

EXCERPT



Healthy Calling
From Toxic Burnout to Sustainable Work

January 7, 2025 | \$18, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0840-9

There's Burnout, and Then There's Toxic Burnout

While burnout in general is definitely concerning—leading to depression, anxiety, increased sick days, relational conflict, a kind of psychological paralysis, and an overriding sense of shame—burnout from a calling is more than that; it can be devastating to the core.

When calling burnout happens, it includes all of those concerning attributes mentioned above, plus a sense of dissociation with a purpose for living, a kind of spiritual and relational burnout. Because a calling involves some kind of identification with a Caller, when we experience calling burnout, it involves a disconnect with the Caller and surrounding community. Here, a rising sense of shame emerges, and it isn't just about the self. The shame is relational. People who feel general burnout might respond with various levels of "I don't like what I'm doing anymore." But people who identify a sense of calling and feel burnout respond more like, "I don't know who I am anymore" (K. A. Molloy, B. J. Dick, D. E. Davis, and R. D. Duffy, "Work Calling and Humility: Framing for Job Idolization, Workaholism, and Exploitation," *Journal of Management, Spirituality, and Religion*).

The relational obligation that comes with a sense of calling can easily override personal boundaries and healthy parameters. A need is great, and we feel the pull to meet that need. Renowned theologian, author, and Pulitzer Prize winner Frederick Buechner points to *calling* as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*). This is very moving because it appeals to the visceral sense of calling. But let's not go too fast here. There's a reverent tone in Buechner's words that we tend to skip over.

If we identify with feeling called, it means we sense a significant need that we know we can help fill. The scary part is, if we invert our role in the calling dynamic, if we begin to think of ourselves as the Caller, it's very hard to say no. We are no longer accountable to the Caller because we are the caller. The plumb line gets skewed in a kind of moral vertigo based on the magnetic pull of the need we see before us, often letting panic or scarcity guide decision-making.

When we recognize our role as the *called*, we offer up the big picture vision and the important details to an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God who can see the details and the larger scene with a mindset of care, order, and peace.

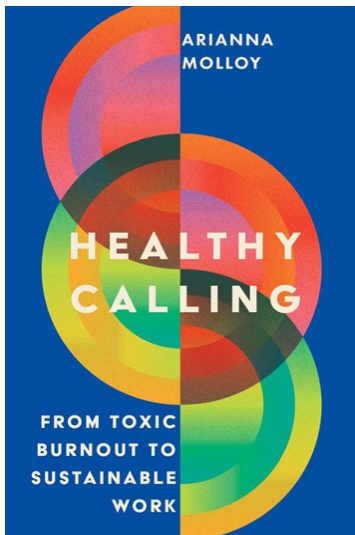
False control from assuming the role of caller also means we may minimize ethics and integrity for the sake of the goal before us. We may justify ignoring healthy boundaries for the sake of the need we see, adding greater confusion about when and why we might want to say no or not right now. Remember, burnout thrives on deception and our personal dismissal of boundaries.



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From the outside, burnout behaviors from a calling look very similar to the pursuit and experience of meaningful work, what psychologist Angela Duckworth describes as grit (passion plus perseverance), or even what social innovator Greg McKeown frames as *essentialism* (choosing what is most important and investing wholeheartedly in that endeavor) (Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*). However, burnout is not the same as grit or essentialism because it does not yield long-term positive results.

Calling burnout has a distinct toxicity. And those most prone to burnout are already primed to push ourselves beyond what is healthy, because we are highly motivated, enjoy working toward a goal, and often feel deeply passionate about what we are doing for the sake of others.

Consider the metaphor of burnout: what is left after something is burned out? Ashes. Broken pieces. An unrecognizable shape of something that once was. Perhaps you're feeling that right now. Maybe you've gone from doing something truly meaningful, something you genuinely felt called to do, to now feeling like a fragmented shadow of yourself. Maybe you're somewhere on the border of apathy and emptiness. Maybe you're feeling frozen by a lack of knowing how to move forward because your internal compass feels broken. My friend, you are not alone, and you don't have to stay here in this.

In order to avoid calling burnout, or recover from it if we're already there, we need to understand it a bit better. So we'll peel back the burnout process a little bit. We'll look at how the sausage gets made, and while it should feel uncomfortable, hopefully it will also feel illuminating. We need to turn the lights on.

-Taken from the introduction



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Healthy Calling *From Toxic Burnout to Sustainable Work*

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Arianna Molloy (PhD, University of Denver) is associate professor of organizational communication at Biola University. Her research focuses on meaningful work, work as a calling, and the connection between humility and burnout in the workplace. She is an award-winning scholar and educator who has published in the *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Communication Studies*, and *Christianity Today*. Arianna is also a consultant for organizations, business professionals, and ministries.

