ANTI-BURNOUT

How to Create a Psychologically Safe and High-performance Organisation

Michael Drayton

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Burnout results in people feeling exhausted, cynical, detached and hopeless – even depressed and anxious. This book looks at burnout from an individual, group and organisational perspective. It uses anecdotes from the author's life; and examples from literature, poetry and art to bring the subject to life. Based on the latest scientific thinking on burnout and evidence-based ideas, this practical, easy read book gives leaders the knowledge they need to create a psychologically healthy and high performance culture at work.

After reading this book, you will understand more about burnout than 90 per cent of the population. You will know what to do to prevent burnout in other people and in yourself. *Anti-burnout* is an academically rigorous book, written in a friendly, engaging, conversational style. It contains lots of anecdotes, examples from the arts and stories that illustrate and bring to life the practical advice on preventing burnout. *Anti-burnout* will answer these questions:

- What exactly is burnout?
- How does burnout affect individuals, teams and organisations?
- What causes burnout?
- How can I understand and support people with burnout?
- How can I prevent myself from burning out?
- What are the obstacles to preventing burnout?
- How does remote working affect burnout?
- What can I do to create a workplace culture that prevents burnout?

This book is helpful because it relates the scientific literature on burnout to real life. *Anti-burnout* looks at the individual factors in burnout, including personality and mental health. It also looks at how the dynamics of teams and how work is organised relate to burnout. Finally, the book investigates organisational culture, leadership and burnout. This book is essential reading for leaders and managers who want to minimise burnout in people in their organisation. It will also be essential reading for anyone with an interest in mental well-being at work such as occupational health practitioners, researchers and human resource professionals.

Michael Drayton is an executive coach, organisational consultant and clinical psychologist. He is an expert in leadership, resilience and mental health at work. Mike was educated at LSE, Oxford Saïd Business School and the University of Birmingham.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Mike Drayton is an executive coach, organisational consultant and clinical psychologist. He has over 20 years' experience in mental well-being in the workplace. His clients include: a world-famous Japanese consumer electronics company, a Swiss owned multinational pharmaceuticals company, a European rail company and the Cabinet Office. Mike is also unique in that he has lived experience of work-related mental health problems. In the 1980s he worked as a paramedic and attended the Clapham Rail Disaster. As a result, he developed PTSD. Mike describes his experiences in the book. Mike was educated at LSE, the University of Oxford, and the University of Birmingham. Mike is a Fellow of the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College. He is a clinical psychologist licensed with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and an Executive Coach accredited at Senior Practitioner level by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). He is a Chartered Psychologist and an Associate fellow of the British Psychological Society.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever felt so tired that you couldn't think? Have you ever felt really exhausted, but at the same time unable to switch off, relax or even sleep? Do you ever feel cynical about your job and wonder what the point of it all is? If you have experienced any of the above, you may be on the road to burnout.

This is a book about burnout – the biggest public health crisis of the 21st century. Burnout is a visceral physical experience. It's the exhaustion, the anxiety, the sick feeling in your stomach. Burnout is also in your head. It's the cynicism, negativity and detachment from work and people. It's the inability to think clearly, the absence of mental well-being. People on the road to burnout are often clinically anxious and depressed.

Personality plays a role in burnout. Conscientious people are more likely to suffer burnout than those who are low on this personality factor. But why burn out? The roots of burnout are in a toxic organisational culture. Burnout is also a social and political experience, because it happens in the context of an organisational culture, which in turn exists in an economy.

Economic uncertainty impacts on organisational culture, and this can find expression in staff burnout.

As well as the personal, public health and humanitarian effects, there's a massive financial price. Burnout costs British companies a fortune in high levels of sickness and employee absence, along with poor retention and poor performance due to presenteeism (HSE, 2019).

This isn't right! Work shouldn't make people ill. In fact, I believe the opposite should be true: work should promote good mental health by giving people purpose, meaning and connection with others.

One of the obstacles to addressing burnout is that organisations tend to treat it as an individual or personal problem rather than a broader organisational challenge. To minimise burnout, it has to be seen as a systemic issue needing board-level action.

