THE BURNOUT CURE
THE BURNOUT CURE
An Emotional Survival Guide for Overwhelmed Women

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You made wine from water
And raised up Jairus’s daughter from her bed
Filled the empty fishing nets
And with some loaves and fishes fed
A hungry crowd
Make enough of me to go around

— Julie de Azevedo Hanks
You would not be reading this book were it not for the consistent support of my loving husband, Jeff, and our four wonderful children. They have generously supported me in so many areas of life that have contributed to this book. I am truly blessed and buoyed up by their love.

Many thanks to Jana Erickson and Laurel Christenson for lighting a fire under me to carve out time to write this book, and to Kathy Gordon, Robby Nichols, and the Covenant team for keeping the fire alive.

Thank you to my friend Matt Jackson and my sister Rebecca Overson who provided invaluable feedback and much-needed encouragement during the writing and editing process. Also, thanks to my friends and family for traveling with me through the ups and downs of this book-writing journey.

My heart is full of gratitude for the thousands of women who’ve shared their hearts with me over the past several years through meaningful discussions about our common struggles as LDS women. These enlightening conversations have helped me to tease out the cultural myths and doctrinal truths presented in this book and have enabled me to raise my voice for the importance of self-care and emotional health in applying true doctrine. The perspectives and insights of my mother, my sisters, my dear friends, my therapy colleagues, my therapy clients, and the Preventing Emotional Burnout workshop and survey participants are woven throughout this book.

I am grateful to my “goodly” parents for being incredibly loving and always supportive, instilling in me a desire to make a difference for good. I’m also thankful that they were wise enough to send me to a therapist as an adolescent, setting me on a journey toward emotional awareness that has brought me a more fulfilling and rich life than I might have had otherwise.

I want to express love to my Heavenly Father for His infinite love and His perfect plan of growth, and to Jesus Christ for showing boundless love and mercy through His life and sacrifice.
One of the great struggles we often face as women in the LDS Church whose lives are full of charity for others is avoiding personal emotional burn-out.

As a person with strong interests and varied passions, I tend to take on many worthy endeavors simultaneously. For example, while writing this book, I also have responsibilities and commitments as a wife and mother, a gospel doctrine teacher, a performing songwriter, a blogger, media contributor, business consultant, public speaker, and the owner and director of a therapy clinic. These are all good pursuits; I derive much joy and my soul is strengthened by what I do. However, at times, I do—or feel as though I do—try to do too much. It seems that I’m always teetering somewhere between exhilaration and exhaustion. Emotional burnout is a topic I know well.

I want to make a difference for good in every aspect of my life—especially in the lives of others. Tuning in to the Spirit and being aware of my own emotions and needs allows me to prioritize and accomplish the things that are important to me and that I feel called to do. Heavenly Father seems to have put many things in my heart that bring me great joy, yet each of them comes with a price. Prayerful guidance from the Spirit helps tutor me in what endeavors should take top priority in my life right now.

My commitment to the gospel and to my family has been and will always be a priority, which often leaves me feeling like engaging with the rest of the “good” aspects of my life is like taking on an impossible juggling act. The only way I can manage to make my abundant life work in a healthy way is to tune in to the Spirit, stay aware of my own emotional needs, and constantly sort through priorities as they shift and change and as I strive to serve others. My hope and prayer is that the insights and tools I offer in this book can help women of the Church who are feeling emotionally drained or just plain exhausted and overwhelmed to find peace and strength, as I have in my life.
My experience as a psychotherapist for nearly two decades has shaped me and provided the basis for many of the insights in this book. I’m amazed by the many bright, good, committed women who pour out their hearts to me about “not feeling good enough” or about feeling like a failure because of the so-called imperfections and struggles that brought them into therapy. By comparing themselves to other women in their family, ward, and neighborhood, the typical women I counsel are battling feelings of discouragement and worthlessness about their performance in life. These types of comparisons are often filled with a focus on the apparent flawless high standard that we seem to see in others while being painfully aware of each and every shortcoming we might have.

