

When There Is More to Carry Than One Life Can Hold

Stress, responsibility, and making room for a life you can inhabit

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“And could nobody be employed on such an errand but Fanny?”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, chapter VII ^{R22}

The message itself is small. Could you take one more thing? You look at the screen, already aware of the work that will have to move to make room. There is a practical answer forming somewhere in you: perhaps tomorrow, perhaps with help, perhaps this belongs to someone else. Before that answer reaches your mouth, you have agreed.

Later, you are short with someone you love. A question about dinner lands as though it were another demand you cannot possibly meet. You hear the edge in your voice and dislike it. Now, alongside the unfinished work, there is guilt about how you responded. You tell yourself to organize better, be more patient, get up earlier. The day becomes a problem with you.

For someone else, the yes was deliberate. A person needed care. A shift could not be left uncovered. The work matters, and doing it well brings real satisfaction. Yet the body that carried yesterday's commitment has to carry today's, too. Wanting a responsibility and having enough capacity for it are different questions. We can care deeply about what we do and still be running out of room.

I want to begin with the actual load before deciding what it means about the person carrying it. What has been asked of you? What have you chosen? What happens when you cannot manage? Who else has some responsibility here? There may be something familiar in the way you keep going. There may also be too much to do, too little money, insufficient help, illness, or a setting in which saying no has consequences.

We need enough curiosity to see these possibilities together. The aim is to understand what would make this particular life more workable, including the care and commitments you wish to keep.

What We Miss When We Look Only at the Person

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price appears to be sitting idly while others are occupied. When the day's events become visible, the picture changes: she has been cutting roses and sent on repeated errands in the heat. Edmund also recognizes his part in depriving her of a usual opportunity to ride. Austen lets us see the difference between judging a pause and understanding what preceded it. His concern is imperfect; he later adds pressure of his own. The scene asks us to look at both the burden and the arrangements around it.^{R22}

Something similar can happen in our own accounts. We see the untouched task and call ourselves undisciplined. We forget the appointment we arranged, the problem we anticipated, the meal we made, the interruption we absorbed. Some work is visible only when it is not done. Keeping track of what another person needs can consume attention long before an action appears on a list.

A more accurate account does not excuse every sharp response or forgotten commitment. It gives us a better place from which to address them. We can acknowledge, "I spoke to you harshly," and also ask why the same overloaded arrangement keeps repeating. Taking responsibility for our conduct need not mean taking responsibility for every demand.

Perhaps you have enough support in one area and very little in another. Perhaps a valued role has expanded without anyone discussing its new size. Begin with a manageable part of the week. We do not need a complete inventory of your life before one overlooked burden can be recognized.

Stress Has a Setting

Research on work helps us widen the question. Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter describe difficulties involving workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. A person may be exhausted because there is too much work, but also because decisions are made without them, contributions go unrecognized, or the work repeatedly requires something they find troubling. These are related pressures with different implications.^{R3}

The job demands-resources framework adds a useful question: what does this work require, and what does it provide? Time, staffing, clear expectations, usable equipment, authority, and dependable colleagues can change the effort required. Meaning and enthusiasm do not make a demanding task costless.^{R4}

Outside paid work, we can ask similarly concrete questions about care and household responsibilities, while recognizing that a workplace model does not explain every family. Who notices what needs doing? Who can decide? Who has recovery time? What help is actually available? A strained person may need an altered arrangement, not another instruction to become more resilient.

WHO uses *burnout* specifically for an occupational phenomenon associated with chronic workplace stress. Here, stress and overload name a wider range of experiences. Exhaustion can also accompany illness, sleep disruption, depression, medication effects, or other circumstances. Persistent or unexplained changes deserve appropriate health care; this reflection cannot determine their cause. ^{R1, R2}

When Continuing Has Become Part of Who You Are

There may be pride in how much you can carry. You are dependable. You know how to make things work when others are uncertain. People trust you, and you may enjoy being useful. I would not want to treat those capacities as though they were mistakes. They may be among the qualities you value most.

