



How millennials became the burnout generation

Author Anne Helen Petersen on why millennials have internalized the worst parts of their condition.

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“We’re trying to build a solid foundation on quicksand.”

That’s how Anne Helen Petersen, author of *Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the*

Burnout Generation, describes the plight of most millennials in America. We're a generation that has never quite been able to find any stability, economic or otherwise. And it's not just because we've endured two financial crises (the Great Recession and now the **coronavirus**), though that's obviously part of it. It's because the world we've inherited set us up for burnout.

The sort of burnout Petersen describes goes beyond mere exhaustion, which is at least fleeting. If you're truly burned out, there's no escape. It's what happens when you live without any margin for error, when you're always one accident or illness away from bankruptcy or eviction. Living so close to ruin saps the joy from nearly everything because there's no security, no peace of mind.

According to Petersen, this is the baseline condition for the vast majority of millennials — whether they work in retail or the gig economy — and it's become so internalized that most of us can scarcely imagine a different way of being in the world.

I reached out to Petersen to talk about millennial burnout and why she thinks it's similar to but also different from the experiences of previous generations. We also discussed the role of capitalism in transforming society, the collapse of the American dream, the impossible dilemma faced by parents in this culture, and why social media is making everything worse.

A transcript of our conversation, lightly edited for length and clarity, follows.

Sean Illing

You did a ton of survey research for this book asking millennials to describe the state of their lives. What were the most common complaints or themes?

Anne Helen Petersen

A lot of sadness and regret. Many people I heard from believed they made the choices they were supposed to make and it led them to a deeply unsatisfying place. They had confidence in the path, society assured them it was the right path, so they went to

college and took out debt and expected things to work out. Or they pursued a certain career and found themselves continually exploited and continually behind. The end result of that is a kind of despair and anger, and it came across in the surveys I conducted.

Sean Illing

What is it about the world millennials inhabited that makes burnout so pervasive?

Anne Helen Petersen

The overarching thing is precarity. Precarity has been connected to burnout historically — we just haven't called it that. We haven't paid much attention to it because it was always a smaller percentage of the population that had to grapple with it. People in poverty have been dealing with burnout forever. The burnout experienced by millennials is textured by how we interact with digital technologies, and some of our ideas about work and the fetishization of overwork. There's a feeling of instability that's the baseline economic condition for many, many millennials, and it's enhanced by these other components of our lives that make it harder to turn away from.

Sean Illing

Can you unpack what you mean by “precarity” and “burnout”? Because I think these are slippery terms for a lot of people.

Anne Helen Petersen

Precarity is the state that most Americans find themselves in. It's operating with the knowledge that one big life gust (a car accident, a serious illness, a house fire, a lost job) could send you spiraling toward bankruptcy or eviction. It's living with massive amounts of debt and not knowing how you'll service that debt if your income stream fails. It's not having family members in [a] financial position to support you. It's basically operating without a safety net.

Burnout is the feeling that you've hit the wall exhaustion-wise, but then have to scale the

wall and just keep going. There's no catharsis, no lasting rest, just this background hum of exhaustion. It manifests in not being able to make the sort of decisions you actually want to make — my classic example is that you're so tired, you just scroll Instagram instead of reading the book that you legitimately do want to read — and everything in your life flattens into one endless, ever-recycling to-do list that you just feel like you have to get through so that you can do the next thing on the list. Things that should feel good or joyful or restful (like vacation!) just feel like another thing to get through, because everything is work and work is everything.

Sean Illing

How has our relationship to technology intensified the burnout problem?

Anne Helen Petersen

I think it's two things. One is that our phones and our wifi-equipped laptops enable work to spread into virtually every corner of our lives. We're always connected, always reachable. It's so much harder to maintain any sort of boundary.

The other thing is that social media — Facebook and Instagram in particular — and this idea of packaging your life and leisure in a way that makes it part of your personality, whether you think about it or not, has made a lot of us turn ourselves into a brand. And maintaining that brand is exhausting.

Sean Illing

The kind of burnout you describe definitely applies to a subset of millennials (highly educated, knowledge-economy workers, people carrying laptops everywhere). But do you think this applies to millennials in the retail or service sector as well? Is it universal?

“WE’RE SUPPOSED TO LIVE IN ONE OF THE MOST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD — HAVING CHILDREN SHOULDN’T BE THIS HARD”

Anne Helen Petersen

Of course! Burnout occurs when you are asked to do more than you are capable of, and you keep doing that day after day after day. It happens when you're not given autonomy in your job, when you're surveilled in some capacity, when you're not making enough to find financial security, when you're scrambling every day to figure out child care or housing.

Middle-class or "knowledge workers" often confront burnout by throwing money at it — which doesn't really work but does provide some semblance of stability. Retail workers dealing with lack of health insurance, algorithm-controlled scheduling, harassment on the job with little recourse — they get burned out, don't have money to throw at the problem, and just keep going. Sometimes that means they end up in the emergency room, on disability, reported to child services.