Discouragement is one of Satan’s greatest tools and is frequently accompanied by serious issues such as chronic exhaustion, depression, fear, worry, anxiety, resentment, confusion, and self-doubt. These emotions are expressed regularly in therapy sessions by women who appear to “have it all together” on the outside but who are suffering quietly on the inside.

Before proceeding further, I want to make clear that I believe strongly in the divine principles of charity, especially charity expressed as Christ-like service. Living Christ-centered lives of service can strengthen us in every aspect of our lives. There is real power in the paradoxical statement that it is only by losing ourselves that we find ourselves. But let’s look at this statement a bit more closely. The scripture often quoted is found in Matthew 10:39, and the precise wording is very important for my purposes in this book: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” The key to this phrasing is losing our lives for the Lord’s sake; that is, getting lost in living a Christ-centered life. Of course “finding our lives” in the secular sense results in a selfish and empty life; while this is certainly a problem in our world, it not the focus of this book. This book is focused on helping those of us who have perhaps lost ourselves completely in the service of others and are exhausted to the point that we can no longer find, nourish, care for, and strengthen ourselves so that we might be more effective in continued service of others. The goal of this book is to help us learn how to live lives full of compassion and service for others as we wisely care for ourselves.

My first experience with an overwhelmed woman was long before I became a therapist. My mom, while a generous and unconditionally loving woman who was fiercely dedicated to her role of wife and mother, was frequently overwhelmed by the demands of her life. Married at nineteen, she and my dad quickly started a family, leaving little time for her to realize—let alone explore—what her own needs were. She set out to raise her family, support my dad in his professional endeavors, and serve faithfully in
the Church—all of which she did well for decades. My parents raised nine children together. Understandably, my mom didn’t have much time to take care of her own needs.

As the second oldest of nine children, I did my share of caretaking. I also unknowingly took on a sense of responsibility for my mom’s happiness and well-being by being helpful, obedient, cheerful, and self-sufficient as I tried to lighten her load and ease her bouts of depression. Because of my concern for my mom, I put my own emotional and personal development on hold to some degree.

In my early teens, I began to wonder if it was possible for a faithful Latter-day Saint woman to be a great wife and mom, have a strong and loving family, and remain committed to her own personal growth, talents, and interests. While I am incredibly grateful for my mother’s sacrifice to raise her family, I had stirrings in my heart that a different life was in store for me. On the deepest level, this book is an expression of the continuing culmination of my journey of building a bridge between what I experienced through my mom’s example of adulthood and my own desire to expand on the possibilities that awaited me as a woman.

My personal and professional experience has given me great empathy for the struggles that many women face—not only because I too am a woman of faith wife, and mother, but because I’ve also been in therapy myself. The road I have walked and continue to walk with many clients has led me to discover several wonderful insights that I long to shout from the mountaintops to my sisters in the gospel and to busy women everywhere.

After hearing women express similar feelings of inadequacy, depression, and shame for having problems, I realized that it would be helpful to create a way for all women to hear their feelings echoed and to realize as a result that they are not alone in their struggles.

So I created a workshop ten years ago to present to my own ward that I hoped would address some of the most pervasive issues head-on and give women some emotional freedom and peace of mind. I called the workshop “Preventing Emotional Burnout.” I wanted to facilitate a dialogue about common misinterpretations of gospel principles and the fusion of Mormon culture with true doctrine that can keep us feeling stuck in impossible situations—situations in which we find ourselves spread and stretched too far. Most importantly, I wanted to engage some of our common assumptions about who we are and what is required and expected of us as women with a divine inheritance, purpose, and future.

When I first presented the workshop, I created a short survey based on both my clinical observations and personal experiences. I listed the emotional
themes I’d observed repeatedly with my clients and created a handful of true/false and short-answer questions. That somewhat last-minute survey ended up being a very powerful tool in revealing the real issues with which many women struggle.

With each subsequent workshop, I sent out the survey in advance and asked the women to complete and return it beforehand, allowing me time to compile statistics for each group. A handful of surveys were administered online, but the bulk of the surveys were handwritten.

