



## How Mend's Founder, Elle Huerta, Wants to Help You Beat Burnout

When the digital entrepreneur launched the self-care app, Mend, she was focused on helping users recover from the fallout of romantic breakups. Now she and her team are taking on a new challenge: professional burnout. Elle talks Alicia through the warning signs, the science of recovery, and the steps necessary to tackle what the World Health Organization calls an "occupational phenomenon."

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**Alicia Menendez:**

Are you feeling exhausted? Has your productivity taken a nosedive? Is your sleep all over the place? Could it be that you're burning out? That's what I'm talking about today with Elle Huerta, the founder and CEO of the self-care app, Mend. The first time I spoke with Elle, she told us all about the science of heartbreak. Now, she's taking her research and problem solving and using it to help us all deal with burnout.

Elle, the last time that I saw you, we were in New York City at a very fancy studio. Now, look at the two of us.

**Elle Huerta:** We're both in sweatshirts.

**Menendez:** But you now join an elusive club of people who have been on Latina to Latina twice, so thank you for being willing to do it.

**Huerta:** I feel very honored.

**Menendez:** I think there's a lot of talk about burnout now. It sort of has become a very in vogue topic, so I'm curious how you are defining burnout.

**Huerta:** I define it based on really the definition that's been studied for the past 15 years by psychologists, and the definition of burnout is that it is... It's a state of chronic stress caused by unrelenting work stress. So, it's very specific to work, and we can talk about other types of burnout too, but really burnout in research looks at people who are stressed from work, and it's characterized by a few different traits. One of them is exhaustion, and then the second is feeling cynical or negative about your work, and then the third one is lack of efficacy. So, you're no longer as productive as you used to be.

And I feel like every time I go over that definition, it sounds like I'm describing every single person on the planet right now. And I think another important part of that definition is that it's a state and it's a process. It can really creep on you. It's not like from one day to the

next, you're necessarily gonna feel like you got hit by a Mack truck and you're burned out. It really is kind of a slow build for a lot of people. That's how they experience it.

Menendez: What are the telltale signs that you're burned out?

Huerta: So, one telltale sign is that you just don't have the same enthusiasm that you used to have for what you did for a living. Burnout is really, really common with high achievers and top performers, and one really common sign, especially in people who are used to performing really well in their job, is that they just don't care anymore. They feel really negative about their job. They're really cynical about aspects of their job. You recognize it in yourself when you start to think differently, and then I think your coworkers start to recognize it in you. Maybe you're shorter than you usually are. You just don't have as much patience for people.

Menendez: It also seems like it manifests for a lot of people physically, that you see yourself becoming ill more frequently, changes in appetite, like it can take on a more physiological manifestation.

Huerta: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. It impacts your neuroendocrine system. It really changes your brain, so over time, it changes the structure of your brain and how your different brain regions are communicating with each other. And it can depress your immune system. There are so many physical effects and neurological effects that someone who's burned out will start to experience, and they're really serious. Very detrimental health effects. And that's one of the reasons why burnout is such a critical health issue, because if enough people don't address burnout and get support and get help, it can really lead to a lot of chronic health issues.

Menendez: Once you hit a point of burnout, can the impacts of burnout then be undone or reversed?

Huerta: Yeah. So, this was a big question in research, and the good news is that it looks like the effects of burnout can be reversed. And a lot of that has to do with the fact that our brains are plastic, so neuroplasticity is this beautiful thing that allows our brains to change over time in response to the environment. So, just like burnout is a process, you can also come out of that process, but it can take time. That may be one of the frustrating things of burnout, is that it feels like you're just going to be in this state forever, and if you start to improve, it can feel a little bit slow. But it's a really wonderful thing that you can actually reverse burnout.

Menendez: Part of what makes burnout complicated is that you're always trying to distinguish between what is just normal, stressful work and life, and what is a bridge too far? So, if someone is listening and they're just at the point where they're like, "I can't quite tell whether this is what life and work life is supposed to be, or if I am pushing myself, or being pushed too far." What are the core questions we should be asking ourselves to distinguish between stress and burnout?

