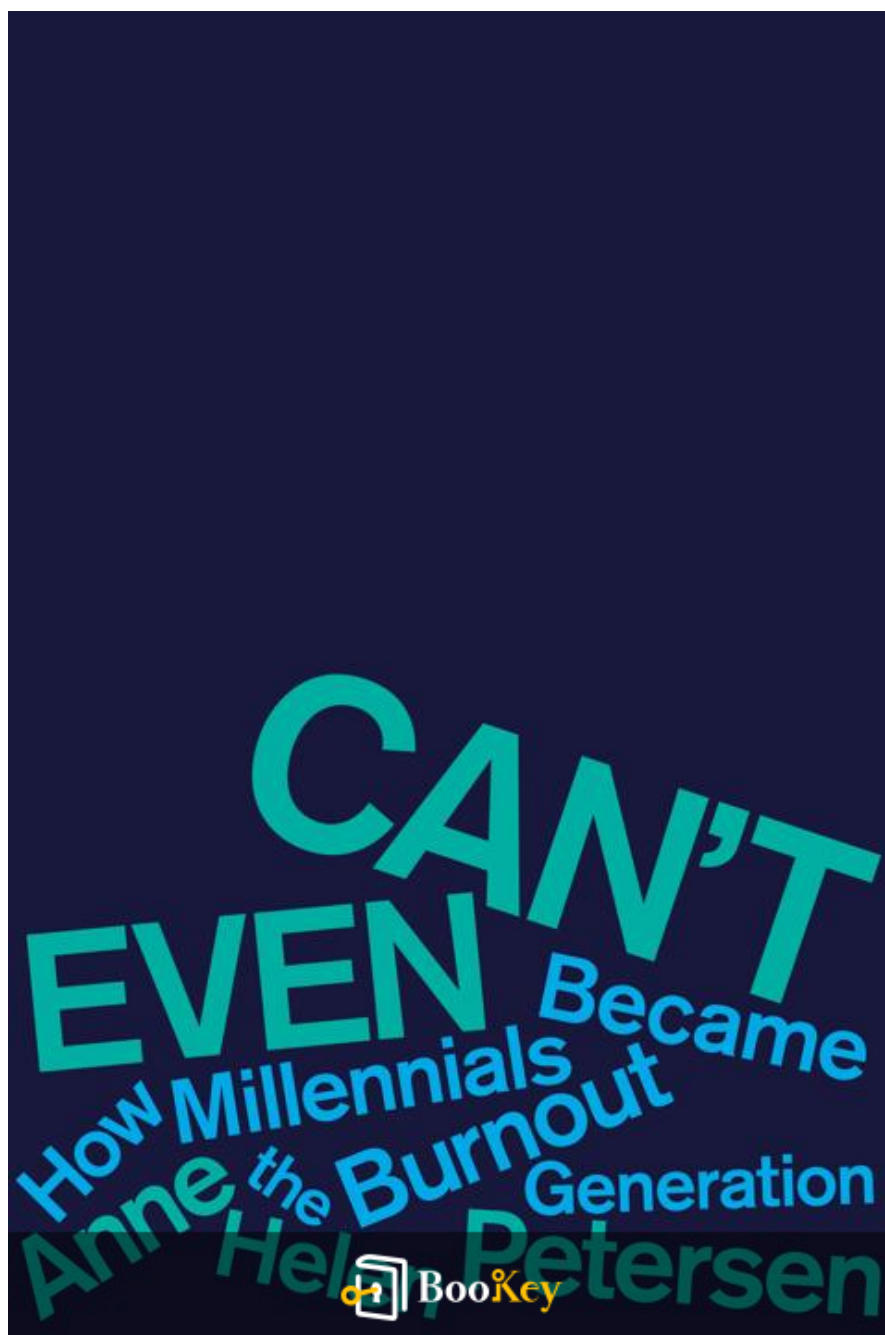


Can't Even PDF (Limited Copy)

Anne Helen Petersen



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Can't Even Summary

Navigating burnout in millennial life and work.

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About the book

In "Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation," Anne Helen Petersen delves deep into the complex landscape of millennial life, unraveling the societal pressures, unrealistic expectations, and relentless hustle that have led to widespread burnout among this generation. Through her incisive analysis, Petersen deftly intertwines personal anecdotes with broader cultural critiques, illuminating the myriad ways in which economic instability, social media saturation, and the quest for meaningful work have contributed to an epidemic of exhaustion and disillusionment. This poignant and relatable exploration not only sheds light on the unique challenges facing millennials today but also challenges readers to reconsider their own relationships with work, success, and self-worth in an increasingly demanding world. Join Petersen on this compelling journey to understand the roots of burnout and discover what it means to truly thrive in today's society.