This is a book for leaders and managers, and also for those on the road to burnout or recovering from burnout. It's a practical book that will give you the latest scientific thinking on burnout and evidence-based ideas about how to make things better for individuals and for organisations. This book will help you to become part of the solution, not the problem.

This book is a manifesto, a call to action for leaders, managers and anyone who has had that experience of 'vital exhaustion'. It's a book for those who want to create a positive, psychologically healthy culture at work.

What does this book cover?

Section 1: Person

This section covers the individual factors that contribute to burnout.

Chapter 1 explores what burnout really is. I describe the experience of burnout using the World Health Organization's framework. I talk a bit about the history of burnout. I also look at the bigger picture, seeing burnout in the context of organisational culture.

Chapter 2 looks at burnout and mental health at work. I discuss the difference between normal human emotions such as worry and feeling fed-up, and clinical disorders like anxiety and depression. I give you some simple advice about distinguishing between normal emotions, which you shouldn't be concerned about, and signs of clinical depression or anxiety, which should worry you. I end by talking about the importance of energy in managing burnout.

Chapter 3 is all about burnout and personality. I explain how psychologists understand personality using a model called the ‘Big Five’. Some personality types are more susceptible to burnout than others, and if you are vulnerable, you’ll find guidance in this chapter on how you can protect yourself. I also touch on the idea of personality disorder burnout and mental well-being. To finish up, I talk about men and women – how gender influences the way in which we manage stress and burnout.

In Chapter 4, I look at why it seems so hard to address burnout and poor mental well-being in ourselves and in other people. I tell you about research from the fields of social psychology, neuroscience and cognitive science that can help us to understand and break down the barriers to managing stress and burnout.

Section 2: Role

This section is all about your job and your day-to-day life at work. I share practical steps you can take to protect yourself, and those you manage, from going down the road to burnout.

Chapter 5 is about the psychology of office politics. It explains some ideas and practical tools for understanding and managing the dynamics of the group of people you work with.

Chapter 6 focuses on you – on how you can look after your own well-being whilst you are at work. The key to this is not so much managing your time or workload, but managing your energy levels.

Chapter 7 is about how you can protect the people you manage from burnout. I revisit how you can spot the early-warning signs of burnout. I highlight the importance of communication and talking to people who might be struggling. Finally, I tell you about some simple and straightforward techniques that you can introduce to change the culture of the group of people with whom you work directly.

Section 3: Organisation

Section 3 zooms out to examine the wider organisational and social system in which burnout happens.

Chapter 8 looks at the role that organisational culture plays in burnout. By far the biggest factor in burnout is a toxic workplace culture. What kind of day-to-day experiences do people in your organisation have? It is these millions of experiences that form either a positive or toxic organisational culture. I discuss practical initiatives you can introduce (like encouraging a thinking environment) that create a positive culture at work.

Chapter 9 is about leadership. Organisations are reflections of their leaders. This chapter examines the crucial role of proactive leadership in creating a psychologically healthy and high-performance culture. Gandhi famously said, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." Leaders should embody psychological safety in their own lives and model psychologically healthy attitudes and behaviour to those they lead.

Chapter 10 is all about how you can make this happen, both personally and organisationally. I draw together all the themes in the book and present them as a framework that you can adapt to your life, your job and your organisation.

Everything I suggest in this book is common sense. However, as we all know, common sense is one of the rarest commodities in this world. Everything I suggest is simple to know but hard to do. But as a leader you are paid to do hard stuff, and it is the hard things that bring meaning and satisfaction. What is more important than creating a psychologically safe and high-performance workplace environment?

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Section 1

PERSON

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WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Pause for a moment and think about burnout. What image comes to mind? Is it a frazzled man or woman who is agitated and not coping? Is the person running around trying to keep up, or maybe sitting at a desk in front of a computer looking exhausted and defeated?

Burnout is all of these things and a whole lot more. When most people are asked to consider burnout, they think of it as being synonymous with overwork. They might explain burnout as exhaustion caused by too much work. However, exhaustion is only one part of the burnout jigsaw. Other pieces include psychological and spiritual factors like cynicism, hopelessness and helplessness, and detachment – not only from work but from life. These psychological, emotional and spiritual aspects of burnout are a lot more damaging to people than the physical exhaustion.

