

# Losing motivation? 3 tips from a pro athlete and an expert to turn things around



Corey Hirsch experienced burnout while playing in the NHL. He learned some tools to help overcome it. Illustration: Dan Goldfarb / The Athletic; Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / Getty Images

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*This story is part of Peak, The Athletic's desk covering the mental side of sports.*

A few weeks ago, my friend explained that she was struggling to muster the energy to accomplish simple tasks such as washing dishes or replying to

messages, and she hated that she'd developed an uncharacteristic cynicism toward work. My first thought was that I understood the feeling.

You probably do, too.

So I called Corey Hirsch, a former NHL goaltender and coach, who has worked through burnout and is widely known as one of the first professional athletes to speak openly about his mental health. I also called Michael Leiter, a leading voice on burnout science and co-author of “*The Burnout Challenge: Managing People’s Relationship with Their Jobs*.”

Here are their best tips for digging yourself out of a funk.

Try finding fulfillment in something other than work

During a Christmas dinner with his family while he played in the NHL, Hirsch couldn't focus on the conversations around him. His mind kept reverting to his job as a goalie and everything he needed to do to prepare for upcoming games.

Hirsch had been a “rink rat” since he was young and doesn’t remember a time when he wasn’t hard on himself. He struggled to soak in good moments. Baked into that was an even deeper worry that if he wasn’t thinking and talking about hockey all the time, it meant the game didn’t mean as much to him.

“I didn’t have balance when I played,” he admitted. “What do the fans think of me? What is the coach saying about me? How did I play last game? What about that goal I just got scored on? What can I do?” And it becomes so consuming that you don’t have anything else in your life.”

After his first NHL game, Hirsch’s teammates took turns congratulating him in the locker room, but one said, “It’s only one game, kid. Don’t fall in love with yourself.” Hirsch took that to heart and, in a lot of ways, never gave himself much credit. Over time, he lost his spark.

Burnout grows when you’re physically present but mentally elsewhere, like Hirsch at Christmas dinner. Over time, it made him physically sick and lethargic.

But then he started asking himself questions: *Am I giving my family enough time? When was the last time I went outside for a walk or spent time in*

*nature? Am I actually listening to the people around me, or am I too consumed by my responsibilities to pay attention?*

He threw away the “suck it up” mentality he said he was conditioned to believe in and asked for help. He started therapy and was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

He committed to new interests, such as playing guitar and spending time in nature, and allowed those experiences to fill him up. He scheduled more time away from hockey, which he said actually benefited his game.

“There’s so much more in the world, and when you fill your soul with other things, you can appreciate the game, or your job, more,” he said.

Hirsch now leans on a small group of close friends and works hard to show up fully in those relationships. Spending time with them recharges him in ways that stressfully overanalyzing or strategizing never could.

“If I’m feeling down in the dumps, I’ll self-isolate and shut down,” Hirsch said. “But now I’ve got a buddy who’ll ask me to grab a coffee, and we look out for each other. It doesn’t matter who it is, just people. People who connect with you and care.”

On that note, feel free to tell me about your burnout. Email me at [edevlin@theathletic.com](mailto:edevlin@theathletic.com) and tell me what you do when you feel drained, stressed, or just a little off.

Track the best and worst parts of your day

When you fall into a slump, not everything in your life turns bad, though it might feel that way. But you likely ended up in your current role for a reason. At some point, something about it mattered to you. You might still care, but now there is a disconnect.

To repair that connection, you need information about yourself. Leiter, a professor emeritus at Acadia University, encourages people to write down and track the best parts of each workday.

“What were you doing? Who were you with? Why did it feel good? What was actually happening? And also, what was the worst part of your day? What didn’t work for you?”

These reflections help you map patterns and reveal what drives your energy and what drains it. Once you understand that, your sense of purpose becomes clearer, and so does figuring out if you should leave your situation or make a different move, like having conversations with your manager about spending more time on areas that tap into your original passions for the job. That's because, Leiter said, purpose is linked to happiness.

### Create daily habits ahead of time

Burnout is easier to manage if you create daily practices ahead of time. For Hirsch, meditation, journaling, nature walks, therapy and reflection have all helped reduce the impact of burnout. Preparing, he said, softens the blow.

“It stops the negative spiral that, if it’s too deep of a hole, you can’t dig yourself out of,” he said.

It doesn’t have to be every day. Hirsch sees a therapist maybe once or twice a year. But he still goes as maintenance. And even if the maintenance doesn’t prevent a burnout spell, because you did the extra work ahead of time, Hirsch believes you’ll be able to handle it in a stronger way.

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