the job that is repetitive or simple seems to take longer to complete. Motivation loses its invitation to the party and stops coming around.

Space in your timetable becomes a procrastination trap. Distraction is easy. Working is harder. There's an underlying sense of guilt and frustration growing as you take so much longer to complete tasks. Deadlines can run late. Work quality may even begin to suffer. You've started making simple mistakes. Or you resent the intrusions, feedback, and client management aspects of the work.

There's a sensation of being stuck. You've designed this job and you're good at it. But working out how to find the next level or make it less repetitive to make room for other, more enticing things, seems exceedingly difficult.

It can be far more passive but still cause issues.

You could feel as though you and work are drifting apart. Or that boredom has crept in and won't leave. Maybe you've noticed you have less tolerance for client requests or disruptions to workflow. You might feel underwhelmed by the work you do. Maybe the repetitive nature of the work is getting to you.

Maybe it's not you. You remain a keen bean, but the clients, your contractors, or fellow collaborators you work with make the journey to completing a project difficult. Toxicity in the workplace or the industry can also bring you down.



Facing the same struggles over and over again can also play a part. Compassion fatigue saps your strength as you repeat the same conversations and face the same challenges with resources, value, budget, scope, and time.

Or perhaps you're seeing other freelancers and self-employed people become increasingly jaded and cynical. Maybe you don't want to fall into that trap. Or you've walked the burn out wastelands before, can hear the siren song and don't feel like completing the journey.

Whatever the case, this toolkit is designed to help you.



Why dying on the inside?

When you're a creative, self-motivated, and applied person (spoiler alert: you're a freelancer so this is most definitely you), losing our connection with work can be hard to deal with.

Actually, hard to deal with may very well be the downplay of the century.

While people get into self-employment for many and varied reasons, all the ones I've ever met value their connection with work. It's a huge part of our identity. It gives us satisfaction and meaning in life. Plus, many of us choose it because we want freedom, creativity and stretching ourselves to be the hallmarks of our career.

We take on a lot of risk, responsibility and stress because work is that important to us.

When our relationship with work changes, we are not the ones content to accept the change and rest on our laurels. Challenge-seekers by nature, we invented our own jobs, for goodness sake! We did that knowing we were setting ourselves up for a wild, adventurous ride. One filled with projects we could be proud of and opportunities we could grab.

What happens is the nature of our relationship with work changes. We grow in capability. The challenge starts to wane. But unlike the situation of getting a promotion and moving onto the next big thing, we can get stuck.

Reasons why freelancers get stuck include:

- You've built up a reputation and a rolodex of clients expecting you to do a certain set of projects using a specific set of skills
- Being popular for what you do means most of the time will be spent servicing clients in the area you've become disinterested in. Motivation drops, procrastination sets in. This leaves little time for study, learning new things and experimenting
- With skill comes seniority and with it, great income. You may become accustomed to a certain standard of living and don't want to or cannot lose that income trying new things



- Our awareness of the industry grows. With it, our concerns about what our peers and clients may think of failures increases. It means we train ourselves to take less risks.

The reasons for getting stuck can be many and varied. The one thing that is constant however is the longer you remain stuck, the harder it is to kick free. And the more likely burn out will result.

Being stuck usually fits into one of three categories:

- 1) **You're experiencing an occupational mismatch.** This is when you start to feel the work you do is ineffective or meaningless. This sensation continues to grow. It swallows up both your enjoyment of inspiring tasks and your tolerance for the day-to-day, less interesting but necessary items. You may feel as though you're having an existential crisis or your purpose in life or career. Or you may know what you want to do but feel like it's out of reach. Most of the time, you feel as though your creative energy doesn't have an appropriate outlet – it's like you can't make space for it because of competing demands
- 2) **External influences are hampering your progress.** Here, devoting energy to thorny people and problems of their making may be taking its toll. You could be dealing with stakeholders and working partners that keep changing the goal posts. Their lack of direction may feel contagious. You may start to feel as though you are being asked to do things a lot that simply don't make sense, let alone have meaning. Or perhaps you're being exposed to toxic relationships where bullying, humiliation and/or negativity are a regular feature. It may also be structural issues such as working in fields where the aims are lofty, but the resources are low, leading to systemic industry issues that make you feel as though you are robbed of your power
- 3) **You've fanned the flames of individual burn out.** This is when negative self-talk rules the roost and nobbles you from the inside. Its hallmarks include self-criticism, perfectionism and neuroticism. You are highly aroused by situations and find it difficult to lower the temperature back to safe levels. Over time, it brings self-doubt, a genuine inability to connect with the work, and a loss of identity through being unable to connect positively with your self-image. You



seem to attract negative people and situations that continually affirm these feelings.