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About the author

Anne Helen Petersen is a prominent cultural critic and writer known for her incisive analyses of contemporary issues surrounding work, culture, and societal expectations. With a PhD in Media Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and years of experience contributing to leading publications like BuzzFeed, Petersen has carved a niche in examining the complexities of modern life, particularly the anxieties and challenges faced by millennials. Her work often blends personal narratives with academic insight, making her commentary both relatable and thought-provoking. In her book "Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation," she explores the systemic pressures that have led to widespread burnout among young people, drawing on her expertise to illuminate the socio-economic factors influencing their struggles.

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chapter 1 Summary: Our Burnt-Out Parents

In the opening chapter of "Can't Even," Anne Helen Petersen explores the fraught relationship between the Baby Boomer generation and Millennials, examining how misunderstandings around work ethic and entitlement have shaped the discourse on burnout and generational divide. The chapter addresses several key points that reveal the roots of millennial malaise and its connections to boomer anxieties.

1. Generational Critique: Petersen reflects on the dismissive sentiments often expressed by older generations toward Millennials, with critiques suggesting millennials are ungrateful or complain too much about their perceived hardships. The critiques often overlook the unique economic and psychological pressures Millennials face, which differ significantly from the experiences of Boomers, many of whom have benefited from more favorable economic conditions.

2. Inadvertent Influence: The author points out that Boomers, while facing their share of challenges such as job instability and societal critiques, created the social and economic ideologies that have shaped Millennials. Education systems, workplace expectations, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment stemming from Boomer values have instilled in Millennials a heightened sense of entitlement to job satisfaction and work-life balance.



3. Cultural Backlash: The evolution of cultural humor from memes like "Old Economy Steve" to the phrase "OK Boomer" captures the intensifying frustrations of younger generations. These phrases serve as both a coping mechanism and a means of resistance against the supposed superiority and privilege that defines the Boomer identity. This cultural pushback highlights generational tensions, where younger individuals seek to redefine their struggles outside of the narratives imposed by their predecessors.

4. Historical Context: The chapter delves into the socio-economic backdrop of the Baby Boomer generation, discussing how they came of age during an era of prosperity characterized by strong labor unions and government support, which effectively created a robust middle class. This stability allowed them to distance themselves from the hardships witnessed by earlier generations, like the Great Depression and World War II.

5. Economic Shifts: Petersen illustrates how the gradual decline of labor union power and the rise of a neoliberal economic ethos shifted the burden of financial security away from corporations and government safety nets onto individuals. This transfer resulted in the dismantling of benefits like pensions and the imposition of personal responsibility on workers for skills training, exacerbating feelings of economic precarity among Millennials.

6. Psychological Toll and Untapped Empathy: The chapter argues that while Boomers experience their anxieties regarding economic instability,



they often lack empathy for their children's struggles. The inability to recognize parallel experiences fuels generational tensions. As Boomers cling to their identities and life lessons shaped by their pasts, they tend to dismiss the current realities faced by Millennials, thus perpetuating misunderstanding and conflict.

7. Class Anxiety and Individualism: Moving into a discussion on societal change, Petersen suggests that Boomers are at once the beneficiaries and casualties of the socio-economic transformations of the late 20th century. The rise of individualism and the decline of collective support mechanisms have fostered an environment of anxiety, where success is often equated with personal effort rather than broader systemic structures.

Through this multifaceted analysis, Petersen lays the groundwork for understanding the generational cultural divide not just as a series of complaints or misapprehensions, but as an intricate web of historical context, economic shifts, and divergent values. The exploration sets the stage for examining how these dynamics contribute to the growing epidemic of burnout among Millennials, as they grapple with the unfulfilled promises of prosperity and the burden of navigating an increasingly precarious economic landscape. The chapter ultimately calls for a nuanced understanding of these generational experiences, encouraging empathy rather than divisiveness.



chapter 2 Summary: Growing Mini-Adults

In Chapter 2 of "Can't Even" by Anne Helen Petersen, the author explores differing childhood experiences and parenting styles among millennials through the narratives of individuals like Caitlin and Stefanie. These stories illustrate two contrasting paradigms of parenting that have evolved over the decades, particularly in the context of socioeconomic backgrounds.