The writer Sam Keen described burnout thus: "Burnout is nature's way of telling you, you've been going through the motions, your soul has departed; you're a zombie, a member of the walking dead, a sleepwalker. False optimism is like administering stimulants to an exhausted nervous system." (Keen, 1992)

I won't be offering any false optimism in this book. I will explain the science behind burnout and provide some practical suggestions to remedy it.

BOX 1.1 THE HISTORY OF BURNOUT

The term 'burnout' was first used in New York in the 1970s to describe how volunteers who worked with the city's population of drug addicts were emotionally affected by their work. The term was coined by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, who helped to develop the free clinic movement in New York to support people suffering from addictions. Freudenberger, who devoted a large amount of time to these clinics, without pay, observed the gradual emotional exhaustion and declining motivation in some clinic volunteers, and termed this phenomenon 'burnout'. He defined it as "a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life" (Freudenberger, 1975). Jobs can be exhausting for lots of different reasons. Some people do jobs that are tedious, lack meaning and are badly paid. Others do very emotionally demanding jobs, working with people in pain (like the New York drug workers in Freudenberger's clinic). Some do jobs where the demands far outstrip the resources, and others work for employers who treat them badly. Whatever the situation, people can't simply absorb these stresses. They manifest in physical exhaustion, cynicism, detachment from the work and greatly reduced performance.

Why understanding burnout is important for you

There are three reasons why it is important for you to understand burnout, whether you are a leader, a busy manager or work for an organisation:

- Having a good understanding of how and why burnout occurs might prevent you from burning out.
- If you are a manager and you have a direct report who's at risk of burnout or is suffering with burnout, then it's important to know what you're dealing with and how you can best help.
- If you are a leader in an organisation, then understanding burnout will help you to develop an organisational culture where burnout is a thing of the past. This will translate into a highly engaged workforce and a high-performance, creative and generally happy organisational culture.

In this chapter, I describe in detail what burnout is; and believe me, it isn't very pleasant, let alone optimistic. It makes for grim reading. But at the end, you will know more about burnout than 99 per cent of the population. You will know and understand your enemy – and burnout is your enemy.

Once you understand the problem and how complex it is, we can start to come up with some solutions.

Many years ago, I trained as a clinical psychologist. One of the first things that gets drummed into you in training is that when a person turns up for help with a problem (let's say depression), you have to really understand the problem, the person and that person's life before rushing into treatment. Often, when treatment fails it's because the psychologist hasn't taken the time to really understand the factors that constitute the problem. Maybe they've taken a cookbook approach, thinking that the treatment for depression with the best evidence base is cognitive behavioural therapy, and so that's what the person got. But what if the person's depression was the result of unspeakable childhood trauma or a head injury which they didn't think was relevant and didn't disclose? Then all the CBT in the world ain't gonna help. Similarly, burnout is usually addressed like this, with off-the-peg cookbook solutions that more often than not fail to have any impact whatsoever.

So before we rush into solutions, let's spend a bit of time trying to really understand the problem of burnout.

Burnout: the World Health Organization gets involved

In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) included burnout in the *International Classification of Diseases* (11th Revision; *ICD-11*), in the section entitled 'Mental and Behavioural Disorders' (World Health Organization, 2018).

What is ICD-11?

ICD-11 is a book that clinicians use to diagnose mental health problems. It contains detailed descriptions of mental illnesses, and lists of signs and symptoms (diagnostic criteria) that a person would have to meet to be diagnosed with a particular mental illness. Take depression, for example. There are three groups of symptoms that characterise a depressive episode: first, low mood; second, disturbances in physical functioning such as poor sleep and appetite; and third, problems with thinking such as poor concentration and memory. In order to be diagnosed with depression, you would need to be suffering with specific signs or symptoms from each of these groups. (I go into this in more depth in Chapter 2.) Being diagnosed with depression isn't as simple as just feeling fed-up; there's more to it than that. *ICD-11* covers all mental disorders from depression right through to serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia.