The difficulty can begin when a capacity becomes a condition of belonging. Perhaps you can help, but cannot let anyone know that the help costs you. Perhaps you can be competent, but cannot be the person who needs time, reassurance, or a second attempt. The role grows more settled while the person inside it has fewer ways to participate.

Jung's idea of persona offers a language for the public roles through which we meet the world. A role is necessary and can be sincere; it is also partial. The dependable colleague may have interests, fears, and limitations that the role scarcely permits. This is a depth-psychological lens, not a diagnosis of your identity. ^{R13}

Earlier relationships may have made usefulness feel particularly important. You may have learned that being easy, capable, or attentive helped preserve a bond. But an inherited rule is only one possibility. Present job insecurity, a loved one's real dependency, cultural commitments, or the pleasure of skilled work may better explain a particular yes. We can ask what your agreement meant without assuming that every act of generosity concealed a fear.

A useful question is what would happen if the role became more accurate: still dependable, and able to say what can actually be done. Another person may feel disappointed. Their disappointment needs room, and so does the difference between disappointing someone and failing a genuine duty.

Listening to Strain Without Turning It Into a Verdict

Sometimes you recognize overload through an ordinary change. Concentration becomes harder. A noise that usually passes unnoticed feels intrusive. You postpone answering a friend because another conversation seems beyond you. Or you notice nothing until a small inconvenience brings tears.

Damasio's work places feelings and representations of bodily states within the way people evaluate choices. It gives us reason to include felt experience in our account, alongside

facts, consequences, values, and practical resources. It does not mean that a tight chest can tell us whether to leave a job or explain our childhood.^{R9}

Our capacities are not equally available in every setting. You may think clearly when someone gives you time and struggle when you feel hurried or scrutinized. Developmental and relational theories help us stay interested in these differences. They cannot establish a particular childhood history or brain change from what happens in one conversation.^{R10, R11}

You can begin externally if that is easier. Notice the time of day, the number of interruptions, or the conditions under which a task becomes possible. Looking inward is optional. The first useful discovery may be very practical: a shorter interval helps, a written instruction helps, or the load remains too large even when you are organized.

When that happens, let the result matter. A practice that adds strain has given us information about the practice, its timing, or the circumstances. It has not established that you are unwilling to change.

Several Concerns Can Be Present at Once

You may want to rest and be frightened of losing income. You may resent a task and still believe it is yours to do. You may want someone else to take over and worry that their way will create more work. None of these tensions has to disappear before you can think carefully.

Schwartz's parts language can make competing concerns easier to approach: one part presses on, another protests, another wants reassurance. If that language does not fit, ordinary words are enough. "I want to keep this commitment, and I am concerned about what it is costing." The task is to understand the pressures without adding shame or surrendering responsibility.^{R12}

We can ask each concern a different question. What do I want to preserve? What outcome am I afraid of? What is genuinely required? What do I know about the consequence, and what am I predicting? Sometimes the feared outcome is unlikely. Sometimes it is realistic. A person with little employment security cannot be asked to treat every fear as an old story.

Time, income, housing, energy, and support belong in this account, including what has already been lost or is at risk. The ability to make a change depends partly on what a person can afford to risk. A modest adjustment, shared advocacy, private advice, or help obtaining resources may fit better than a dramatic declaration.^{R5}

Work, Vocation, and the Wish to Give Something of Yourself

Work can do more than pay for a life elsewhere. It can offer competence, friendship, contribution, rhythm, and the pleasure of becoming good at something. There may be a particular kind of attention you bring to a task, a craft you have come to love, or people whose lives are affected by what you do. We should make room for that affection before recommending less investment.

Parker Palmer's writing on vocation invites listening to the life we actually have rather than forcing ourselves toward an admired image. I find that invitation useful when fulfillment has become another assignment: find your passion, make every hour meaningful, become the person you were meant to be. Listening may reveal a valued part of the work, an unwanted expectation, or an uncertainty that needs time. It need not reveal one perfect calling.^{R17}

Not every job can express all of who we are. Work undertaken for income can still be honorable. A person may keep an imperfect job to provide stability, preserve care, or make another part of life possible. Meaning can be found in the responsibility, in relationships at work, or beyond employment. Economic necessity is not a failure of authenticity.

