

The Modern Editor Podcast – Episode 26: How to Avoid (or Recover From) Burnout

Tara Whitaker: [0:03] Welcome to *The Modern Editor Podcast*, where we talk about all things editing and what it's like to run an editorial business in today's world. I'm your host, Tara Whitaker. Let's get to it.

Tara Whitaker: [0:18] Hello? Is this thing on? [chuckling] Hello, there. It's been a while, hasn't it? To be specific, it's been just shy of four months since we have chatted here on *The Modern Editor Podcast*, and that break was not intentional. Not even in the slightest. And that's what we're gonna talk about today. If the title of this episode wasn't hint enough, we're going to talk about where the heck I've been, why I had to take some time off (*hint* burnout). We'll chat about my tips on trying to avoid it in the first place. Or, if you're too far into it, how to get out of it. Because burnout happens to all of us at some point. Hopefully it doesn't, but [for] a lot of us it does. Especially to those of us in the freelancing world.

Tara Whitaker: [0:18] You know, when you are the business, when you're a solopreneur, and you wear all of the hats, you can get too much on your plate very quickly. It accumulates very fast, and it sneaks up on you. And that's exactly what happened to me. So, I'm going to share my experience with you about what's been going on over the last four months, the lessons I've learned, and what I'm going to do in the future to hopefully avoid this happening again. Or at least to this level. And my hope is that by sharing this, it's going to help at least one of you in some small, tiny way to either avoid burnout, or more quickly recover from it. Hopefully avoid but, you know, this is reality. Before we dig in, I do want to make a content warning that I'll be briefly mentioning depression and eating habits as it relates to my personal burnout experience. And I will mention those when I talk about the signs of burnout for me. So, let's get started.

Tara Whitaker: [2:14] Let's go back to the beginning. It's April, beginning of April. I released my 25th episode on the podcast called "How to Find Time to Get Things Done." And at the time of this recording, it is my most downloaded episode to date. And I talked about doing a time audit to see what you actually have time to do. And I'm really proud of that episode. And it resonated with a lot of you. And you told me how much you enjoyed it and how much doing a time audit helped you, which was amazing. And then, here's where the problem comes in, though. I took my own advice for once and did my time audit. You know, I've done them in the past and I was like, oh, you know, this is good time to do another one. Shocker of all shocks I saw in, you know, paper and pencil right in front of my eyes—I was stretched way too thin. I was swamped. And I knew I was. I knew I was just based off of the signs we're going to talk about, but that time audit showed me clearly, I had too much on my plate. And yet, I kept adding to it, even though I knew it was too much.

Tara Whitaker: [3:23] And the reason I did that was quite simple. It was for money. We had big expenses coming up this summer. And I panicked. I'm like, oh my gosh, how

are we going to cover all this? We've got a bunch of traveling for family things. I've got Invisalign, you know, we have kids' stuff. Just all the things and everything is so expensive now, right? And I panicked. And then I overcompensated to the extreme. I was so focused on money that I let all of my priorities, like my physical health and my mental health, take a backseat. And guess what? Ta-da! Burned the *eff* out. What also didn't help is that April was my highest revenue-generating month ever in my business. I made the most money I've ever made in April, when I was burned out. That's not helpful. Because I was actually accomplishing the goal I had of: we need money to do these things. But at what expense, right? It was absolutely not sustainable.

Tara Whitaker: [4:30] So, even though I knew better, even though I saw the signs—because I've been burned out before—it hit hard. It hit me like a ton of bricks. And it has taken me until very recently to begin to even feel like I was normal, or back to normal for me. So that's why we're going to talk about the warning signs. These are the ones that I experience when I am on the verge of burnout. They may be different than yours. So, we'll talk about, you know, keeping an eye on that. But these are the ones that I experience. And I'll share with you my experience with how to recover from it. If you're way past the signs, and you know that, you know, there's some work to be done. And just—just to be clear, I'm not a doctor. This is not medical advice. None of this should be construed as anything like advice or recommendations. These are just my symptoms and signs. So here we go. These are the big ones. I had a lot! We don't have time for all of that, but I will give you the ones that were the most, either the—we'll say worst or the most prevalent.