No matter the cause, burn out is a lot like a major blockage in the creativity and choice systems. It's a like a blockage of possibilities laced with a loss of control. You and your potential are out of synch with one another. You stare across the abyss to what it means to be working on meaningful work. Something or someone appears to be getting in the way.

The other problem too is that the longer you feel the burn, the harder it is to imagine a future out from underneath it. Confidence dwindles along with our ability to cope. Our enthusiasm seems to die with it, and we enter a situation where we do what we can to survive. This convinces us that the ability to thrive is further and further away.

Yet burn out is a place where knowledge is power. Action is your best friend. And incremental progress is your saving grace.

By choosing to be here with me, you're committing to uncovering one and taking the other. There's a heck of a lot of power in making these decisions.



Taking your temperature

One of the first things we need to do is work out where things are for you. Let's take a deep dive into where you sit with things.

Does this sound like you?

- You wake up tired, even after going to bed early
- You find it difficult to stay present in the moment
- You are wrestling a high-volume workload that often spills into overtime or working on weekends when you'd prefer not to
- You question if you are moving fast enough with your business
- You worry your contemporaries are leaving you behind
- You feel as though you've lost control over the work you do
- The work you do is repetitive and doesn't invite creativity
- It takes you longer to psych yourself up to do the work than it used to
- Procrastination is a big feature of your workday – from social media scrolling to tidying your desk and organising work files
- Small tasks, especially repetitive ones, such as admin frustrate you
- You have started to dread communication and feedback
- You've begun to shy away from interactions – online and face-to-face
- Interruptions when working seem to have more impact than they used to
- You can no longer tell if your work is of an agreed standard
- You appear to be repeating the same challenges over and over again

Any of this feeling eerily familiar? It's time to make a change to connect with work in a meaningful way.



You are not alone

We're living in a tough world. We're expected to be switched on and fabulous a lot of the time. High stress impacts and burn out are affecting more people. [1 in 5 Australians now report taking time off from work](#) because we're stressed, anxious, depressed or otherwise feeling mentally unhealthy. Untreated mental health conditions cost the Australian economy approximately [\\$10.9 billion a year](#). And that's without significant research into self-employment or freelancers added to the mix.

You might be startled to know that we're in crisis when it comes to work and our relationship with it in Australia. Over 60% of Australians feel [insecure about their work](#). [40% of people have had their regular role casualised](#).

A Victorian study found that 17% of our suicide total can be [attributed to work](#). We also have an extraordinary workplace bullying rate, with [5-7% of workers experiencing bullying within the last six months](#). And [40% of Australian workers](#) experience it early in their career. Again, the bullying can and sometimes sadly does circle back to suicide.

In the 2019 survey reported entitled [The State of Australian Freelancing](#) produced by the Freelance Jungle, 16% of people had chosen freelance life due to redundancy, being squeezed out, fired or toxic culture. 22% wanted a better working relationship to spend more time with family. 7.5% wanted the ability to manage their physical and/or mental health better.

That sends a fairly strong message that traditional workplaces aren't catering to basic human needs such as respect at work, time to have a life or the ability to look after ourselves.

When I had the pleasure of sharing the stage in 2015 with former head of research for Beyond Blue Nick Arvanitis at Vivid Ideas, I found out that while 7 out of 10 companies aspire to be mentally-friendly workplaces, it's more like 4 out of 10 that are willing to put in the hard yards to get there.

That's a huge gap in desire and activation.



Is it any wonder that 2015 research conducted by the Australian Psychological Society (APS) found that [26% of people were experiencing burn out?](#)

We all know the jokes about workplace flexibility and caring companies being reflected in being able to take the extra hours home. Or offsetting long hours by throwing beers at us in the evening and free yoga in the morning. Sadly, it looks like this is the reality.

Workplace flexibility is not a true reality in Australia.

You would think that as self-employed people, we would be able to circumvent the issues the traditional workplaces face.

Anecdotally, many people have chosen freelancing in Australia because we've worked out the structures don't support us.

That's why we have a bunch of people that have created their jobs to support-

- Family and maternity needs
- Mental health issues
- Physical health issues
- Unexpected diagnosis
- Disability management
- Living regionally
- Escaping and recovering from toxic workplaces
- Travel
- Study
- Making more money and/or work less hours
- Having more autonomy
- Challenging ourselves
- Creating space for side projects, entry into the start-up scene and more

Yet we appear to have deeply ingrained attitudes and habits, especially when it comes to overwork and accepting poor working conditions (e.g. late pay, abusive clients etc).