Huerta: One of the tricky things of burnout is that you can adapt to it. And most people do adapt to it, especially top performers, and so that's the tricky part, because there's still all of this... Your brain is still changing, you're still experiencing the effects of stress over time, and yet you're still functioning, you're still doing your job. And then, at some point you do hit a wall, so for a lot of people that looks like they have to take time off, or they have to take a leave of absence, or right now we're starting to see a lot of people who are dropping out of the workforce because they just can't work anymore. And that's the extreme of burnout.

Latina to Latina: How Mend's Founder, Elle Huerta, is Combating Burnout

You know, you have to go through that list of kind of characteristic traits of burnout, and you have to be honest with yourself, and I think it is also really, really helpful to have a kind of a third party, more objective opinion, because so many people, it just becomes normal to function that way and to feel that way. And so, it can be helpful to have someone come in from the outside and help you assess how you're doing if you're unable to do it yourself and be honest with yourself.

Ad: *You all know I did not grow up speaking Spanish. My husband did. And it's really important to us that our girls have exposure to the language. When I interviewed Susie Jaramillo, the creator of Canticos, she gifted me a book for my girls, and they love it. Like, we read it all the time. And now the older one is using their bilingual learning app. They use the same nursery rhymes from our childhood, Burrito Sabanero, Elefantitos, and Arroz con Leche, to teach kids concepts like phonics, letters, math, and emotional intelligence through song and play.*

*The games and the songs alternate between English and Spanish, so it's super easy to learn the languages, plus the characters are adorable. Pollitos, Elefantitos, we can't get enough. I want to squeeze their little cheeks. They've also got beautiful books, games, and toys that just bring the lessons and fun from the app full circle. If you want to learn more about bringing language and culture to life for your little one, visit [CanticosWorld.com/Latina](https://CanticosWorld.com/Latina). That's [CanticosWorld.com/Latina](https://CanticosWorld.com/Latina). Start their bilingual journey today and watch their Latino greatness shine.*

Menendez: What are some of the unhealthy ways that people tend to manage or cope with burnout?

Huerta: The top one right now based on what we see in our Mend audience, and this is also a common one that's cited in research, but it's just distracting yourself with passive entertainment or technology. So, you can imagine just scrolling endlessly on Instagram, binge watching Netflix for an entire weekend, and I feel like that's normal behavior for so many people this year because it is such an extremely stressful year, but it's not really normal if you look at what that is doing to you. So, that's one of the signs that you just don't have the resources to deal with what you're experiencing, and so you revert to this passive mode to help yourself, and it's really a defense mechanism, really.

Menendez: What just strikes me is that we push ourselves, push ourselves, push ourselves in the interest of productivity, but once you hit a point of burnout, you can't be as productive as you once were. So, it requires a recalibration of the way you even think about work.

Huerta: Right. It really does. So, if you really care about what you do and if you want to do a good job, it's in your interest in the long term to try to prevent burnout or to take care of yourself if you're feeling burned out, because otherwise you will eventually end up at that point where it's there's no return. You will really reach that extreme burnout point where you have to stop working.

Menendez: I feel like there's sort of a rhythm to these shared social crises, which is first we identify the problems, then all of a sudden it becomes sort of this thing everybody's talking about, it becomes Instagram memes, it sort of loses a bit of its definition and contours, and once the alarm raises past the individual up to the institutional level, what I've seen happen very often is that employees are getting afternoons with puppies, and free massages in the breakroom, but they still have the workloads and the expectations that they've always had.

Huerta: Right.

Menendez: Which really doesn't address the core problems. So, if you're looking at this as a manager, or as someone who runs a business, what do you actually have to be doing to build the scaffolding and the infrastructure such that an employee yourself never reaches the point of burnout?