Research on self-determination distinguishes personally endorsed motivation from acting chiefly under pressure. An obligation can be difficult and still be something you choose to stand behind. The question is not whether every task feels enjoyable. It is whether your participation has some room for a considered yes, and what happens when that room is missing.^{R6}

There may also be sorrow in noticing how much life has been postponed until the work is done. We can acknowledge that sorrow without turning it into evidence that the work was empty. Something mattered, and something else may have gone unattended. Both deserve a place in deciding what comes next.

Can Help Reach the Actual Burden?

Being told to take care of yourself can feel lonely when the person offering the advice could take something off your plate. A kind conversation may help, but so might someone making the appointment, covering a task, providing transport, or sharing responsibility from beginning to end.

Bowlby's attachment perspective gives adult support-seeking a legitimate place. Fosha's experiential work draws attention to what happens when difficult experience is met with responsive company. Together, they invite us to ask both what practical help is needed and what it is like to receive it. A brief educational reflection cannot provide the responsiveness of a therapeutic relationship.^{R15, R8}

Consider Aveline, an invented learner. She works set hours and coordinates a relative's routine care. Her first explanation is that she cannot tolerate anyone else doing things differently. Looking more closely, she finds a missing arrangement: another family member has offered to “help,” but Aveline still has to notice, plan, remind, and check. She wants assistance that includes ownership of a defined task.

She asks whether that person can take responsibility for arranging one recurring delivery, including noticing when it is needed and confirming that it arrived. She predicts fewer reminders, and worries she will have to correct the process. They agree to a two-week trial. One delivery is late. Aveline is frustrated, but the other person follows up without being prompted and changes the schedule. The result is useful and imperfect.

Her revised account is more specific than “I cannot let go.” She needs trustworthy follow-through and a task that has genuinely changed hands. She also notices the impulse to check before there is evidence of a problem. The arrangement and her response can each be reconsidered. Nothing in this invented example promises that another person will accept a request.

We can stay connected while saying what we can offer and listening to what the other person can do. A workable agreement can acknowledge what the other person can give without quietly returning all responsibility to the exhausted person.^{R14}

A Different Relationship With the Available Moment

Not every burden can be reduced today. Care may be ongoing. A job may remain necessary. A decision may require information or resources that are not yet available. There can be grief and anger in recognizing those limits, alongside a wish to make the next interval less lonely or demanding.

John O'Donohue speaks about rhythm and the experience of time in his conversation with Krista Tippett. His philosophical invitation is to notice how we inhabit a moment, rather than treating time only as something to schedule. That can deepen an available pause; it cannot create staffing, money, or adequate care.^{R20}

Perhaps a brief meal can be eaten without also answering messages. Perhaps a trusted person can stay on the telephone while you complete something hard. Perhaps the useful change is deciding which task can wait, or seeking help with a continuing health concern. There is no requirement to make these moments peaceful or beautiful. They should fit the life they are meant to support.

We can also ask what follows the pause. If rest is valued only because it returns us to more work, every quiet interval may become another performance review. Does it leave any room for pleasure, company, or doing something whose worth does not have to be demonstrated? These are questions to explore where there is room, not demands placed on someone already stretched.

When There Is Finally a Little Space

Something changes. Another person follows through, a deadline moves, or a difficult week ends. You had imagined relief. Instead, the first quiet evening feels unfamiliar. You keep remembering tasks. You wonder whether you have forgotten someone. You reach for work almost before noticing the interval that has become available.

We can be interested in this without deciding that you are addicted to busyness. There may still be a practical concern. You may be accustomed to interruptions and need time to discover that this interval really is yours. Or a familiar way of mattering has become less necessary, and the space brings feelings you did not expect.

Perhaps there is sadness about how tired you have been. Perhaps someone else's reliability touches a longing to have been helped sooner. Perhaps there is simple pleasure, or nothing much at all. You do not owe the change a grateful or peaceful response. It is enough to notice what is actually happening.