What To Do When You Feel Burned Out in Your Calling

What or who motivated you to write *Healthy Calling*?

Arianna Molloy: There is nothing more satisfying and life-giving than being in a healthy relationship with the Caller. Both secular and religious research demonstrates that those who feel called in their work are more motivated, satisfied, have greater well-being, stronger resilience, and positive influence over others than their peers. And yet, they are also most prone to burnout. I was motivated to write this book from a mentorship perspective, so that those who have felt the shadow and sting of burnout won't feel alone or stuck in shame. I wrote this book so we can be proactive and protective in our calling.

When does a healthy calling become an unhealthy calling?

Arianna: If we identify with feeling called, it means we sense a significant need we can help fill. The scary part is, if we invert our role in the calling dynamic, if we begin to think of ourselves as the Caller, it's very hard to say no. We are no longer accountable to the Caller because we are the caller. The plumb line gets skewed in a kind of moral vertigo based on the magnetic pull of the need we see before us, often using panic or scarcity to guide decision-making.

Why is burnout different when someone has been called to something?

Arianna: While burnout in general is definitely concerning, leading to depression, anxiety, increased sick days, relational conflict, a kind of psychological paralysis, and an overriding sense of shame, burnout from a calling is more than that. It's devastating to the core. Burnout in general results in deep and consuming feelings of "I don't like what I'm doing anymore." Burnout from a calling goes beyond that. Burnout from a calling is "I don't know who I am anymore."

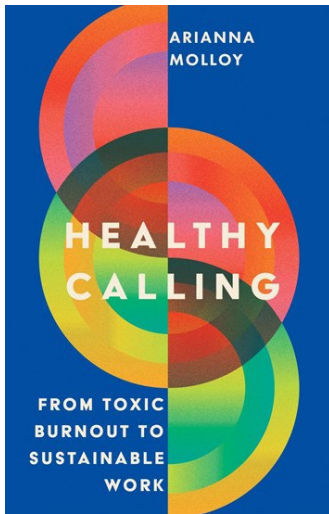
How can we avoid calling burnout?

Arianna: In order to avoid calling burnout—or recover from it if we're already there—we need to understand it a bit better. Defining and recognizing calling burnout is the first step. The second step is knowing what will help mitigate this tendency. The final step is learning how to implement it, so we are freed up to delight in our Caller, calling, and community.

How is *Healthy Calling* different than other books on faith and work or vocation?



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Q & A



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Arianna: At the risk of being too lengthy, here's another way to view it: The number of books about meaningful work speaks to the evergreen relevance of this topic. Most of these books have been written by sociologists, business-minded professionals, or psychologists. These heavy hitters write with the backing of philosophy, social science, and personal experience. But there's something missing in their approach to helping people minimize stress and live a more joyful life. *Healthy Calling* addresses the missing piece in the conversation about burnout, calling, and meaningful work—for two key reasons.

First, it approaches the topic from a social science framework with a distinctly Christian perspective. The goal of this book is to integrate faith throughout the process, pairing it with data, experience, and stories.

Second, *Healthy Calling* is informed by a communication background, which means there is a recognition that what we say and what we hear significantly impact our beliefs, values, and actions. The discipline of communication offers the dual approach of rich theory and compelling practicality.

This book also offers a fresh and more accurate understanding of the role of humility and uncovers an important layer to the concept of calling by addressing the impact of community.

How do you hope your book will impact your readers in their work and calling?

Arianna: My hope and actual prayer is that readers will:

- feel empowered and equipped to pursue their work and life goals without being bound by fear of burnout.
- experience release from shame that may have surfaced from silently burning out in a calling.
- know how to manage moments of initial burnout and get back on track to a healthy calling.

Because this book will:

- act like a mentor, dissolving feelings of being alone in this journey.
- help create healthy habits that are doable and long-lasting.
- inspire them to pursue meaningful work and life by introducing humility as the linchpin to a healthy relationship with calling.

My entire approach as a mentor, is to walk alongside the reader and normalize what can often feel so "othering." To say, "I'm with you, and you can do this." When the reader has finished this book, here is what I'd like them to think, feel and do:

- **Think:** Humility is core to a healthy calling
- **Feel:** Informed and empowered to pursue meaningful professional and personal goals without fear
- **Do:** Be released from any sense of shame for feeling burned out, and proactively address initial burnout so it does not overcome them



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