Huerta: You really hit the nail on the head because employers and managers, anyone who is running a team right now, they're part of the problem whether they realize it or not. And that's something that is very clear in the research. So many people address burnout on an individual level, and that's important. People definitely need tools to help themselves and to deal with sort of the aftermath of burnout and to heal from it, but the environment is what causes burnout, and it's exactly what you said. It's this mismatch of resources and time, and you're just not able to get everything done that you can within the timeframe that you're given.

So, as an employer or a manager, if you have burned out employees, it's not on them, and you can't just put the onus on them to take care of themselves. A big part is admitting that you are creating the problem. And so, then you have to really get into the weeds and figure out what is it that's contributing to burnout at the organizational level? And there are six risk factors that have been shown that contribute to an environment that causes burnout.

Menendez: Can you give me a sense of what those are?

Huerta: So, the six key areas that are risk factors for burnout are one, excessive workload, lack of control, insufficient reward, lack of community, lack of fairness, or whenever there are mismatched values or conflicting values. So, one really practical thing that you can do at an organizational level is gather feedback on all of those risk factors and it's not just about listening, and gathering feedback, and asking questions. It's really about then making changes in whatever your areas of strength or areas of development are, because everyone will have a couple of those risk factors that are probably really high if they have a lot of burned out people on their team, or you may have problems in all of those areas, in which case it's a good thing that you're looking at it and addressing it.

Menendez: Why the pivot on the part of Mend from heartbreak to burnout?

Huerta: My vision for Mend was always to go beyond heartbreak, but it took us a long time to kind of figure out what area we should expand into. And really, the reason that we decided to expand into burnout was because of our users constantly asking us for something related to career heartbreak, whether it was mending burnout, or people who'd lost jobs, and so we knew that this was something that people were asking for. We started working on it before the pandemic hit, but burnout just felt so timely because it was just this rising tide. It felt like it's what everyone was talking about, everyone was experiencing, and the burnout rates were so high, even pre-COVID, which is really alarming because then if you think about what they are now, they're extremely high right now across all industries, across all different types of workers. And so, it just felt like the right time and we also knew that it was something our audience really wanted.

Menendez: I think a lot about when you and I first spoke about Mend. Part of your theory of it was that when you are in a relationship, you get sort of that serotonin boost, both from seeing someone, or getting a text from someone you love, and to me as someone who loves to work, work can often take on a similar dimension, which is you push yourself hard on a

project, you extend yourself for a project, and then you have a manager or coworker who sees it and applauds you for it. I mean, I go back to being in the first grade and getting my first gold star every single time that happens, and it does give you that boost. Is that part then of what is missing when someone loses a job or is experiencing burnout?

Huerta: That gold star effect, it turns into work becoming your identity. And I think that that is such a common scenario for people right now just in modern culture, in a lot of developed countries. They really feel like they are, because they work. They exist because they work. And they have value because they're productive. And so, I think when you reach a point of burnout and you are too tired to do anything, you lose motivation for work, and you're just not as productive, then oftentimes it sort of dovetails with an identity crisis because work was your life for so long, and all of a sudden you're not able to do it at the same level, and you're not getting the pleasure from it, and I think there's sort of this vacuum that you can feel like you fall into trying to figure out who you are and how to have a sense of ease and happiness in your life again.

Menendez: Daniela Pierre-Bravo, who we've interviewed before on Latina to Latina, she wrote a book about the workplace and women, and she is herself an immigrant, and she talks now a lot on her social about the process of learning to rest without tying the reward for that rest to be more productivity, or the objective of that rest to be more productivity, and I didn't realize until she shared that how much that is my understanding of rest and relaxation, that I am resting and I am relaxing with the intent of rebooting to go and do more work, to strive more.

Huerta: We did a really large survey of our current audience when we were preparing to expand into burnout, and we had a question that was something like, "If you could ask a fairy godmother any question about burnout, what would you ask?" And the question that came back the most, almost verbatim, was a question around what quick tip or strategy can you give me to be more effective and to avoid burnout, or to get rid of the burnout that I feel?

Menendez: Amazing.

