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When land is over-farmed, areas once fertile may turn into deserts. In humans, a similar process can occur. It is called Burnout. Inspired by permaculture principles, Chris Johnstone looks at what we can do to reduce the risk.

### 1. VALUE YOURSELF AS A RESOURCE

There is a real problem of erosion of idealism. Each year, just as forests and topsoil are lost, so too are activists for our world. You may know people who've given up, burnt out or become disillusioned. How can we keep alive the flame of inspired action?

Permaculture is about conscious design to conserve and regenerate the earth's resources. If you recognise and value yourself as one such resource, you can then apply the principles of permaculture design to your life.

### 2. RECOGNISE THE RISK

It happens. People who are idealistic are more likely to burn out and activists (here broadly defined as those active in serving purposes bigger than themselves) are a high-risk group. If you're aware of the risk, you can take steps to reduce it. So what is burnout? Ayala Pines and Elliott Aronson, in their book *Career Burnout – Causes and Cures*, define it like this:

*Burnout is defined, and subjectively experienced, as a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding. The emotional demands are most often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stresses.*

*Burnout is accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, disillusionment and the development of negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, people and life itself.*

*In its extreme form, burnout represents a breaking point beyond which the ability to cope with the environment is severely hampered.*

Basically life goes sour, you lose your spark, and you stop being fun to be with. In severe cases, the consequences can be more serious and include addictive behaviour, depression and suicide.

### 3. SELF-MONITORING

Problems that develop slowly are often more difficult to recognise. The effects of chronic stress can build up over time, such that it is possible to drift into a state of depletion. How would you know if your inner reserves were running dry? The following symptoms could be possible warning signs:

- Irritability
- Loss of enthusiasm
- Feeling resentful or hostile to others
- Forgetting things
- Muscle aches
- Waking up feeling tired
- Frequent illness
- Losing the joy in life

### 4. IDENTIFYING HOT-SPOTS

Read the following half sentence and see what words naturally follow: "The times I feel most under stress are when..." When you complete this sentence, you describe your 'hot spots' for stress. Can you design ways of avoiding, reducing or responding differently to these?



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### 5. COMMITMENT CROPPING

Like a hedge that needs to be cut back from time to time, our commitments need regular review and pruning to prevent overload. You can do this by first listing all the different roles you play in your life, then identifying the commitments or demands that come with each one. If you are feeling weighed down by too many obligations, go through the list and for each item, ask yourself “what would happen if I didn’t do this?” If more would be gained than lost, then consider letting that item go.

### 6. FEED THE SOIL (OR EMOTIONAL BANK BALANCE)

If you are constantly giving out your time, energy and attention, you also need to have equal measures of nourishment coming back in. This is like feeding your soil if you want to continue getting a good crop. So what nourishes you? How can you promote personal renewal?

### 7. COMPANION PLANTING

Some plants grow better with company. Relationships of mutual encouragement and support can help bring out the best in yourself and others around you.

### 8. REVIEW YOUR EXPERIENCE OF SUCCESS & FAILURE

Failures and disappointments can be great sources of learning, but they still suck! The experience of success


nourishes you, so is worth making room for and savouring. It is also worth reviewing how you define success. What are the steps towards this? If you can identify achievable steps you can take each day that move you in the direction you want to go, then every day can contain mini-victories. Noticing these is a great way of feeding enthusiasm and confidence.

### 9. CROP ROTATION WITH FALLOW PERIODS

Fallow periods allow for soil renewal. We can apply the same principle in burnout prevention – having times

when we’re not expecting ourselves to be productive is good for personal sustainability. Sometimes a change is as good as a rest, so stepping outside our usual routines, or even approaching familiar activities in new ways, can have a rejuvenating effect.

### 10. GROW THE CROPS YOU MOST WANT TO GROW

Follow your enthusiasms, desires and dreams. When you’re coming from your ‘wants’ rather than ‘shoulds’, it is easier to keep going. You are likely to be more effective that way too 

Chris Johnstone is author of *Find Your Power*; Nicholas Brealey Publishing; price £12.99; available from



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His free email newsletter *The Great Turning Times* focuses on how we find our power to respond to global issues, see [www.GreatTurningTimes.org](http://www.GreatTurningTimes.org) for details.

Information about Chris’s courses can be found at: [www.chrisjohnstone.info](http://www.chrisjohnstone.info)

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