

# Banishing burnout - pointers from some fellow creatives that might just help

## ***What exactly is burnout?***

Burnout and stress are pretty closely linked – think of them as first cousins - but they're not the same thing. As we talk about in the [Stress and Anxiety](#) part of our Balance toolkit, stress puts a lot of pressure on your mind and body.

While this can be OK (or at least manageable) in the short-term, if it becomes a constant companion to your life in the creative sector, it can be bad news for both your physical health and emotional wellbeing. Too much stress for too long, and the chances are that you will burn out, meaning that you'll be in a state of complete mental, physical and emotional exhaustion that can stop you from doing all the things that you normally find meaningful. Signs of burnout include:



- feeling exhausted and unable to perform basic tasks
- losing motivation in many aspects of your life, including your work and friendships
- feeling unable to focus or concentrate on tasks
- feeling empty or lacking in emotion
- losing your passion and drive
- experiencing conflict in your relationships with co-workers, friends and family
- withdrawing emotionally from friends and family

Essentially, when you've reached the point of burnout, it can feel like you've had the life sucked out of you. You no longer feel capable of caring about what's important to you, making any effort, or staying motivated.

## ***In the creative sector, the chances of burning out are woefully high***

For artists and other creatives like all of us — for whom the line between work and play, career and passion, is often non-existent — the threat of burnout is particularly dire. It's been that way for a long time too; back in 2018 an Arts Council England report on cultural leadership indicated that low pay, a lack of work-life balance, limited opportunities for career development and the ongoing pressure to do more with less was creating an “increasingly high” risk of burnout in the sector. Add on all that the pandemic has thrown at us, and it's not surprising that so many of us feel burnt out.



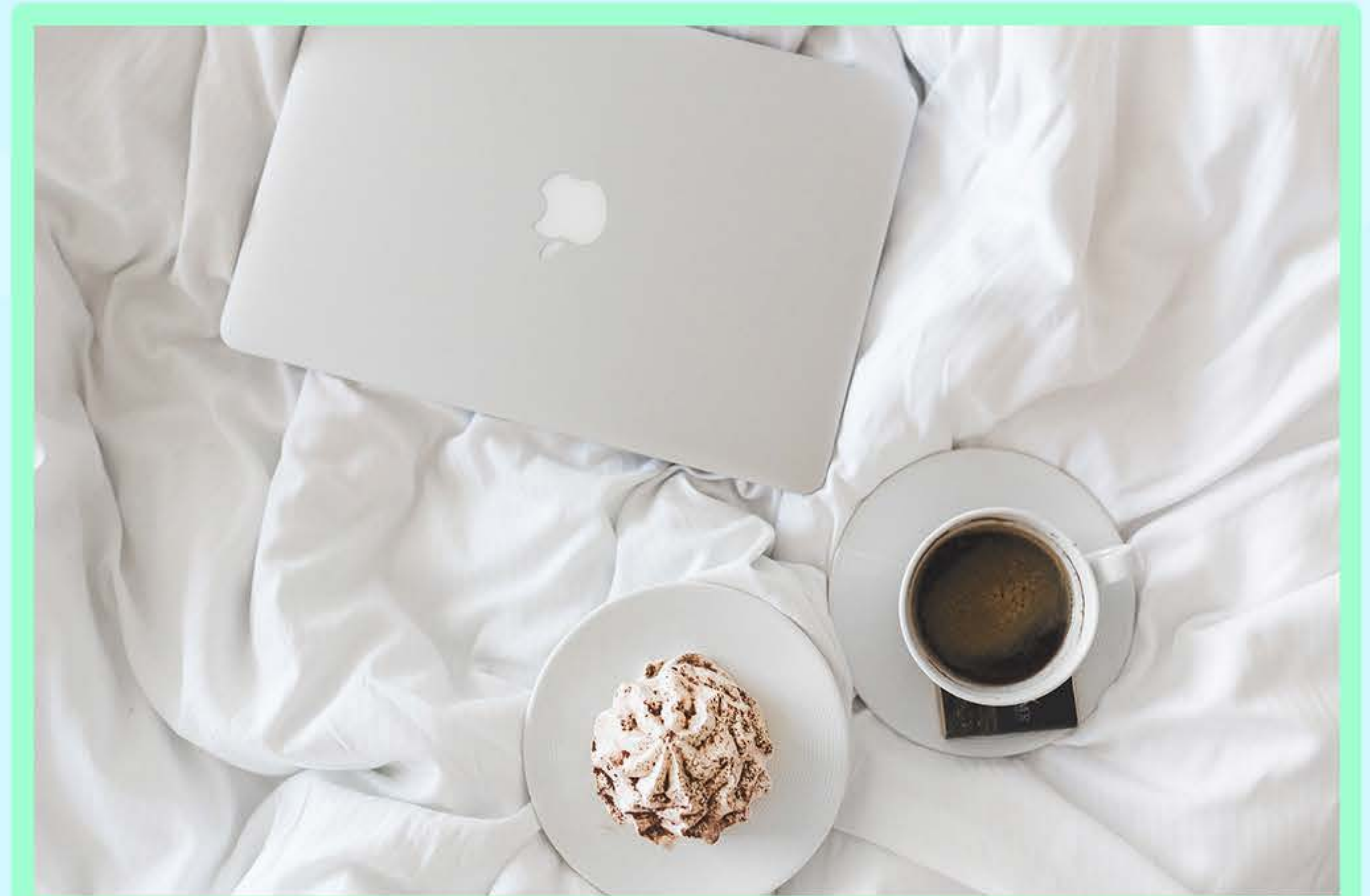
### ***What to do if burnout is beckoning, or if you've already burnt out***