I hoped that by presenting the statistical data or survey results of the particular group to whom I was scheduled to speak, I could help normalize the feelings and challenges that those women were facing and could open an honest dialogue among them. I wanted each woman to hear the message loud and clear: “You are not alone in your struggles! You are not the only one suffering! We all need help and support!” and, “We can do it with the Lord’s help!” I also hoped that the women attending the workshop would continue to be more open with each other and find safety, comfort, and relief in their relationships with other women.

The workshop addressed myths and misinterpretations I had witnessed in Latter-day Saint culture, and I have included the same myths in this book. I believe these myths can perpetuate the feeling of “I’m never good enough.” I aim to dispel those myths and help provide a healthy perspective of who we really are and what God actually expects of us. I’ve found that what we expect of ourselves or what we think God expects of us might actually be quite different from the true, divine, and reassuring reality that you’ll find in the scriptures and the teachings of our modern-day prophets. We might find that we are making our lives much harder than they need to be!

*Note:* While the concepts in this book are directed toward members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they also apply to women—and, indeed, men!—of all faiths. I invite all readers to adapt these concepts and principles in meaningful ways to their own lives.
Burnout is a state of exhaustion and lack of motivation due to prolonged stress or frustration. It’s that persistent feeling of trying really hard but not getting the desired results. Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, who coined the word burnout, defines it as “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results” (Douglas Martin, “Herbert Freudenberger, 73, Coiner of ‘Burnout’ Is Dead,” New York Times, December 5, 1999). I love this definition because the word devotion so accurately describes what women feel toward their families and their faith. There are certain promises and blessings that we believe we will receive if we are obedient to God’s laws. If we do X, then Y will happen. Burnout occurs when we do X and we never get the desired Y, or we get some other undesired result—Z—instead, which could be something unexpected. We might perceive that we have gotten “nothing.”

Emotional burnout, as I am describing and using the term here, is not simply the failed results of devotion to a cause. I would extend my definition to include the perception of a failure to attain certain results, successes, blessings, and rewards after devoting all of one’s time, talents, and energies to reaching those goals. In other words, at times emotional burnout may be quite formulaic and seem fairly objective. There are many other times (and this is part of what I want to bring to light) when emotional burnout is a very real result of a process that is rather complex, is not very clear, and is based primarily on the individual’s subjective perception of herself and her situation. This does not make emotional burnout any less real; it’s just harder to see and define, not just for herself, but also for those around her.

A client once talked with me about how she had tried so hard to be a dedicated mother and had tirelessly had family prayer, family scripture study, and family home evening (her version of X). She cried as she described to me her feelings of burnout and failure as a mother. Her adult son, who had recently
Julie de Azevedo Hanks

returned from a mission, had left the Church, and she was heartbroken. She had done the X (prayer, scriptures, FHE), so she believed that she would get Y (a son who stayed faithful to the Church). She had worked so hard for a desired result that had not come.

While this example may seem somewhat simple and formulaic and has the obvious flaw of not taking into account the son's agency, I believe this is a good example to which most of us can relate in some way. Because of that, I think it’s useful in opening a discussion about emotional burnout. I say this because on the one hand I see the astonishing beauty of the infinite uniqueness and individuality of women’s eternal souls every day. On the other hand, given the differences and innumerable variations in our lives, I see that we are sisters with so much in common as we strive toward similar goals and strive to conquer common obstacles in working out our salvation.

One additional note on the concept of emotional burnout as I am using it throughout the book: while I am focusing on the “emotional” aspect of burnout in our lives, I realize that our feelings and emotional well-being are directly and inseparably connected to our intellectual, social, physical, and, most vitally, our spiritual well-being. The way these aspects of our lives work for each of us is different, but the result I see all too often is the same: emotional burnout. So as we focus on emotions, keep the other aspects of your life in mind, and we will discuss some of them as we work our way through the concepts and exercises in this book.