Tara Whitaker: [5:42] The first one that's always a sign for me is when I have to work repeatedly during my off-hours in order to just simply get things done. Not because I want to. Not because I have a burst of inspiration. Not because, you know, I had to adjust my schedule for a sick kid or anything. Because I had no other option unless I just missed my deadlines, which for me is not an option.

Tara Whitaker: [6:06] So, I usually keep “traditional” work hours. I usually work about 9am to 4pm my time. Obviously, there are some exceptions to that. But that is what works for me in my brain. And I like to keep those boundaries in place because before 9am and after 4pm, that's set aside for other things. Number one, I enjoy my sleep, and I never know day-to-day how much I'm actually going to get with two kids under five who have sleep regressions and illnesses and attitudes and all of the other things. So, I don't want to wake up early to work. I want to sleep. And I don't like working at night. I never have. I've never been one of those people that can pull an all-nighter. I just can't. I would rather go to bed at midnight and wake up at 4am to finish something. I would rather not do that at all, but I just I can't work late. My brain is done. And when my kids get home, that's, that's family time. Like, again, there are exceptions, of course, but I don't want to be working. And I don't want to be working after they go to bed because that's me time and me and husband time. Like that's not work time. I like to keep my work within a certain time boundary. And during April, especially, but in the months previous, that was not the case. I was working all hours, which does not work for me at all. So that was my biggest warning that I needed to make a change.

Tara Whitaker: [7:37] I also had a very big— Big? That's not the right word. I had major trouble focusing. Now as a society, I think this is becoming more and more prevalent. But for me and how I am able to focus, I could tell that I couldn't focus at all. I would get so flustered about my to-do list and all the things I had to get done that I would just, like, flit from one thing to the next without actually getting any real work done or making any real progress because I would just hop from one thing to the next, panicking. My phone was attached to my hand because then I would like, you know, *I don't want to deal with this*, and then I would mindlessly scroll for who knows how long. It was bad. I mean, I really had a hard time focusing. And as an editor, that's not a good problem to have. You need to be able to focus. So that was the second big sign.

Tara Whitaker: [8:34] I also just had a general lack of motivation or desire or energy to do anything extra outside of my— we'll call them obligations or things I just had to do. I met my deadlines, I continued to serve my clients and club members, which I was very proud I was able to still do that. And I, you know, spend time with my family and friends. But that took everything I had. There was no extra anything. I would have ideas for the business, and I would write them down, and I would have absolutely no desire to take any action on them just because I had nothing left to give. And kind of going along with that—I didn't lose touch with friends, but I didn't make as much of an effort to meet up in person. It just felt too exhausting and too taxing. And I didn't want to rub off my negativity or my *ick* on anyone else. And I didn't realize I did that until after a while actually when I met up with my friend Amber and we were talking about it and we, we kind of both had a funk at the same time. And this was my funk.

Tara Whitaker: [9:47] And again, going along with that, I had no desire to move my body. Like in any meaningful way. I didn't want to work out. I didn't want to do anything extra. I was being a real baby. I was like, I just don't wanna. And as a result, I got super stiff and sore, and everything hurt. And I just didn't feel good. Big, big warning sign.

Tara Whitaker: [10:11] Another one is fatigue, which is a little tricky, because who is not tired in some capacity these days? And I'm a big fan of naps. Oh, I love a good nap. But I don't want to have to take a nap. I want to take a nap because I enjoy a nap. Like it's just that downtime. You get all snuggly and cozy. I don't want to take a nap because I can't function without it. And that's sort of what happened. I would go, I'm gonna take a quick 30-minute nap, and I'd wake up four hours later. Like, am I sick? Am I— Something wrong? And I think this is where depression sort of flared up a bit. Full disclosure, I'm on depression/anxiety medication—love it, big fan. But I think it flared up a bit. And I don't know if the burnout was a cause of it, or if the depression was with the burnout. I don't know how that works together, but I knew that it wasn't normal for me. And I just was tired all the time.

Tara Whitaker: [11:15] And my eating habits changed. I'm a fairly consistent eater, you know, three meals a day with snacks in between. But there are days that I would eat so much, and there are days that I'd barely eat anything. My cravings would change. I'd hyperfixate on one type of food or meal until I was sick of it. Which, I do that normally. Like, I find a really good recipe or meal that I really like, and I'll eat it until I can't even

look at it anymore. But it was more, it was exacerbated over the last four months. And also, I could tell that it was happening more frequently than it normally does.

