

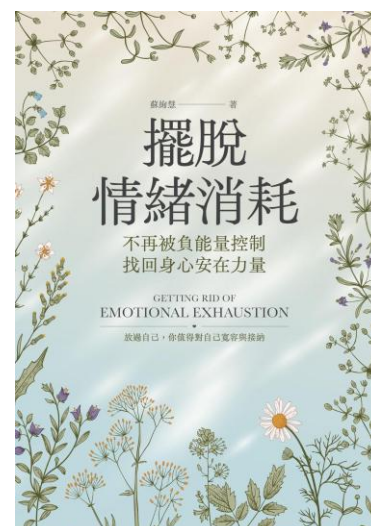
ESCAPING AFFECT EXHAUSTION: FREE YOURSELF FROM NEGATIVITY, REDISCOVER PEACE OF MIND

擺脫情緒消耗：不再被負能量控制，找回身心安在力量

In this work, professional psychologist and bestselling author Su Shun-Hui cracks the code on how to manage body and mind energies effectively, helping readers reclaim true happiness and contentment in their lives.

Nationally renowned psychologist Su Shun-Hui has already drawn on her over twenty-five years of psychological counseling experience to author multiple bestselling books on motivational psychology and personal growth. Now, her insights, gleaned through her work across community, university and hospital settings, into the powerful psychological and physiological effects of emotional negativity are platformed in this important work on the issue and real-life impacts of “affect exhaustion”.

This work in three parts begins by defining affect exhaustion before moving on to help readers wrestle with this topic and then achieve deeper understandings of both their own emotional issues and effective strategies for self-healing. Su works solid theoretical knowledge into highly relatable, everyday issues such as family pressures, workplace competition, and media-based incitement, social-media controversies, and the dichotomous relationship many women have with modern and traditional values. Readers learn that



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affect exhaustion, beyond tying affected individuals in knots, can impact interpersonal relationships and even pull at the fabric of social stability and trust. Little wonder why effectively managing your body and mind energies is so important!

This book gently but clearly reminds readers to prioritize their personal needs and goals. After all, only by fully knowing yourself and your emotions can you actively avoid becoming mired in affect exhaustion of your own making, gain better control over your body and mind, positively influence others in your orbit, and, ultimately, learn to recognize others with affect exhaustion and safely navigate your relationships with them. This book has something of value to give all who value and seek to better their emotional health.

Su Shun-Hui 蘇絢慧

Su Shun-Hui holds a master's degree from the Institute of Psychology and Counseling at the National Taipei University of Education, and has over twenty-five years of experience in psychological counseling. She has worked as a social worker and counselor at various medical centers and hospices, and is a specialist in childhood trauma. She is the founder of and currently works at the Puchen-Hsinyu Space Mental Health Counseling Center. Her books have received Golden Tripod Awards in the Social Science and Literature categories. As of 2024, Su has written and published nearly thirty books, including most recently *Escaping Affect Exhaustion* and *Learn to be More Secure*.

ESCAPING AFFECT EXHAUSTION: FREE YOURSELF FROM NEGATIVITY, REDISCOVER PEACE OF MIND

By Su Shun-Hui

Translated by Emily Lu

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Preface: Affect Exhaustion Is When Everything Falls Apart

Living in modern times regularly forces us to the brink. From the day we are born, we accumulate each disappointment and unresolved hurt. Feelings of futility and learned helplessness become our constant companions, and the reverberations of early childhood trauma pervade our interpersonal relations as adults. News on the internet and real-world encounters can leave us momentarily stunned. Mired in affective phenomena almost daily, with the trigger pressed against our chest, *bam-bam*, we erupt in our pain. Overwhelmed by disquiet and anxiety, we run.

In high stress and unsafe environments, we must implement coping mechanisms – denial, repression, aggression, dissociation – to survive. And although we survive, we are invariably plunged back into affect, unable to break free.

At the heart of affective spillover, like the eye of a typhoon, are the unresolved emotions of painful past experiences. Those past lessons have primed us to react reflexively. Impulsively we head into affective storms where everything falls apart. Again and again, our physical and mental health lie in the wreckage.

Emotional boundaries are integral to constructing safe personal spaces. When at the whim of emotion, we are constantly overrun by situational anxiety. Feelings of unease and fear stampede over us, and emotion is sovereign. Its intensity kidnaps and redirects our logic into reaction, and we bear its onslaught and consequences.

I Build Myself a Safe House

Boundaries are like the windows and walls of a house. I want my windows and walls to be able to protect me from the storm outside. A whisper from the streets shouldn't easily penetrate these walls and disturb my repose. If so afflicted, it can only mean these walls were either damaged or never constructed at all. I am forced to respond at every moment to external elements, without the benefit of time or assistance. I need to build a safe house to be my own master.

If I want to practice becoming the master of my life, the next time I am in crisis, I should allow myself a moment to look at the situation and ask myself:

“What has happened?”