The organisational context of burnout

Burnout is included in *ICD-11* as an occupational phenomenon, not as a mental illness. It's interesting to note the emphasis on 'occupational' rather than illness.

Burnout is described in the chapter 'Factors influencing health status or contact with health services'. This chapter makes the point that burnout only occurs in the context of working for an organisation, whereas other mental health problems can occur in any context.

This is important to note, because it means that employers and workplaces are necessary conditions for burnout. In other words, burnout is not just an individual phenomenon existing within an individual person. Burnout is the consequence of a dysfunctional system.

The mistake that many employers make is to locate burnout firmly within the individual and fail to see the circumstances surrounding that individual that have led to them suffering burnout. The problem, it is assumed, is a 'weak' individual who is not coping with the day-to-day stresses of work. The solutions that emerge from this wrong assumption target the individual. Often, such solutions include things like antidepressant medication. These are sometimes supplemented with psychological techniques like time-management training, mindfulness or cognitive behavioural therapy. These interventions are positive and helpful, but they are still individual solutions to a systemic problem. They only tackle one factor contributing to the problem. The other factor is the workplace environment that triggered the burnout in the first instance.

For every employee that goes off sick with burnout, there will be many others on the edge of burning out. Burnout is a symptom that something is going wrong in the organisation – an underlying organisational 'disease' that has to be diagnosed and cured. We have to help the individual suffering with burnout, and I talk about how we do this later, but the organisation also has a responsibility to address the situation that led to the burnout in the first place.

"A state of vital exhaustion"

The WHO describes burnout as "a state of vital exhaustion" (World Health Organization, 2018). I think that's a terrific (and rather poetic) description. The word 'vital' conjures up images of energy and liveliness, and of something that is absolutely essential. 'Exhaustion' is a state of extreme physical and mental tiredness, and to exhaust something means to use it up to the point where all reserves are depleted. These two words beautifully sum up the experience of burnout. The person suffering from burnout feels exhausted. They feel that their resources have been completely depleted. At the same time, the person experiences a sense of agitation and energy. They feel that they just can't switch off or relax. All the people I have met who have been suffering with burnout have experienced this combination of agitation and exhaustion.

ICD-11 goes on to describe burnout as being:

> a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions:
>
> 1 feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
> 2 increased mental distance from one's job, negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and;
> 3 reduced professional efficacy.
>
> Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life. (WHO, 2018)

This definition focuses squarely on the occupational context of burnout rather than the individual 'illness' context. It follows that the best way to avoid burnout and help people suffering with burnout is to focus on fixing the workplace as well as 'fixing' (helping and supporting) the individual employee. A systemic and multi-level approach to burnout is important.

Burnout is related to poorly managed stress in the environment, rather than weakness on the part of susceptible employees. Taking an individual approach to managing burnout brings to mind the experiences of shell-shocked soldiers and airmen in both World Wars. According to military psychiatrists at the time, shell shock (or PTSD as it would now be known) was a result of individual weakness rather than the hellish conditions of trench warfare or the terrible casualty rates of World War II bomber crews. Servicemen who developed shell shock would have their military records stamped with the terrible acronym 'LMF', which stands for *lack of moral fibre*. These soldiers were told that the cause of their shellshock wasn't the appalling environment but a weakness in their personality. That attitude persists in many organisations, where burnout is attributed to the weakness of the employee rather than the toxicity of the organisational culture and environment. This attitude adds to the distress of the individual, who sees themselves as being weak as well as burnt out. It also absolves the organisation of any blame, guilt and need to change.

BOX 1.2 ROB'S STORY

It is one a.m. and in the bedroom of a modest semi-detached house in a London suburb Rob lies next to his wife, Marie, who is quietly snoring. He is wide awake and staring into the darkness. Two hours ago he was exhausted. He couldn't keep his eyes open, let alone focus on the TV programme he was watching with Marie. Now, he can't sleep. He is worrying about work. Rob's typical pattern is to fall asleep quickly and then wake up a few hours later with a feeling of panic.