Tara Whitaker: [11:56] So those were my biggest signs. Again, yours might be similar, exactly the same, or maybe they're totally different. And it's, it, unfortunately, it's something that you just kind of have to recognize for yourself because there's not any one particular surefire way of recognizing it, because everyone's different. Other signs that I've heard people talk about are things like massive impostor syndrome, or like overwhelming fear of doing anything, or a real negative feeling about just everything, or you go down gross rabbit holes. Not fun rabbit holes, but icky rabbit holes. Those are just some other symptoms. But there are signs—symptoms/signs. So, if you feel like you're acting differently, or if maybe a friend or partner notices something that might be a warning sign for you. And keep note of that. Because chances are, if this happens again, those same signs will pop up again, and there'll be a little bit of a warning like, “hey, hey, yo, something's off here.” You might need to readjust. So those are the signs.

Tara Whitaker: [13:08] Now let's say you're like me, and you knew the signs, and you chose to ignore them anyways. And you're burned out. You're, you're fully in the burnout phase. Here's how I have attempted to recover from that burnout four months ago. Again, this might not work for you, but this is just my experience. My biggest overall takeaways are—there's two of them. One is to start very, very, very small. And two is to be patient. I know, easier said than freakin' done. Like I'm the least patient person ever in existence. But I had this dream of *Oh, I'm burned out, I'm just going to be ready to go in May. I just need to take a couple weeks off. No big.* Ha-ha! It took clearly way longer than I thought it would. And I didn't realize how burned out I was until I was in it. Like I knew I was in April. May—*pleh*—yuck! But then I thought okay, now we're done. But then June, I was still feeling the same way. In July, I was still feeling the same way. And it's now, only now in August—and we're only a week in—that that fire is coming back and my, my normalcy for me is coming back. It takes a long time. Or it can take a long time, at least it did for me.

Tara Whitaker: [14:36] And it's sort of like being physically ill. We know that when we're physically ill rest is important. It gives our body a chance to recover. It's the same with burnout. You have to give your mind, your body, your emotional state rest. Which for some of us, including me is very hard to do. I want to go, go, go. I don't have time to rest. But the more you rest, the faster you recover. And that's what I found. I really had to be patient, remind myself that this will pass. I have to take small steps. But the burnout also didn't happen in a day. The burnout accumulated over time. It's kind of like pregnancy. You carry a baby 9 to 10 months, and then you have it, and you're like, *Oh, hey, okay, baby's out, body back to normal.* No, no, no, no, no. It can take years for your body to get back to its, its semblance of normalcy, or whatever your new normal is. It is a physical trauma. Burnout in a way is a—I mean, very much lowercase trauma, but it's a, it's, it's a thing, it's a mental hit. And you've got to give your mind and body a rest. So, there's my little Tara Tangent: start small, be patient.

Tara Whitaker: [15:49] Now, for the starting small. What I did was I figured out, okay, these were those signs that I'm experiencing, what can I do in some small way to work

toward fixing it. So, I'll take a couple of my signs here. I didn't want to move my body, I was like, I'm not a fan. So, if I was watching TV, I would force myself to do some stretches, you know, point my toes, roll my wrists and ankles, lean down and do a butterfly thing, whatever. Whatever you're capable of doing. Something just teeny tiny. And if you need to reward yourself for doing it, or, like I did, do it while you're doing something else you enjoy. If you're reading a book, maybe you stretch your neck or stretch your arms. Just get moving. Or if you need to go to the grocery store, again, if you're—this is if you're physically able—maybe park a few spots down from where you normally would and get those extra steps. And I'm talking very, very, very, very small steps. Here, I'm talking about them literally, but also figuratively.

Tara Whitaker: [16:54] Another example is I was scrolling way too much. Way, way too much. Not productively, mindless scrolling. I put my phone in another room. When the kids came home, the phone went in another room. I couldn't have it anywhere near me because I was addicted. It was too tempting to have it nearby. Another thing I did, which I know this might cause some backlash, but I closed out all of the tabs and windows on my computer, except for the ones that I needed for the particular task. I know, I am a multiwindow, multitab kind of person. I'm kind of back to that, but I—it was just too overwhelming. I got too distracted. I couldn't focus. So, I would only have a couple of tabs open at a time. When I was done with those or that task, I would shut those tabs and then open the next set. And do that until I felt more comfortable having multiple tabs open.