So what to do if – as an artist, creative freelancer or entrepreneur – you encounter burnout, or want to, do all you can to prevent it from becoming part of your story? We are all our own biggest assets, so it's really important that we look after ourselves, but at the same time it's unlikely that any of us can really drop everything and head for a month-long yoga retreat in Thailand (although we can dream right?!).

**Here a few tried and tested thoughts, ideas and tactics that we, and others in our community of curious and generous creatives, have found useful ourselves. We hope you find some value in them too!**

### ***Take a break***

Taking time away from your practice or work might seem irresponsible, especially when you're facing a wall of deadlines and can't see the wood for the trees. We know that (we've been there, got the tee shirt in all colours!). But in the long run, allowing yourself some breathing room even at the busiest, most stressful times, can help you avoid burnout, and (kerching!), it will also ultimately make you more productive and creative. Time and again we've heard fellow creatives tell us just that, and we know it to be true from our own histories too. So think about how and when you can build breaks into your schedule (see below for the benefits of putting 'do nothing into your calendar!). **As your own biggest asset, the time and money you invest in taking a break could be the best investment you could make.**



### ***Switch off from technology***

We've all been there, checking our emails or socials just before we attempt to get some sleep. And we all know it's bad for us, and means our minds are likely to be whirring when we want them to be purring. So here's the thing – buy yourself an alarm clock and trade your phone for a book! And try to make sure you limit your tech use – especially the things you use for work – in your down time.

### ***Write yourself a work handbook and set some boundaries***

It's time to form your own union, and make sure your employer (oh that's you too) treats you right! Writing their own work handbook is something that one of our team did a few years back after they gave themselves a short sabbatical. **We are all our own employers, and yet more often than not, we ask way more of ourselves than any 'real' employer would. Writing a set of guidelines that set out how you will employ yourself**



**or your team (of which YOU are a member, remember!) can be really helpful in getting you to think about, and set, reasonable boundaries.** If you're a freelancer and writing 'I will ensure that I don't work more than x hours a week' feels a bit fake or like you're playing shops, it might help to write about your employee (i.e. you) in the third person (I will ensure that Jane Doe/my graphic designer doesn't work more than x hours a week). Being aware of all the hats you wear as an artist, creative freelancer or entrepreneur can really help you become a better employer of yourself, and help you fend off burnout.