*Helpful Hint: My hope is that you find as many ways as you can to engage with this book, so feel free to write in the margins, fill in the blanks, copy the pages and paste them in your journal, or keep a companion notebook in which you can express your thoughts and feelings as you are prompted.
Take a moment and reflect on how and why parts of your life—even the good parts—can take an emotional toll on you.

Faulty Spiritual Equations and Myths

In my personal and professional life I’ve observed that much of the emotional burnout in our lives can be attributed to faulty spiritual equations. Regardless of whether we are consciously aware of our belief in faulty spiritual equations, our relentless work and commitment to them creates burnout. Though the scriptures are filled with amazing promises for the followers of Christ, there are actually very few specific and concrete blessings promised to us in this life!

In other words, the righteous are promised comfort; “peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come” (D&C 59:23); and that the “windows of heaven” will be opened (3 Ne. 24:10). The scriptures don’t say that if you read the scriptures daily and attend church meetings regularly all your children will remain active in the Church. What they do say is that you will be blessed with peace, comfort, and eternal life, even though your life today might not look as you imagined it would. Based on my own life experience and my work with numerous women, I believe you may find it helpful to examine your own spiritual equations to see if any of them are faulty or based on myths. This includes slight misunderstandings or applications of true doctrines or beliefs in half-truths and “mostly-truths.” Erroneous interpretation and application of gospel principles may certainly be contributing to feelings of being “burned out.”

However, even living gospel truths to the best of our ability does not make us exempt from adversity. Have you noticed that most of God’s beloved prophets experienced intense loss, discomfort, misfortune, and grief throughout their righteous lives? Joseph of Egypt was righteous, but he was thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers. Nephi was righteous, yet his brothers were constantly tormenting and threatening him. Moses and Lehi were prophets of God, but they wandered in the wilderness—for years—with large groups of murmuring people. The prophet Abinadi taught truths to his people, but King Noah had him burned to death.

Myth: Blessings are always comfortable and feel good.

Truth: “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Heb. 12:6). He allows us to experience adversity and affliction.
Our modern-day prophet Joseph Smith buried six of his children, was tarred and feathered numerous times, and was imprisoned several times—for months at a time—before he was killed by a mob while in Carthage Jail. While in Liberty Jail, the Lord comforted Joseph Smith by reminding him of the immediate promise of peace and the long-term promise of exaltation. He didn’t promise a concrete result. The Lord said: “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands” (D&C 121:7–9).

If you find yourself feeling shameful about the fact that you have trials and sufferings, remember that the Lord’s prophets experienced much hardship. So you can pretty much count on having afflictions! However, the Lord has promised that He will bestow on His followers feelings of peace, increased strength, hope, forgiveness, and mercy to help us through adversity.

As you read and process your thoughts through this book, you will find that there are many reasons for trials and adversity, some of which are not the direct result of our own actions. Some of the pain and suffering in our lives is caused by others, and some of it can be chalked up to “accidents” or just the hazards of being an imperfect person in an imperfect world. You will find, however, that there will be just as many coping mechanisms as you need to get you through those challenges. One of the most beautiful and amazing aspects of the Atonement is that through its power we can be healed from all types of pain, regardless of its source.
You Are Not Alone

Throughout this book we will untangle some of the cultural myths and faulty beliefs that keep us feeling burned out, exhausted, and “never good enough.” Many of the myths became apparent to me after talking to the women who came to the clinic for help or who shared with me during the workshop.

Which of the common cultural myths do you believe? Do any of the following sound familiar? Mark and comment on those that apply.

- Blessings are always comfortable and feel good.
- If I am experiencing pain in my life it must because of sin.
- I’m the only one who struggles with ____________________.
- I should be happy all of the time.
- Certain emotions are either acceptable or unacceptable to have, show, and talk about.
  - I should always say yes to reasonable requests.
  - I have to lose myself completely to find myself.
  - Struggling with emotional, mental, or relationship problems is a sign of personal or spiritual weakness.
  - If I’m righteous enough, my family will be perfect.
  - If we don’t talk about things, they aren’t real.
  - Taking good care of myself is selfish.
  - The people that love me will make sure I’m happy.
  - My worth is based on my righteousness and performance.
  - If I notice good things about myself I am being prideful.
  - I should be perfect now, and perfect means flawless.
  - Asking for help means I’m weak.
  - Going to counseling is a sign of spiritual or personal weakness.
  - Christ will help me only after I’ve done everything I can.