1. Contrasting Childhoods: Caitlin, who identifies as biracial, experienced a heavily structured upbringing in a suburban environment where achievement and busyness were emphasized—her life was filled with organized activities from an early age. In contrast, Stefanie enjoyed a more laid-back and unsupervised childhood in a rural setting, filled with freedom to explore and interact without adult oversight. Despite their divergent experiences, both represent the broader trends and pressures that shaped millennial childhoods.

2. Parental Influence on Childhood Preparation: A key study by sociologist Annette Lareau reveals the concept of "concerted cultivation," wherein middle-class parents actively structure their children's lives around organized activities to prepare them for a competitive future. These parents heavily invest in building their children's skills, vocabulary, and social connections. Conversely, lower-income families often have less time and resources to provide such structured environments, resulting in children



developing independence and resourcefulness instead.

3. Shifting Norms in Parenting: The ideals of concerted cultivation have permeated across social classes, leading to a homogenization of parenting practices. The pressure to provide enriching experiences often spawns a culture of over-scheduling and competitive parenting, causing not only burnout but also instilling anxiety regarding achievement in children. These experiences often manifest as a sense of inadequacy among those who struggle to meet these pressures, whether due to socioeconomic constraints or personal circumstances.

4. The Rise of Helicopter Parenting: Over time, societal fears, driven by sensationalized media coverage of dangers facing children, have intensified parenting oversight. Events like playground accidents and child abductions have led to increased supervision and a decline in unsupervised play, consolidating the trend toward helicopter parenting. This shift exemplifies a culture where risk is minimized to a fault, leading children to miss out on crucial developmental experiences that foster independence and resilience.

5. Consequences on Millennial Identity: Many millennials reflect on their upbringing characterized by continuous productivity and achievement, which has fostered a mindset that equates self-worth with constant busyness. The narrative reveals the complexities of transitioning into adulthood—with many feeling inadequate or "lazy" for simply wanting downtime. This



disconnect between societal expectations and personal fulfillment becomes a consistent theme in conversations about millennial burnout.

6. Navigating Class and Identity: Experiences further vary among millennials based on race and socioeconomic status. For some, like Rhiann, emphasis on safety and achievement arises from a context of systemic challenges. Her narrative illustrates the ways in which cultural and racial dynamics influence parenting strategies and the sense of precarity experienced in predominantly white environments. This raises questions about how parenting styles adapt within diverse contexts, balancing educational ambitions with necessary survival instincts in the face of discrimination.

7. From Ambition to Anxiety: The chapter concludes with anecdotes from millennials who grapple with the anxiety associated with socioeconomic stability, prompting them to adopt rigorous work ethics. Various interviews reflect a common sentiment that the pursuit of success often comes at the cost of personal well-being, leading to an existential questioning of value outside of achievement. As the posturing for professional success often overshadows personal growth, millennials find themselves reckoning with the burdens of unmet expectations and the need for a more balanced approach to life.

In summary, Petersen's exploration in Chapter 2 serves as a critical reflection



on how upbringing, parenting practices, socioeconomic status, and cultural anxieties shape distinct yet overlapping narratives among millennials, with lasting implications on their identities, ambitions, and mental health.

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chapter 3: College at Any Cost

In the exploration of college admissions and the pressures surrounding them, the narrative begins by reflecting on Anne Helen Petersen's analysis of the cultural phenomenon characterized by overachievement among millennials. It captures the compelling yet distressing nature of the college application process shaped by expectations, societal pressures, and the evolving landscape of higher education. The central themes revolve around the extreme lengths to which students have undergone to secure their futures, including mental and physical health tolls associated with the quest for academic and professional success.

1. **Psychological Consequences:** The text underscores the psychological burden placed on students as they navigate the demands of an overachiever culture. As articulated by Robins in **The Overachievers**, teenagers often assess their self-worth through their accomplishments, engendering anxiety, sleep deprivation, and discontent. Many parents have internalized the belief that securing college admission is tantamount to success, thus fostering a competitive atmosphere where students feel compelled to prioritize their resumes over personal well-being.

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chapter 4 Summary: Do What You Love and You'll Still Work Every Day for the Rest of Your Life

In Chapter 4 of "Can't Even" by Anne Helen Petersen, the author presents a critical analysis of millennials' relationship with work, particularly the myth of pursuing one's passion. The narrative unfolds through personal anecdotes that illustrate the emotional and psychological struggles faced by a generation caught between lofty expectations and harsh realities in the job market.