### ***Make a date to do nothing***

For those of us who seem to be wired to always need to be doing something, this favourite go to of one of our team, could just work. The idea is simple: you make 'doing nothing' something, by putting it in your calendar on a regular basis, or writing 'do nothing' across a whole day. You might want to switch things up by adding 'read a book', 'do some yoga', that kind of thing, but essentially what you are doing is giving 'equal billing' in your calendar to the things that nourish rather than drain you.

### ***Don't hibernate, however tempting it is***

One for the introverts amongst us. During major projects, or periods of really intensive activity, the temptation to hide out and hibernate from the outside world, can be enormous. But that way danger lies, and burnout beckons. Social contact helps us keep a proper perspective, and stops us from having the tunnel vision that means there really isn't ever going to be a light at the end of that tunnel, just burnout.



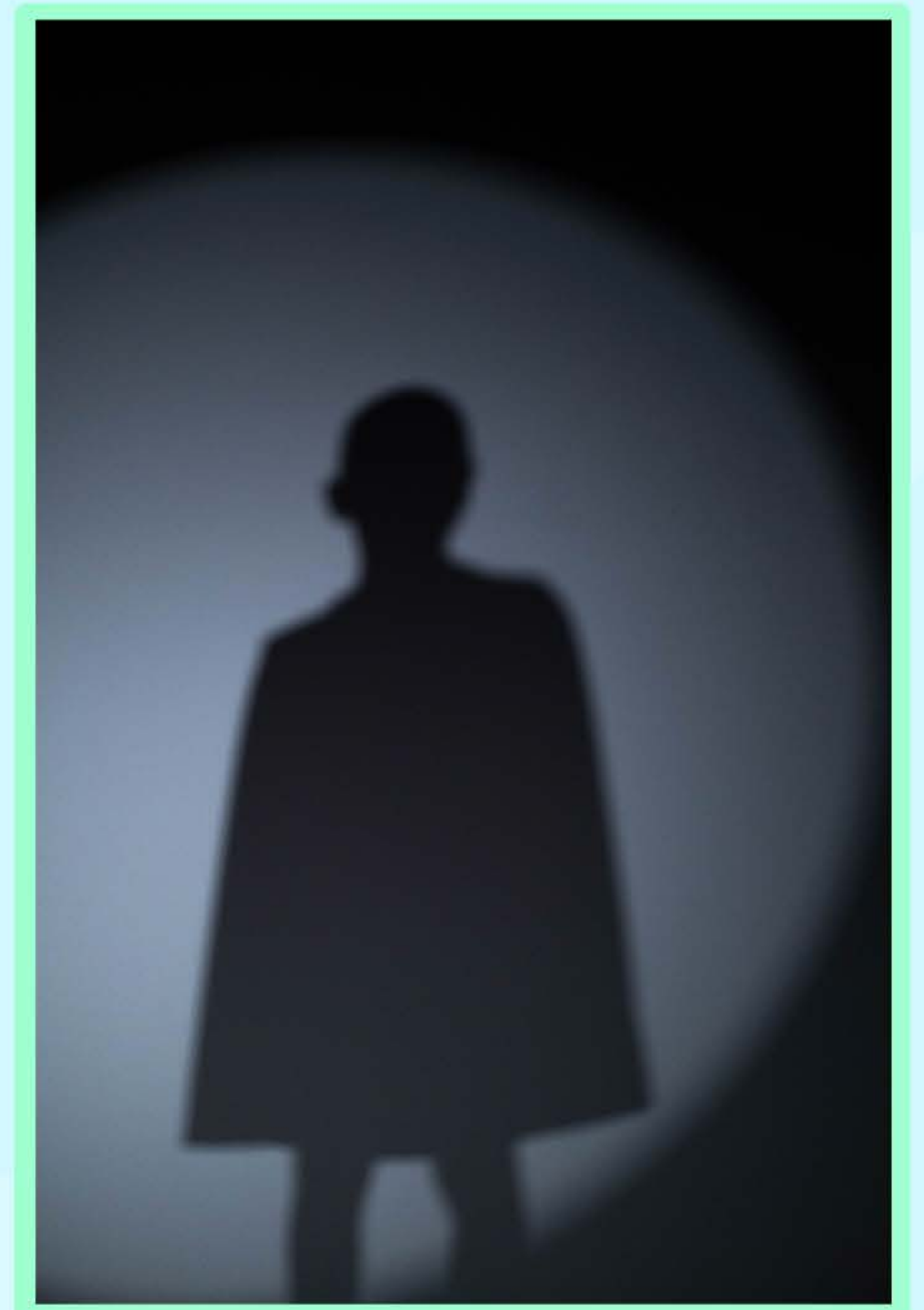
## ***Do something creative that isn't work, and just muck around***