After seven or eight years of individually surveying every group I spoke to—thousands of women—I noticed that no matter where I went, the results were surprisingly consistent and gave a fairly accurate snapshot for each subsequent group of women. I have surveyed women all over the state of Utah and in several other states as well. It turns out that my hunch was right: Our feelings about ourselves, our fears about being selfish, and our ambivalence about where emotional self-care fits into our lives are prevalent whether we live in Hawaii, California, or Utah. (I’ve yet to be invited to speak outside the United States, but I suspect that the statistics may not vary too drastically for women in other parts of the world.)
I am always touched by the honest and courageous answers offered in the survey and especially in the workshop itself. I am, however, greatly troubled by the apparent correlation between a fear of appearing to “care for ourselves” and resulting emotional burnout.

One of the prevailing and pernicious themes that arises from many of these comments is a vicious cycle of feeling discouraged or depressed about not doing enough good in the world around us and that the only or best way to make ourselves feel better is to do more for others. This type of behavior most often leads to running faster than we have strength, spreading ourselves too thin, and experiencing emotional burnout. The truth, as King Benjamin taught, is that while it is “expedient that we be diligent” it is not “requisite” that we run “faster than we have strength.” He exhorts us to do all things in “wisdom and order” (Mosiah 4:27). I hope to help you learn that a healthy balance between aspects of proper self-care is essential to the goals of doing more good for others—which makes all of us feel good!

I encourage you to complete—as openly and honestly as you can—the “Preventing Emotional Burnout” survey (there’s a brief form below, in addition to a photocopy format in the appendix). Especially if you’re really struggling, it may help to repeat the survey after implementing some of the principles and tools in this book. Repeat the survey as frequently and as often as you like; a running record of the results may help you highlight your areas of progress and help you see where there’s room for improvement. As you proceed through this book and do the exercises, I hope you’ll understand that you are not alone in your struggles—and that you will discover how to take better care of yourself so you have more to offer to your Heavenly Father and to your earthly relationships.

Myth: I’m the only one who struggles.

Truth: You are not alone. We all experience painful times as part of being in a fallen world.
### Preventing Emotional Burnout Survey

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<th>Statement</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have enough time to pursue my own interests and needs.</td>
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<td>I often take on more commitments than I can handle.</td>
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<td>I say “no” when someone asks me to do something that I don’t want to do.</td>
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<td>I often feel guilty about all of the things that I am not doing.</td>
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<td>It is easier to give help than to accept help from others.</td>
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<td>I am comfortable expressing anger, frustrations, and disappointment.</td>
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<td>I have struggled at one time or another with emotional or mental health problems (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, abuse, substance abuse, etc.).</td>
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<td>Family members have struggled with emotional problems.</td>
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<td>I get less than seven hours of sleep every night.</td>
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<td>I exercise at least three times per week for half an hour at a time.</td>
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<td>I am generally happy with my life and relationships.</td>
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<td>I can easily accept compliments from others.</td>
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<td>I am tired or worried most of the time.</td>
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<td>I have sought professional counseling.</td>
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<td>If so, for what reasons?</td>
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<td>Family members have sought professional counseling.</td>
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<td>If so, for what reasons?</td>
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<td>I have considered going to counseling, but I haven’t followed through.</td>
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<td>If so, what has prevented me from seeking help?</td>
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<td>The areas of my life that are the most emotionally draining for me are:</td>
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<td>The thing I would most like to change about myself is:</td>
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How to Use this Book

I have two rules as you continue to proceed through this book. The first rule: *This book is a guilt-free experience!* I am going to make a compelling case for the need for you to take better care of yourself—remembering, of course, that this is not an argument to completely abandon your responsibilities for others. I will give you six concrete suggestions for preventing emotional burnout:

1. Feel and express a full range of emotions.
2. Give yourself permission to say an inspired “no.”
3. Do your emotional family history.
4. Take responsibility for your own happiness.
5. Practice being kind to yourself.
6. Learn to ask for and accept help.