He decides to get up, thinking that he may as well be working rather than just not sleeping. He swings his legs out of bed, puts on his slippers and dressing gown, and tiptoes quietly downstairs to the kitchen. He pours himself a large whisky and switches on his laptop, which he's left open on the kitchen table, and begins work.

Rob is the in-house solicitor and company secretary of a global professional services firm. The firm is in the middle of a multimillion-pound piece of litigation, which Rob is leading. He feels terrified that he has missed something, because his concentration and memory have been terrible of late.

As he stares at the screen, he hears Marie padding down the stairs. He quickly hides his drink in the cupboard over the sink. A brief argument follows, the gist of which is Marie telling Rob off for working at home. He replies along the lines of, “I know, I know.” Then Marie smells the whisky and loses her temper. Rob shouts back, “Just bloody leave it, will you!” This is quickly followed by, “I’m sorry, love, I didn’t...” But Marie is already climbing the stairs, sobbing. Rob goes back to the document on his laptop.

He has been a lawyer for over 20 years. After he qualified, he worked for a private practice law firm, but he didn’t like the competitive business development aspects of private law. It just didn’t suit his personality. So he decided to move into a general counsel role, firstly with a retail company and now with the global professional services firm. He enjoyed his job up until the last two years, when the pressures really escalated because of a combination of the uncertainty around Brexit and a merger with a rival firm. These events doubled his workload, which was big to begin with. He also had to become involved with tasks he found upsetting, like advising on redundancies. As the pressures increased, he took on more and more work. He felt sorry for the junior lawyers whom he managed and would support them by taking on their more complex tasks himself. He began to hate his job, but felt trapped.

The only way he could keep on top of things was to take work home, and this caused a lot of tension between Rob and Marie. He’d always enjoyed a couple of glasses of wine at night, but now he was having a ‘nightcap’ of Scotch before bed to help him sleep. His increasing alcohol consumption was another cause of conflict with his wife. The main thing that bothered him, though, was his insomnia. He just couldn’t sleep, and this made his workload all the more impossible to tackle. He felt tired all the time, but also tense. *If only I could get a good night’s sleep*, he would think. Sometimes Rob would daydream, and his favourite fantasy was becoming ill or breaking a leg so he wouldn’t have to go to work. *God, I hate my job and I hate my life*, he would think as he lay there in the dark next to his quietly snoring wife.

A slow process

Burnout is the dramatic endpoint of a long, slow, miserable process. People aren’t okay one minute and the next minute burnt out; it takes a long time to get there. This might seem obvious, but in my experience organisations and their support structures respond to burnout as if it is an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Responses to burnout are, more often than not, reactive rather than proactive. Organisations respond to the crisis, not the numerous early-warning signs. Most of us are aware when we aren't coping particularly well, and usually we notice when a colleague isn't coping. However, it's common for us to turn a blind eye to these early-warning signs of burnout and do nothing. There are many reasons for this. Later on in this book, I describe cognitive biases that can often get in the way of a proactive approach. To prevent burnout, we as individuals, managers and leaders (in other words, the people in an organisation) need to take a proactive, compassionate and systemic approach.

The burnout matrix

A matrix is the set of conditions that provides a system in which something grows or develops. That 'something' could be a high-performance workplace or it could be a workplace characterised by burnout.

To properly understand a complex phenomenon such as burnout, it's important to see it in the context of the organisation as a whole, as part of an organic system. The WHO's definition of burnout emphasises the employment context rather than the individual 'illness' context. Most organisations do the opposite, though, and see burnout as a manifestation of some kind of weakness in the employee. So most interventions to address burnout are individual, not systemic. But if we accept the WHO's hypothesis (which I do, because it is based on evidence and research), it follows that any attempt to properly understand and ameliorate burnout has to take into account systemic factors. Burnout is multifactorial. It isn't caused by just one thing, like individual weakness or a tyrannical boss, but many things that interact.