The stakes of burnout are just so much higher. I think it's incredibly important to be clear about that — but I also think that we can still use a word to gesture toward what's shared between those sorts of jobs, if only to create the sort of larger solidarity that makes as many people as possible believe that the system that creates burnout across the income spectrum needs changing. Yes, middle-class people should care about the working conditions of poor people, even if they haven't experienced themselves. But that presumption has led us to where we are now.

Sean Illing

Every generation has had some version of this, and probably every time it seems like it's more intense and more widespread. You even concede in the book that burnout isn't a uniquely millennial condition. So what is it about *this* world and *this* moment that makes millennial burnout different? The digital tech is obviously new, but is this condition?

Anne Helen Petersen

A lot of it has to do with timing. One of the things that people have said about millennials is that we're unlucky. I don't like that because it suggests that there weren't decisions

made that made us unlucky, and that we're just unfortunate to have been born at the wrong time. It's true that millennials graduated from high school or college into the 2008 recession and its aftermath, and that delayed any sort of adult stability for a significant amount of time. It also limited our ability to pay off student loans or start saving money for the future. There are cumulative effects to these things that stack up and create more instability.

But the recession didn't come out of nowhere. We intersected with it right out of school, and it was decisions made by people — most of whom weren't millennials — that brought us to that precipice. And then boom, we're hit with another wave of precarity with the pandemic, right around the age a lot of people want to have children and start families, and now we're grappling with the reality of trying to school those children or find child care. It's forcing people to drop out of the workforce after reaching their breaking point.

Sean Illing

Millennial burnout might seem strange or counterintuitive to some, because in so many ways the world has never been easier or freer, but levels of **anxiety and depression** keep going up. We have more — more stuff, more options, more distractions — and yet there's still this latent despair about the world. How do you make sense of that?

Anne Helen Petersen

There's this general American idea that more is always better, whether it's more choices or more profits or more anything. But there's a lot of anxiety that attends having so many choices. I think the reason why sites like Wirecutter and recommendation sites in general are so popular is because we're so overwhelmed with options to the point of paralysis. You want to make the best choice, the best decision. You don't want to blunder. You want to go on the best vacation. You want to choose the best preschool for your children. And so on. Making choices all the time increases anxiety.

And there's the reality that maintaining a middle-class life is just harder today than it

was in the past, which I think is a huge part of the burnout problem. How do I maintain middle-class stability like my parents had, when doing so requires so much more debt? There's a compulsion to keep borrowing and spending to simply maintain a decent life in an increasingly unforgiving economy.

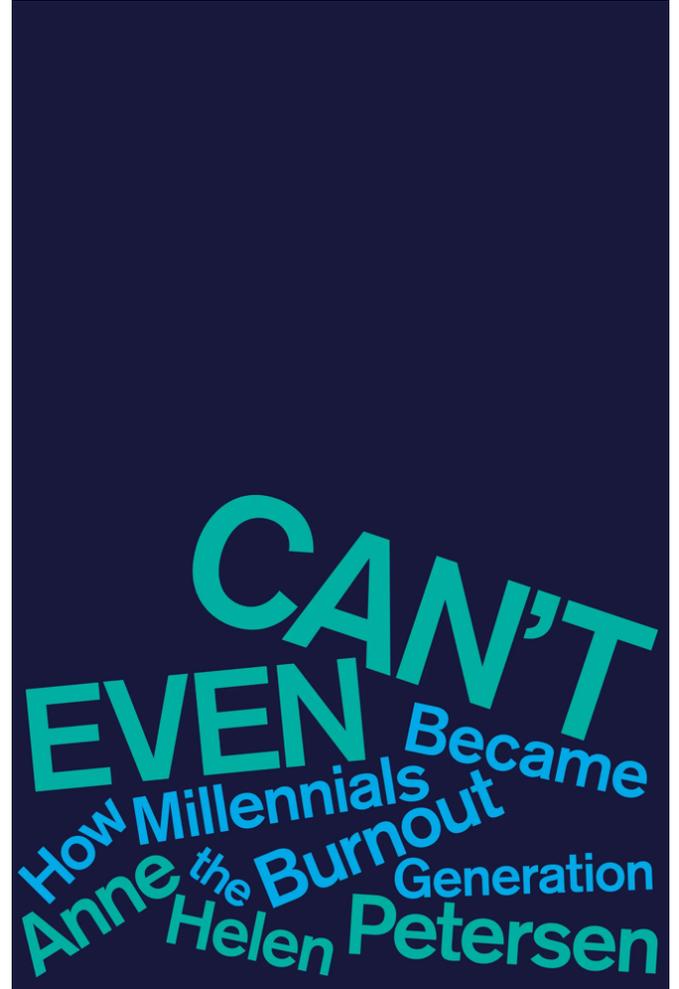
Sean Illing

All of this really boils down to capitalism, doesn't it? And not just the economic system we call capitalism, but the way of life that system promotes. There's the precarity problem on the one hand, and then there's the reality that our value as human beings is bound up with our value as workers, and that seems like a recipe not just for burnout but for a deep spiritual malaise.