A modest question can help: does anything in the arrangement need attention, or can I let this amount of help be available for now? If you want company, ask for company. If you want to return to a valued activity, you can. The point of a more workable life is to have some influence over how you participate, including the freedom to enjoy meaningful effort.

Remaining Answerable to the People Who Need Us

Some responsibilities cannot simply be set aside. A child needs care, an agreed task affects a colleague, a dependent person needs a meal or transport. Your exhaustion deserves recognition, and so do the people who depend on what has been promised. We may need to find another way for the care to happen.

Sometimes that means asking earlier, naming the whole task, or admitting that a previous agreement exceeds what can now be done. Sometimes it means accepting help that is adequate without being identical to your way. Sometimes the needed resource is missing, and the next step is assistance in finding it. A more honest account can include your own overpromising alongside an unfair distribution of work.

There can be tenderness in saying, "I want to keep caring for you, and this arrangement needs more help." There can also be anger when help has been repeatedly requested and not provided. Neither feeling settles the practical question. We still need to know what will happen, who can do it, and how to respond when the plan does not hold.

Even a modest agreement can give a relationship something more dependable to work with. A limit has a meaning in the life around it. We learn from what it protects, what it affects, and whether the necessary care becomes more sustainable for everyone involved.

One Change You Can Actually Learn From

If you would like to try something, choose one ordinary demand. You can also use Aveline's invented situation, read without doing the exercise, or stop here. Start with the observable arrangement: what needs doing, who is affected, who has authority, and what time or support is available.

Offer an explanation, then make room for its correction. "I keep taking over because I am anxious" may contain something true while omitting unreliable follow-through. "There is nothing I can change" may be accurate in one area and leave a small opening in another. We are looking for an account that helps you choose, rather than one that sounds psychologically complete.

Choose a modest proposal: clarify a deadline, ask someone to own a defined task, reduce an optional standard, keep a valued commitment with more support, or arrange professional advice. Predict one observable effect and one possible cost. Decide what would tell you to stop or reconsider. Where a request could bring retaliation, confidential support or private planning may be the more fitting step.

Then return to what happened. Was work actually redistributed? Did the deadline change? Was a limit respected? Did the adjustment free some capacity, or create another obligation? If it helped, notice the ingredient that helped without immediately enlarging the experiment. If it did not, the account needs room to change. Mixed results and not trying belong in the review.

This is the movement of the five modules: noticing the load, understanding what keeps it in place, examining the conditions, making a workable agreement, and reviewing what can sustain a life. Each module contains the whole cycle. Begin with Module 1; you can divide the learning across visits and leave every written question unanswered.

A more sustainable life may begin quietly. Someone understands what the day has required. A responsibility becomes more accurately shared. You discover that a valued commitment needs another condition to remain possible. There is still work to do, and something about the way it is carried has changed. We can give that change enough attention to find out whether it helps you live.

Explore Stress, Overload, and a More Sustainable Life

When the Person Who Carries Everything Comes to Therapy

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Reading, scope, and limits

These readings inform educational learning. Research, clinical theories, literary works, and spiritual reflection contribute in different ways. The reading scopes below identify the original sections, excerpts, transcripts, or abstracts actually consulted. No full-book reading or evidence of BKL treatment efficacy is claimed. Clinical interpretation remains open to the person's correction; literary and spiritual language is optional.

R1. World Health Organization (2019). Burn-out an occupational phenomenon: International Classification of Diseases.

[Open source](#) · Classification.

Actually consulted: Full substantive announcement and definition read. Occupational classification; not a diagnosis or a definition for every form of exhaustion.

R2. World Health Organization (2026). Mental health at work.

[Open source](#) · Guidance.

Actually consulted: Work risks, organizational prevention and accommodations sections read. Guidance/synthesis; no jurisdiction-specific legal advice.

R3. Maslach, C., and Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry.

[Open source](#) · Research review.

Actually consulted: Selected definition, Areas of Worklife, causes/outcomes and prevention sections of the original open article read. Review, predominantly correlational evidence; no BKL outcome evidence.

R4. Bakker, A. B., and Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands-resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward.