During the pandemic millions of people turned to creative pursuits to help them keep going. But what to do if you're a creative yourself, and those very same pursuits are what you do for work every day? The trick is to find a new form of creativity that's totally removed from your daily practice, and even better still, something that you're a novice at, or that you can do just for fun. A painter we know says that he does silly biro drawings of an evening to relax, a musician we know paints stones to give to his friends as presents. If that's not your bag, what about doing something else that seems totally frivolous? Have a kitchen disco, tear that awful wallpaper off the wall and get painting that wall, or do some actual grown up playing! Alternatively, take a deep dive into another artist you really admire, and distract and inspire yourself with what you find there. Whatever works for you, the key is finding another way to channel your creativity.

## ***Don't fall for the myths if you want to hold onto your superpowers***

**History (and popular culture) is littered with stories of tortured souls whose brilliance seems inextricably bound up in what ultimately led to their demise.**

**Similarly, start up culture is often about long hours, and achieving success at any costs.** We think these are myths that you shouldn't fall for. Having good mental health means you have more of yourself to give to your art, while your start up is likely to go nowhere if your burnout means you can't even get out of bed. **So ditch the myths – they're likely to set you up for burnout and mean that instead of going stellar you'll simply be drained of all the superpowers that make you the unique creative being you are.**



## ***Get better at saying no***

For lots of us, saying no comes really hard, but it's definitely something that you need to make friends with if you want to avoid or come back from burnout. **What can be really useful is giving yourself time to reflect about what's really important to you in your life. Being aware of that helps you 'set your compass' and make better decisions. We've found that it can also help to think about the cost of saying yes.** If you're anything like some of us in the team, you might find it hard to worry about the **cost to yourself** of carrying on; you just have to carry on right? But what might work better is to think about the **cost to other people** around you.