Huerta: And it just hit me so intensely how wired we are to just strive for productivity 100% of the time, and we just don't give ourselves permission to rest, and to kind of switch out of the doing mode, and go into just being people, and being human. It was really a wakeup call for me to see that question. And you know, it's people have the best intentions when they're asking that question, but it is alarming that so many of us struggle with not being productive, not doing anything.

Menendez: It occurs to me how many times this has come up with our guests, even just recently. So, I was interviewing Alisha Ramos, the founder of Girls Night In, it's a big part of her story. Regina Merson, who has a cosmetics company, Reina Rebelde. Laurie Hernandez, the Olympic gold medalist, and I do wonder for us as Latinas, how much of it is tied to our families' immigrant stories, is tied to the fact that as we were raised, work for so many of us, it was about survival. It was about then making good on someone else's sacrifice, such that resting feels like such a luxury, and there is a sense of work isn't just work necessarily to go through the motions of collecting a paycheck, but work is built upon this idea of legacy, and investment, and what has been sacrificed for you to have the opportunity and the luxury of working and doing something that you love.

Huerta: I mean, I can completely relate. My grandfather came here when he was 11, and had nothing, and was a migrant farmworker, and his whole life was work, and he started his own small business, and became a mechanic, and then the next generation, my dad, his whole life was school, and getting an education, and working as hard as he could, so that then I could do the same thing. And there's definitely a layer of burnout that is added on when you have that as part of your family story. And it does become hard to take a step back and take a break, because you feel like so many people put in so much work for you to get to where you are.

Menendez: Is the idea at Mend to prevent burnout? Or is the idea to help people once they have reached a crisis point?

Huerta: So, it's twofold. Our app is really geared towards people who are burned out. You know, it functions a lot like our heartbreak program. Now, we're one app with two different tracks, so the burnout track is really geared towards someone who is experiencing the effects of burnout. And on the other side, what we're really focused on is B2B, so we're really focused on talking with businesses, with companies, and having conversations with them about burnout, about the costs of burnout to employers, which are staggering. It's like \$500 billion a year on burnout-related kind of lost work and lost productivity, and so we're having those conversations with companies because we feel like there are ways to address burnout and to prevent burnout at an organizational level, and that is crucial to solving the burnout crisis.

Menendez: You alluded to this earlier, that we talk about burnout in the context of work, but there are other contexts for burnout. What do those look like?

Huerta: There's so many different kinds of burnout. The ones that we see the most often are anyone who's giving care, so caregiver burnout is a really big one. There's burnout from people who are doing a lot of volunteer work. There's volunteer burnout. There's religious burnout. People who are burned out from religious-related activities. So, there are a lot of different ways that people can reach that point. The research has always really focused on work-related burnout and workplace burnout, and even when the World Health Organization defined burnout and recognized it officially as an occupational phenomenon, they made it very clear that they were just talking about occupational burnout. But the reality is that there are so many people who are burned out who don't have kind of a traditional workplace that they're going into.

Menendez: We are coming off of a running series on leveling up for the new year, and so part of why I wanted to talk to you was to ask where you think that burnout fits in a conversation about leveling up.

Huerta: So many of us have just been in survival mode and so many people were just in survival mode before the pandemic. Burnout is not a new issue at all. So, I think assessing where you are and really taking a look at the definition of burnout, just familiarizing yourself more with the research around burnout can be really helpful, because it can give you the permission to admit something about yourself that maybe you don't really have time to address yet, or that you just don't want to admit. And then I think another important thing for leveling up is if you are responsible for anyone at work, so if you manage anyone, if you mentor anyone, having a conversation with them about burnout. Because it is extremely difficult to go to your manager and say, "Hey, I'm burned out. Oh, and by the

way, one of the definitions of burnout is that you're no longer productive." Who wants to admit that?

So, if you are on the other side of that, start the conversation first and have the conversation openly and honestly, so that people feel comfortable getting support when they need it.

Menendez: Elle, congratulations. I am excited to watch Mend grow. Thank you for talking with us again.

Huerta: Thank you for having me back. It was such a pleasure as always to talk to you.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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