The freedoms we covet are traded for the promise of jobs and rush fees with too much ease. Our feelings of financial insecurity are exacerbated by the feast and famine nature of freelancing. We lack workplace protections, so we feel vulnerable and say yes too readily. Our bosses are many and varied, making leadership inconsistent.

We're adept at putting up and shutting up with situations that are not healthy.

As a result, the [2019 Freelance Jungle survey](#) had 18% respondents who were burning out or had already done so. A further 30% identified apathy, disconnection and procrastination, some strong symptoms seen in future burn out cases, as real concerns.

It becomes difficult to stay in the headspace needed to produce quality freelance work. Why? Because the freedom to have a lifestyle we design for ourselves means we often don't get around to designing it at all. We have no contingency plan for the demands of a wildly successful freelancing career.

We're freelancers, not psychologists. That means we're often woefully under-prepared for the amount of client wrangling we have to do. And we rarely, if ever, consider our role in terms of leadership.

We don't help ourselves by being caught up in websites that invite scarcity and encourage us to outbid other freelancers. Or by the glorification of overwork freelancing that translates into eating tinned corn at the desk and joking about it with our peers. The desire for fame and a big juicy profile replaces the freedom.

Mainly, we forget why we started freelancing in the first place.

It's time to get that back.



**WHAT YOU NEED
TO MAKE THE
MOST OF THIS
COURSE**



WHAT YOU NEED

To be able to make the most out of the 'How to keep working when you're dying on the inside course', you will need the following:

- **6 to 10 hours to work on your business.** This may include listening to podcasts and working on exercises in your spare time. It also means attending individual and/or group coaching sessions and presentations (the latter has playback if you cannot attend live).
- **A journal or some similar place to place your notes.** Some templates will be supplied. However, you need to ensure that you take the time to put additional thoughts down somewhere.
- **An attitude that is open to change.** No amount of me or anyone else kicking your butt up a hill will make change if you have decided it's pointless or doesn't warrant your attention.
- **A healthy dose of self-compassion.** Recovery, change, working with yourself, identifying risks to self or work- all these things are uncomfortable. You have to be kind to you to get through.
- **A willingness to do the homework, even when not requested, reviewed, or shared.** This is about commitment. There's nothing wrong in saying, "that didn't work for me" after doing something because you learn that it's not your jam. Where it becomes problematic is if you assume and/or embrace cynicism and let that guide you instead. Be open to giving the opportunity to learn a decent shake.
- **Compassion towards your teacher.** There will be typos, strange sentences, scrapes, and bumps in this course. It started as a book and a pandemic forced it to be something else entirely. Some of it may not apply to you. Working with me to create a better course does more for us both in the long run.



WHERE TO FIND EVERYTHING

The majority of what you need will be found on WordPress via your Patreon login. It will guide you through things.

However, you will also need to:

- **Know your Patreon login** to access Crowdcast presentations and group coaching sessions as well as the WordPress based course. *This is linked to the email address you used to sign up to Patreon.* (note: this may differ to your Facebook email)
- **Select session times on my Acuity calendar.** To book a sessions for individual coaching, you will need to access times here:
<https://ucfjbooking.as.me/PATREON>
- **Have access to Zoom.** Individual sessions will be run on Zoom, so you need to download it if you have not already done so. As I have a paid account, you do not have to pay anything for Zoom. You can download Zoom here:
<https://zoom.us/download>
- **Access your email for recordings of individual sessions.** For privacy purposes, these Zoom files will be sent via Dropbox as a link. You can then download the audio and/or video as needed.
- **Download eBooks.** You will be given a template workbook to do your homework in (in addition to any extra journal thoughts). You will also receive a short booklet on models referenced throughout the course to refer to. As well as any supporting eBooks to read related to course material. Please make use of them.
- **Listen to podcasts.** Some sections are recorded in part or full in podcast form. Please take the time to listen to them as they provide information and context.



The Freelance Jungle is an Australian online support community aimed at ending the isolation inherent with freelance life and self-employment. A place for information sharing, stress reduction purposes and deals with the daily life of being a freelancer. We're low on sales and high on relationship and community building.

OUR AIMS

- » Build community and end isolation.
- » Raise the bar for Australian freelancers (and our adopted Kiwi cousins) through information sharing and strength building as an industry.
- » Remind freelancers that stress has a productivity cost- and to give practical strategies to combat the stress, mental health issues and suicidality within self-employment.
- » Replace the lost camaraderie of 'working for da man' with online and offline places to go.
- » End the stigma associated with self-employment and create a viable and prosperous future industry.

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