Tara Whitaker: [17:53] Another thing you can try and do is to scale back or take some things off your plate. This one is hard. This one is very hard for me. I don't like delegating. I still have a hard time asking for help. But it has to be done. That is why I held off on new podcast episodes. Originally, I was like okay, well I did one in April, I'm gonna skip the second one in April, I'll come back strong in May. May came around and was like nope. June came around—nope. July came around—nope. Just now, I'm finally feeling back to it. And I missed it. And I wanted to do it. But that motivation and energy was not there. I have so many ideas for episodes and so many things written down from the past four months. But it was the action that was missing. And I'm only just now taking the action. So, if you can, scale back. If you can, delegate. And that can be home things, it can be business things. Whatever you can get off of your plate, even if it's just for a short time. Any bit helps. Any little bit.

Tara Whitaker: [19:03] Ah, another one is to get really honest with yourself about your priorities and what's important. And I know I touched on this before and I know I've touched on this in multiple other episodes. And I'm going to keep repeating it because it's, it's important. In April, my priority was money, simply money, panicking money. And it overtook my other priorities—my physical health, my mental health, my quality time with my friends and family and loved ones and people I care about. It was not worth it. It was a short-term, poor decision that went through for months. I can always make more money. I only have one body. I only have, you know, this time right now. Maybe I don't. Maybe there's another life. Who knows? But for now, you know, I can always make more money. I can't get back the time spent with people that I care about, and I know that and those are absolutely my priorities, but I let the money one take control. So, I

had to do a major priority shift and remind myself that, yes, things are expensive. Yes, we do need money, but not at the expense of my body and health and mind. Which, you know, took a little bit more time than I care to admit. But I'm back on solid ground now. So, get really honest with what your priorities are.

Tara Whitaker: [20:26] And the last thing that I mentioned before, I found that at the end of the day, even after all of these small steps I took and, and you know, putting my phone in the other room and all these little things, I simply needed to give myself time. Just time. I couldn't force it, I couldn't rush it, which annoyed me. But I just had to be patient and give it time. And I did. I gave it four months. And now. Now, I'm, like, raring to go. I have so many—I mean, like I said, I have so many ideas, and now I have the energy and capacity to take action on those ideas. But it took four months.

Tara Whitaker: [21:07] So that is my current experience with burnout. I really hope that that helps in some small way. Because it is not fun. If I can help one person avoid it or recover faster from it, I will be a happy camper because I, I help small business owners. I love small business owners. I want us all to be healthy and to be able to do this for as long as we want. And burnout does not fit into that equation. It sets us back in many, many ways. And I don't want that for us, I want us to rock on and, you know, have fun and make money and help people and not have to do all these things. And it was a very big eye opener for me because I realized I make an excellent coach because I'm great at helping people get through their things. And I am awful at taking my own advice. It's so much easier to help someone else with their stuff than it is to help with your own stuff. Right? Nothing has been more apparent than that throughout this experience.

Tara Whitaker: [22:14] So, if, if you are on the cusp of burnout or if you are deep in it, my door is open. I don't want to say I'm done with it, because I still think there's some residual things lingering that, again, are just gonna take some time, but I am more than happy to chat about this with you. Or if you think that you're maybe burning out and don't know for sure, please grab a free chat with me. I do 15-minute chats but I'm going to be honest, a lot of the times they are way over 15 minutes because we get to talking. But we can stay at 15 minutes if you'd like. There's no judgment. Just if you need an ear to listen, I am more than happy to help you. So that is it. I'm back. I'm back! So, until next time—which will not be in four months, I promise—keep learning, keep growing, and know that you've got this!

Tara Whitaker: [23:08] Thank you so much for tuning into today's episode. If you enjoy *The Modern Editor Podcast*, I would be so grateful if you left us a review over on iTunes. And as always, you can head to tarawhitaker.com to connect with me and stay in touch. We'll chat again soon.