Do not—I repeat, do *not* take these six things and add them to your already never-ending list of things to do! You know the list I’m talking about—the one we all have that includes any or all of the following: bake twelve loaves of bread for the neighborhood daily, get up every morning at 5 a.m. to exercise for two hours, volunteer at the food bank, read scriptures three hours a day, do your genealogy back to Adam and Eve, keep the house (and garage and yard) sparkling clean, prepare a PowerPoint presentation for your child’s Primary talk, go to every temple in the United States this year, grow a weed-free garden, and so on. That’s the list I’m talking about. Don’t use these six suggestions to make that list any longer! I am not offering another reason to feel guilty about what you might not be doing—especially things that are less essential to your salvation.

My whole purpose is to lighten your load by offering my best personal and professional suggestions—helpful points of view, if you will—that have made a big difference in my own life and in the lives of many women I’ve counseled. If something you read here touches your heart, great! Take that one thing and apply it if you want to. Or not! If nothing resonates with you, that’s fine too. At the very minimum, you’ll have more tools to apply in your life if you ever need them, or you can share these tools with others.

The second rule is this: **Participate!** Reading this book is very much like attending one of my workshops. You can hang out in the back row and wait for refreshments to be served, or you can lean forward with your heart on the line and pull the information toward you to expand your view of life. I invite you to engage in meaningful exploration and actually do the exercises.

I will also invite you to pause and reflect on aspects of your life throughout this book. Please do stop and answer the questions, even if you can’t bring yourself to actually write them in this workbook. Consider deepening your
commitment to take good care of yourself as you discover what feelings, beliefs, mindsets, and activities will help you on your journey.

**The Emotional Oxygen Mask**

The following analogy struck a chord with me as to why taking care of ourselves is critically important if we desire to truly lift, serve, and support others. Several years ago I was on a flight to Los Angeles to do some vocal recording sessions. I was holding my son Owen, who was then six months old. I have been on commercial flights many times in my life, and like many passengers, tend to tune out the flight attendants as they explain the safety information. With genuine concern for the young baby in my arms, I thought, *I'd better listen this time.*

The flight attendant started talking about what to do if there were a change in cabin pressure. She said, “The oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling and oxygen will begin to flow. Place your mask on first and then assist others, such as small children or the elderly.”

Did she really just say that—put your own mask on first? Was this new information I had somehow missed dozens of times before? As I sat in the plane holding my precious little baby, I realized that my instinct as a woman, as a parent, would be to make sure that my little son and everyone else in my row got an oxygen mask first. But this time I clearly heard the flight attendant’s message: Put on your own mask first and then assist others! I realized what she was really saying: If I don’t put my oxygen mask on first, I’ll pass out—and what good am I going to be to my six-month-old if I’m passed out on the floor?

What a great analogy for our emotional lives. As women, isn’t it true that our instinct is to respond to the needs of others, to put their needs first at the expense of our own? And then what happens?

I see a lot of exhausted, overwhelmed, confused women in my life and in my practice—women who are emotionally “passed out on the floor”—not necessarily because of all they have to do, but because of a failure to include themselves in all the nurturing they are doing. In the name of service, they nurture others first, but they do so at the expense of nurturing themselves and by neglecting their own emotional needs.

No matter where I’ve presented my “Preventing Emotional Burnout” workshops through the years, I’ve always felt at home. That might be because there is almost always a lovely lace tablecloth and something chocolate to eat afterward! (I just love that aspect of Relief Society!) All kidding aside, when I am with Relief Society women, I am always reassured that I am not alone in my struggles and that I’m truly part of a worldwide sisterhood of women
who are sincerely striving to be like the Savior. It is my prayer that by reading this book and pondering its message you will begin to see the importance of taking good care of yourself so there is more of you to offer in the service of others, especially in those relationships that matter most to you.