The Tavistock Institute for Human Relations was formed in 1946, to apply ideas from psychology and psychoanalysis to the problems of post war industry in the UK. The innovative work they carried out had an enormous impact on industries such as coal mining and the development of the newly formed National Health Service. Organisational consultants at the Tavistock have been wrestling with the problem of understanding complex phenomena in organisations since (Trist & Murray, 1990). They have developed a very useful model that helps us to understand organisational complexity. This model is simple but enormously helpful in that it places burnout firmly in its organisational context. This is the person/role/organisation model.

The person/role/organisation model

To reiterate, the cause of burnout is multifactorial. Burnout happens not because of individual weakness or a bad manager or overwork; it occurs when these factors and others interact with each other. The factors of burnout fall into one of three broad categories of the model:

The person

Burnout happens in individual human beings. To understand burnout it's important to understand what the individual brings to the party. All of us are complex and fallible human beings with a history of experiences from infancy that have made us the person we are. Some people are more resilient than others. Some people have personalities that make them more vulnerable to burnout than other people. If you have a personality characterised by high levels of conscientiousness and a low level of emotional stability then you are far more likely to develop burnout than someone who is laid-back and emotionally stable. If a person is suffering stress in their home life – perhaps their partner is ill or they are experiencing financial worries – then they are far more vulnerable to developing burnout than if their domestic circumstances were stable.

These individual characteristics all play a role in burnout. The problem is that many organisations, human resource departments and occupational health professionals only see these individual characteristics and miss the bigger picture – including the role that the person has to play at work and in the organisational culture.

The role

Burnout is something that occurs in an individual, but *only* in the context of work. People have both formal and informal roles at work, and both can contribute to burnout.

The formal role is what the person is paid to do; for example, 'head of marketing', 'engineer' or 'HR director'. One of the most common factors contributing to burnout is a lack of clarity about what the person is expected to do and achieve at work, otherwise known as role ambiguity (Peterson et al., 1995).

As well as their formal role at work, people often have informal roles, such as ‘father figure’, ‘troublemaker’, ‘peacemaker’ or ‘scapegoat’. Our early life experiences pre-dispose us to take up these roles, and we are gently pushed into them by unconscious organisational forces (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). These unconscious work roles can be the cause of enormous stress and contribute to burnout.

The organisation

This refers to the culture of the organisation in which the person works. It also refers to all the external pressures on that organisation from the economy, from political events and generally from the social system within which the organisation has to function.

Many organisations are psychologically very healthy and take care of their employees. Others are not so good. However, when put under pressure from economic and political circumstances, even decent organisations can soon deteriorate into toxic environments.

For example, France Télécom (or Orange SR, as it was then known) was facing an existential crisis in 2005. It was losing money hand over fist and needed to make redundancies. However, because of the strict labour laws in France, it found making people redundant to be almost impossible. It reacted by making the organisation an extremely unpleasant place to work for the people it wanted to get rid of. The CEO at the time, Didier Lombard, was famously reported to have told a meeting of managers in 2006, “I will get people to leave one way or another, either through the window or the door.” Which, very tragically, is what happened. The company was hit by a wave of employee suicides that were directly attributed to the culture of bullying started by the CEO. In 2019, three executives from the company, the CEO (Lombard), his deputy and the director of human resources, were jailed because of their behaviour.

Bringing it all together

Anti-burnout is structured in-line with the three parts of the person/role/organisation model.

I describe in more detail the personal, individual factors that make people more or less vulnerable to burnout. I also talk about what individuals can do to 'inoculate' themselves to prevent burnout.

I go on to describe the role the person plays in the organisation – in other words, what their job is. I describe the job characteristics that contribute to burnout. I also outline some practical techniques you can use, again to protect yourself, but also, if you are a manager, to protect your direct reports.

The third and final section looks at organisational factors implicated in burnout. I explore organisational cultures both good and bad.

Chapter takeaways

Burnout isn't just exhaustion from overwork. It consists of:

- Feeling a mixture of physical and mental exhaustion mixed up with agitation, worry and anxiety.
- Experiencing work as being meaningless, a chore. Feeling cut off and cynical about work.
- A noticeable decline in work performance.
- Burnout isn't just an individual issue it is an organisational and wider systemic phenomenon.

To understand and prevent burnout you have to understand three factors:

- The person.
- The person's role.
- The culture of the organisation.

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