[Open source](#) · Research/theory.

Actually consulted: Author-institution full PDF available; demand/resource, dual-process and challenge/hindrances passages read, pp.274-278. Meaningful challenge can still cost energy.

R5. Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress.

[Open source](#) · Theory.

Actually consulted: Original author-profile paper, selected model/resource passages, pp.516-517. A theory of threatened/actual loss and resource investment, not an intervention trial.

R6. Gagné, M., and Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation.

[Open source](#) · Research/theory.

Actually consulted: Selected autonomy/controlled motivation and managerial-support passages, pp.333-335 and 350. Endorsed duty differs from enjoyment or complete independence.

R8. Fosha, D. (2021). Introduction: AEDP after 20 years. In *Undoing Aloneness and the Transformation of Suffering Into Flourishing: AEDP 2.0*.

[Open source](#) · Clinical theory.

Actually consulted: Publisher sample introduction, selected pp.4-6,9-11. Relational safety, affect and attention to receiving change; not full edited volume or evidence for an educational derivative.

R9. Damasio, A. R. (1996). The somatic marker hypothesis and the possible functions of the prefrontal cortex.

[Open source](#) · Research/theory.

Actually consulted: Indexed abstract and bibliographic record read. Hypothesis/review drawing on neuropsychology; no claim that bodily signals are infallible or reveal the cause of overload.

R10. Schore, A. N. (2001). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health.

[Open source](#) · Clinical synthesis.

Actually consulted: Author-hosted abstract and selected stress/regulation/development sections read, not entire 69-page paper. Historical synthesis focused on severe early trauma; no inference of childhood events from adult workload.

R11. Siegel, D. J. (2020). The Developing Mind, third edition.

[Open source](#) · Clinical/theoretical synthesis.

Actually consulted: Publisher sample, selected integration passages pp.35-36,48-49, not full book. Differentiation and connection within Siegel's framework; no measured neural-integration claim.

R12. Schwartz, R. C. (2021). No Bad Parts.

[Open source](#) · Clinical theory.

Actually consulted: Author-institute hosted publisher excerpt, selected opening passages on conflicting impulses and curiosity. Optional IFS model; no entire-book reading or literal-parts requirement.

R13. Jung, C. G. (1921/1934-1954). Selected passages from Psychological Types (§§717-718) and Collected Works9i (§43), reproduced in The Quotable Jung.

[Open source](#) · Depth theory.

Actually consulted: Original selected passages in Princeton publisher sample, pp.26-28; historical/environmental context and persona. Not full Jung volumes; theory rather than stress neuroscience.

R14. Bowen Center for the Study of the Family (n.d.). Differentiation of self.

[Open source](#) · Systems theory.

Actually consulted: Institute concept page read. Family-systems framework and clinical illustration; not a reader maturity ranking or validated explanation of a particular person.

R15. Bowlby, J. (1977). The making and breaking of affectional bonds. I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory.

[Open source](#) · Attachment theory.

Actually consulted: Publisher summary and original university-hosted opening pp.201-203 read. Adult support-seeking within attachment theory; not classification of a reader's early attachment.

R17. Palmer, P. J. (2000). Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation.

[Open source](#) · Philosophy/spiritual reflection.

Actually consulted: Published original author excerpts consulted, not the full book. Vocation as listening to actual life rather than an imposed ideal; philosophical and spiritual reflection, not an established cause of burnout.

R20. O'Donohue, J., interviewed by K. Tippett (2008/2022). The Inner Landscape of Beauty.

[Open source](#) · Philosophy/literature.

Actually consulted: Selected original time/rhythm passage read. Broadcast 28 February 2008; transcript updated 10 February 2022. Philosophical reflection; unsubstantiated medical statistic and universal definition of stress are not adopted.

R22. Austen, J. (1814). Mansfield Park, chapterVII and openingVIII.

[Open source](#) · Literature.

Actually consulted: Selected rose-cutting/errands/heat and riding-opportunity scene read, not full novel. Apparent idleness changes meaning when actual demands and resource distribution appear; Edmund's later pressure is not endorsed.