“What am I feeling?”

“Has a situation I previously encountered made me feel this way?”

“Looking at the situation again, how are things different this time?”

Examining the reality of a situation is quite different from running on auto-pilot. Each has its own logic, process, and mode of arrival. Pause. I carve out a small space to settle in my feelings. As long as I don't wallow in these feelings, the most intense emotions last only about ninety seconds. During this interval, I let myself breathe. I practice not going down those automatic trajectories. I practice not seeing things in absolutes. As my heart rate slows, I try again to proceed in a way that encompasses myself, a way that accepts and slowly begins to process my negative affect.

When everything falls apart, that's affect exhaustion. Emotional triggers are like the landmines of the body. When set off repeatedly, they take a toll on our mental and physical health. Not reacting reflexively requires practice. If I can repair my inner sense of safety, then I may be able to face the world more pragmatically. I prepare; I trust in my ability; I adapt as needed.

In writing this book, I hope to offer some expertise as well as practices related to our mental health journeys. I have been in the helping professions for over twenty-five years, first, as a hospital social worker and psychologist, then during the last decade, as a community psychologist. Often encountering the emotional pain and turmoil of others, this line of work is affect work. I mobilize my affect effectively to support others.

I'm at the whim of my affective surroundings, and my mental health reserves are drained by the end of each workday. Stuck in the milieu and thus depleted I became interested in the topic of affect exhaustion. For those in helping professions, those working as caregivers, service staff, and other emotional laborers, I believe it to be a topic of quotidian relevance.

I Don't Look Away from the Reality of Affect Exhaustion

The brutal onslaught of affect exhaustion makes me numb and detached from daily life. Life would be untenable otherwise. However, in that relentless cycle, things can only get worse. Not only is my mood worsened by exhaustion, I am more prone to somatic symptoms, physical illnesses, and other functional impairments.

The drain never ends. After all, the wider world is hard to change. It requires collective awareness as well as collective action to prioritize people's wellbeing. Only then may we begin to restore our depleted health and wellness.

But before then, when I'm affect exhausted, how to strategically empower myself to protect health and add to my toolbox? To continue, I cannot wallow in loss. Like struggling against a rip tide, I can only be pulled further into the sea of self-defeat. Instead, I work to improve my psychological awareness, choose people and environments that value me, and when I'm at the limit of my energy, I choose not to carry everything on my shoulders. I don't have to say yes to every ask.

Do I want to mobilize my affect effectively? When will I stop feeling exhausted? When will I break free from people and settings that only drain me? Who will take up the task of valuing my health? Am I willing to be my own guardian? I hope this book can accompany others for the journey ahead. Life cannot not just be exhaustion. There is still time to experience abundance.

Section 1: What Is Affect Exhaustion?

01 Why Am I So Fucking Tired?

Exhaustion refers to a state of depletion, being broken down and worn, as well as the consequence of that process.

Being exhausted implies that affect has been depleted. When drained to null, it is difficult to recharge and even harder to recover. There are two causes of my exhaustion. The first is when

inner turmoil depletes me, making me squander my energy carelessly. The second is when I'm affected by the people and environment surrounding me, leading to an external drain on my health. In the latter, the external world can be vampiric. Until a stop measure or border is put in place, I am unable to stanch the drain.

A common scenario is when I'm assaulted left and right by the intensity of people's words or affects when, for example, they're venting, hurling insults, screeching, making statements or behaving in a manner to elicit maximum drama. When faced with the onslaught of those affects, in order to shoulder the heaviness of those feelings, I must use my affect in response to counter them. Thus, my energy depletes quickly. Like a battery encountering a mega device, my entire charge may be drained in an instant, negating my ability to function. There's nothing left to work with. I'm left void, befuddled, and at a standstill.

There will always be those who leverage emotional intensity to sap energy from relations with others, consuming other people's feelings entirely along their own. People in this category can use their affect as a weapon or tool to threaten and manipulate. Another category of people has no emotional control at all, yet still depletes themselves. Their inner emotional world is akin to a floodwater beast that rears its head at the first opportunity, drowning itself, attacking others, and destroying everything in its path on impulse.

The following are eight additional personality traits that I also observe on a regular basis:

1. Impulsive, thoughts and behaviors escalate rapidly
2. Overly defensive, never at ease, and constantly in search of external validation
3. Egotistic, narcissistic, and superficial in interpersonal relations to take advantage of others
4. Having coping mechanisms maladapted to deal with reality, leading to denial, projection, avoidance, paranoia, lashing out, aggression, hostility and other reactions
5. Lacking a sense of personal agency, blames only their circumstances or others
6. Lacking respect for other people's boundaries
7. Mistake themselves for the center of the universe and everything as constantly threatening, for example, if someone didn't smile, they must be upset at me, or if someone declined my request, they must not respect me
8. Lacking appreciation for other perspectives and points of view, unable to see things as they are, which skews judgment

People who exhibit more of the above characteristics are more dominated by emotions in their day-to-day. They have not adequately trained their rational mind.