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, it's such a complicated dynamic. I was reading this old book from 1951 by a sociologist talking about the American understanding of work, which he saw as the culmination of a couple of ideals. One is this idea that working hard without reward is evidence of deep virtue, and if you don't work like that you internalize a sense of guilt. That's kind of the whole Calvinist work ethic.

But there's another component, which is this notion that we're supposed to do what we love, which he attributes to the Renaissance style of artisans who worked to produce art, even if it's a wagon wheel or something like that, and that's somehow operating outside of capitalism. And I think it's fine to believe that work is good and that idle hands make mischief, or whatever. It's also fine to believe that work ought to be fulfilling. But



the ethos we're operating in says that work is good when you're most like a robot and you make money. But we don't talk about that. We just talk about work as "good."

Sean Illing

George Carlin had this great line about the American dream. He said "They call it a dream because you have to be asleep to believe it," and that's kind of what we're talking about. This fantasy that if you work hard, if you matriculate through the system, you'll find your footing and have a stable life is just dead. Millennials might be the first generation to really confront this, although I'm sure Gen-Xers would disagree.

"THE MERITOCRACY AT THE HEART OF THE AMERICAN DREAM WAS JUST A LIE"

Anne Helen Petersen

Yeah, well, and I think people who weren't white and middle class already knew that for a long time, right? That the meritocracy at the heart of the American dream was just a lie. And now that white middle-class people are discovering it's a lie, it's become a majority consensus. Of course, as a society, we should've been paying attention before. But here we are.

Sean Illing

The chapter on "parenting burnout" hit me hard as a new dad. We have a society that's arranged as if every family has a caretaker who's home all the time, but the reality is that both parents have to work in most families and no one has any answers for this disjunction. So parents, especially mothers, are just collapsing under the weight of impossible responsibilities.

How central is this to the burnout problem?

Anne Helen Petersen

It's a huge component. Fear of this exact problem is why a lot of people, myself included, are opting out of parenthood. And I'll say, there are plenty of good reasons why people should feel free to choose not to be parents, but being frightened about the mental load that's going to fall on you, and struggling with financial precarity, shouldn't be one of them. We're supposed to live in one of the most developed countries in the world — having children shouldn't be this hard. We ought to make this easier. Other countries have done it. But we haven't.

Sean Illing

Let me push you a little because I think the book may let millennials off the hook by casting them as helpless victims of outside forces. Is it possible that millennials have too eagerly absorbed the values that imprison them, and that if they choose to do so, they could've revolted against this culture rather than working so hard to succeed within its parameters?

Anne Helen Petersen

You know how ideology works. It's so hard to push back against something that you don't realize is an ideological force. I grew up in a culture that told me to go to college and get a degree and do what I love no matter what. I didn't realize I was choosing an ideology when I was consuming those things. I just thought I was doing what people did. I think that's true for most of us.

We're all surrounded by media that tells us these are the things we're supposed to do. It's in all the movies, with characters saying, "I'm going to Stanford no matter what it takes." Or it's in Steve Jobs's commencement speech, telling everyone to "do what you love, if you're not doing what you love, quit and go find it." And lots of millennials saddled themselves with student debt in the hopes that it would pay off.

When I was in college, people thought it was the obvious thing to do. It's a low-interest debt that will pay for itself because you're investing in your future. This was the idea of student debt as it was conceived in the '70s and '80s, when overall debt numbers were

so much smaller. But tuition just kept rising, debt payments kept rising, the labor market kept shifting, and most people have found it impossible to get out from under all the debt they thought they had to acquire if they wanted to succeed.

There was also public student loan forgiveness problems that we were sold. We were told you can go into a career that's underpaid and underresourced and it won't matter because in 10 years that debt will zero out. A lot of people made decisions with that knowledge in hand. They trusted the programs would endure. **But it hasn't worked out that way.** It's such a white, middle-class, bourgeois thing, right? We expected the government to keep a promise and were surprised when it didn't. But an Indigenous person who grew up 10 miles from you is like, "Of course the government's not going to keep their promise." They know that you don't trust anything the government tells you.

Sean Illing

What's your advice to people who feel like they've lost control of their own life and have to find some kind of balance now?

Anne Helen Petersen

I really do think that being able to identify what's going on is a huge first step. To recognize and say, "I don't want it to be this way anymore," that's a big deal. Many people don't even have the time or mental space to arrive at that point. But if you get there, and you want to be analytical about your life and lay it down flat and say, "What's going on? Where did I get this idea? How can I look at this idea from a distance and see that it's not necessarily true just because I believed it, or because I've done it for so long?" Because you don't have to have an Instagram account. You don't have to have a Facebook account. You don't have to be on Twitter. You don't have to answer that email at 11 pm. That doesn't mean you have to quit those things, but if you can articulate that to yourself, you can just see it as a choice you get to make.

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