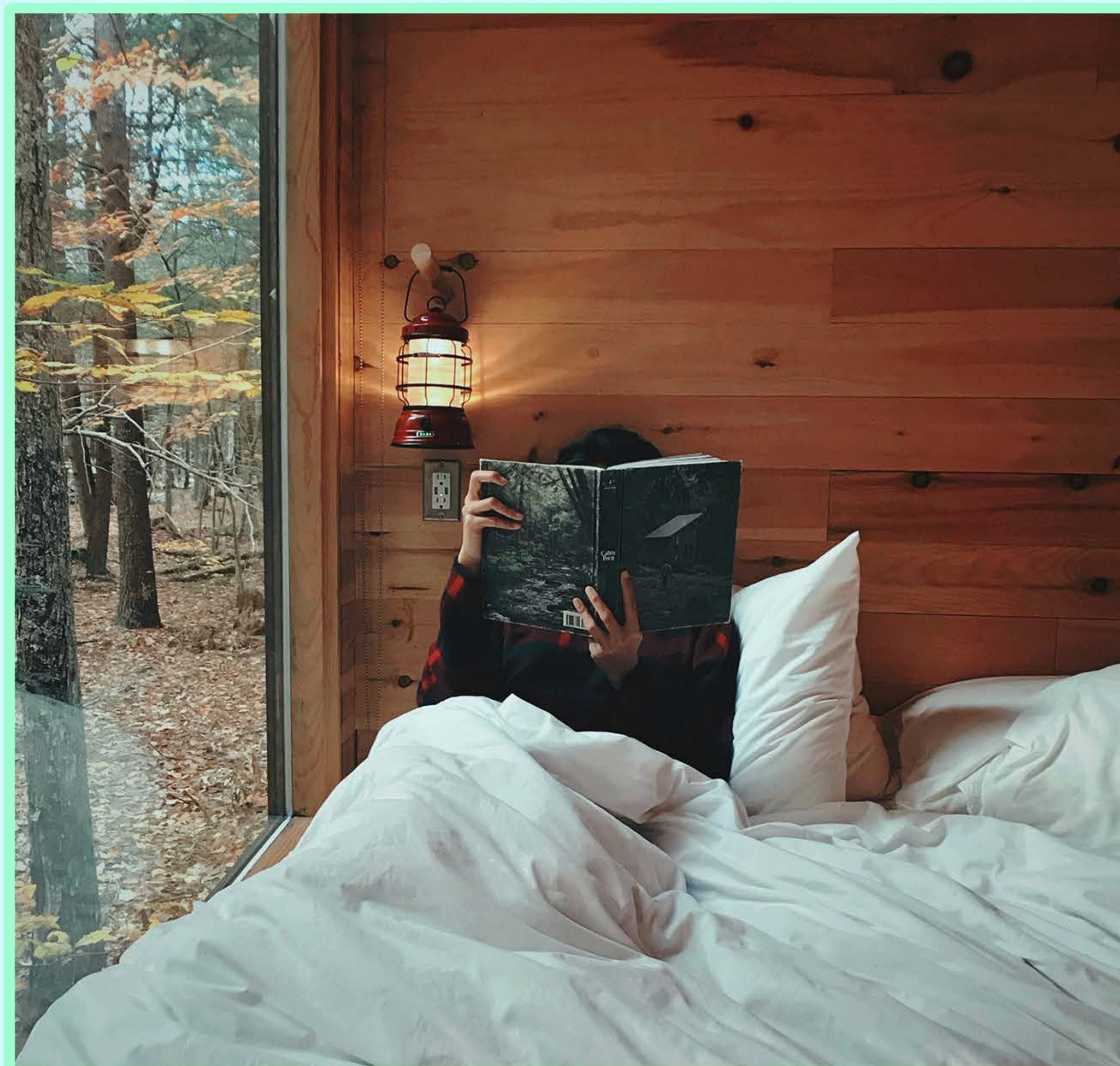


## ***Keep a journal***

As one of the participants in a Balance talk said, “Emptying my head onto a page definitely helps!” We are massive advocates of journalling and creative writing. For us there’s something magical about putting pen to paper and just seeing what comes out. Keeping a journal is a great way to record how you’re feeling and what’s behind that, as well as explore what might help you change. And going back over previous entries can be super useful in terms of spotting patterns, and building up a picture of how you’ve arrived at the place you are in.

## ***Have a ‘bunker weekend’ to figure out what’s really important***

Every year or so, one of our team heads off what they call a ‘bunker weekend’. It’s more fun than it sounds, and basically involves she and her partner heading off for a couple of days to **take stock about what’s going well, what’s important to them both right now, and what some of their ambitions are.** Crucially, they don’t talk about work (ok, it might crop up a bit!); instead, their thinking and talking focuses on things like family, friends, travelling and their health. They do their initial reflections on their own, and then come together over some good food to share them, before drawing up a list of things they are going to do in the coming year, individually and together. By the end of the weekend they have a menu of things designed to help them stay creative, feel nourished and (their words) ‘live in colour’. So think about how you could sort your own bunker weekend or personal retreat.





### ***Give yourself permission to slow down***

OK, we've saved what can be the hardest one for last. So many of the conversations we have with other freelance creatives revolve around the thorny issue of permission. It links to what we said earlier about being our own employers. **Often the hardest thing to do when we're stressed is to give ourselves permission to slow down, yet that's exactly what we need to do.** Many years of experience mean that we know that it doesn't matter what your friends tell you, what your partner or parents say; if you can't give yourself permission to slow down or change the way you work, then you'll never crack it. It's a toughy for sure, but something you can do if you do some of the other things we've suggested here that can help you figure out what's really important to you. Maybe it's time to give yourself a good (but gentle) talking to?



We really hope these tips have been useful for you! If you want to find out more about burnout and how to keep it at bay, don't forget to check out all the resources in the [Burnout](#) and [Stress & Anxiety](#) sections of our Balance toolkit.