Affect originates from feeling, with those dominated by affect prone to oversensitivity and overreaction. Although having a sensitive and reactive predisposition is not necessarily bad, when the balance between rationale and affect is ignored, emotions dominate, and logical processes are swept aside.

Affect is difficult to steer, as is feeling. Instead, they are forced by feeling to dance its dance, to mire in its chaos, and thus be exhausted as inevitability.

Affect exhaustion doesn't seem to be the best approach at home, in the workplace, or in the community. For example, people are drawn to click-bait headlines that incite strong emotion, and easily get caught up in arguing these topics in the online echo chambers that define today's social media. Like a perpetual engine that never shuts off, these cycles burn through to collective affect exhaustion.

Affect has long been used to incite the masses politically, not only leading to collective affect exhaustion but also to the wearing down of the heart and mind. Massive amounts of emotional reserves and mental health are depleted with no hope of replenishment.

I've noticed various media, marketing, advertising, and political strategies employing affect in this way. Surely Taiwan's reputation as an "overwork island" isn't solely due to long working hours and a general lack of awareness regarding the need for rest. The environment and surroundings are also constantly wearing away at people's emotions. This contributes to general unwellness and the rise in prevalence of disease pathologies among the population.

With more instances of affect exhaustion overlapping at home, at work, with in relationships with friends, and on the internet, the world is primed for eruption. How can I live safely while anticipating that at any moment, my body might collapse in the aftermath? How can I build my skills and confidence when my life is constantly on the brink?

To counter both the external and internal processes of affect exhaustion, I must nurture self-awareness and personal agency. To take responsibility for my own self-care, I must achieve a certain affective skillset. The sooner I realize a situation has turned sour, that point when even equanimity and experience have been overwhelmed, the earlier I can implement self-preservation measures. These measures reduce the impact of intense affect flares in my environment. Allowing them to run their usual course would steamroll my physical and mental health and leave me left with nothing.

Disciplines I feel to be of utmost importance to maintaining good mental health include practicing everyday routines of grounding techniques, maintaining boundaries, employing outlets for stress, exercising regularly, and eating a nutritious diet. I want to find respite and safety within myself and to build up my personal space. The goal is to practice a mode of self-preservation that will reduce the risk of affect collapse. I want the ability to examine my own life. In those large and small details, it is up to me to determine how much of myself to invest in order to not overextend and not expend my affect reserves to the point of depletion.

Affect Exhaustion Reflects the Inability to Set Boundaries

Affect-exhausted individuals are prone to stressing themselves out. These people cause themselves to suffer and burn through their own emotional energies. When the external environment is hostile and there's confrontation in the air, those prone to stressing out are quick to blame themselves. Without considering the details or thinking ahead, they jump straight into devaluing themselves, doubting their abilities, and fermenting guilt and shame. They plunge

headfirst into the canyon of negative affect. Eventually, they drain their mental health, and ego. Their confidence takes a huge hit.

The root cause of this phenomenon is during development. Their early relationships and formative experiences may have made them feel that the world is fundamentally unsafe. Along their trajectory, these individuals don't develop an internal fuse box. They don't have a protective feature to disrupt the emotional circuit when overloaded above their limit. Instead, the circuit continues to expand exponentially out of control.

Early family dynamics matter. Main caregivers, most often the parents, provide the model for how adults react to stress. When adults employ threats and fear to teach their children important lessons, these kids from a young age are unable to build a stable system to manage their feelings and traverse life's emotional maelstroms. After a while, these individuals become unmoored like a house washed out to sea, shifting, trembling, teetering.

During acute crises, there is no way to fine-tune their emotional response. Seismic waves of feeling pull and push in every direction. As soon as the alarm is raised, those prone to stressing out experience these tumultuous ups and downs. They see enemies in every corner. Their mood is unstable and they are unable to sit or stand at ease. Every feeling of panic, terror, worry, helplessness come roaring in like a tsunami. It is near impossible to bear the onslaught.

People in this category (estimated to represent around 20% of the global population) also often have sensitive predispositions and highly keen senses. They are very observant and detail-oriented, particularly when it comes to reading the expressions and body language of others. However, like the butterfly effect, the tiniest breeze can set off an inner hurricane, and the furrowing of someone's brow becomes catastrophe.

Nature and nurture both have a hand in creating a sensitive predisposition. Although affect exhaustion can be a symptom, it is not inevitable. The stage before affect exhaustion is marked by intense feelings. Thus, the sensitive individual can avoid being steered off course by their emotional intensity by learning to manage their emotions with practice.

A sensitive temperament is a term and a description, and not a condemnation. Being inundated with intense feelings is a common experience for sensitive individuals. However, if they manage to rope their affect away from exhaustion, they can start to steer their life in a direction that they intend.