1. The Burden of Expectations: A poignant moment is highlighted when a student, disheartened by her unfruitful job search despite numerous applications, expresses the fear of disappointing her parents by taking any job that isn't "cool" or aligned with her passions. This anecdote encapsulates the pressure millennials face, having been raised under the ethos of "concerted cultivation," where children are viewed as valuable assets aimed at achieving middle-class status. As a result, a high salary has become mistakenly equated with career worth, overshadowing other values such as job satisfaction or personal fulfillment.

2. The Modern Perspective on Work The chapter argues that millennials have internalized a narrative in which jobs must not only provide financial stability but also serve as a source of personal fulfillment and social prestige. The desire for "cool" jobs that exude passion is framed



as a bourgeois aspiration, leading many to tolerate poor working conditions and exploitation, under the guise of doing what they love. This sentiment is starkly contrasted with historical perspectives on labor, where survival rather than passion dictated job choices.

3. Confronting Harsh Realities: Petersen illuminates the dissonance between the rhetoric of passion-driven work and the realities of job searching in a tough economy. Many college graduates find that a degree does not guarantee a job, particularly in fields that do not offer salaries adequate to cover student loan debt. Underemployment and exploitative gig work are commonplace, highlighting the contradictions in the vision of work promised during their upbringing.

4. Cultural Hoaxes and Exploitation: Figures like Steve Jobs have perpetuated the damaging belief that passion aligns with professional success, leading to an expectation that one's career will fulfill all aspects of personal life. The chapter critiques this idea, emphasizing that workers are often drawn into cycles of overwork without adequate compensation or acknowledgment of their contributions, which encourages further exploitation under the guise of love for one's job.

5. The Reality of Struggling Artists and "Hope Labor": The author uses interviews with individuals who have pursued their passions, often at the cost of financial stability and mental health, to underscore the futility of the



"Do What You Love" mantra. Many find themselves in positions with low pay, long hours, and little to no benefits, while the 'exposure' and 'experience' they gain from unpaid internships do not mitigate the harsh economic realities they face.

6. Shift in Value Systems As many millennials experience disillusionment, there's a noticeable shift in their approach to work. Moving away from the ideals of passion-driven careers, individuals are increasingly prioritizing jobs that provide stability and respect over societal approval. The realization that a good job can simply be one that allows for a balanced life, with fair compensation, emerges as a new standard.

Ultimately, Peterson illustrates a generational crisis fueled by unrealistic expectations surrounding work. The evolving mindset among millennials—moving from passion to practicality—reflects a broader societal shift in how we consider work and its role in our lives. The chapter concludes with a powerful acknowledgment of the need to prioritize sustainable work conditions over the elusive dream of loving what you do, marking a significant turning point in the millennial narrative.



chapter 5 Summary: How Work Got So Shitty

In Chapter 5 of "Can't Even" by Anne Helen Petersen, the narrative examines the evolution and implications of precarious work within the modern economic landscape, highlighting how the traditional employment model has fissured into a system dominated by temporary, gig, and subcontracted workers—collectively referred to as the "precariat."

1. The concept of temporary work originated in the 1970s, marketed as a convenient solution for companies to fulfill immediate labor needs while avoiding the responsibilities tied to conventional employees. This allowed businesses to benefit from “flexible” workers, who lacked job security, benefits, and rights typical of full-time employees.
2. The precariat is characterized by instability, economic fragility, and the expectation to suffer through poor conditions without complaints. This workforce often comprises educated individuals struggling to align their labor with the elusive promises of the American Dream, leading to exhaustion and anxiety as they navigate lives rife with uncertainty.
3. The erosion of long-term, stable employment options can be traced back to shifts in market ideology during the late 20th century. As companies embraced the free-market philosophy, they dismantled union protections and reduced government regulations to maximize profits for stockholders,



contributing to a work culture that prioritizes immediate financial returns over employee welfare.

4. Key factors such as the rise of consultancy firms, private equity, and the shift towards prioritizing shareholder value transformed the corporate landscape. Consultants were brought in to streamline operations and eliminate costs, leading to widespread downsizing, outsourcing, and the prioritization of short-term profits, often at the expense of employee dignity and job security.

5. This restructuring resulted in a "fissured workplace," where companies outsource labor to contractors to avoid responsibilities for their workers, thereby creating a stratified workforce often experiencing poor pay and conditions. Employees are increasingly disconnected from the companies they serve, leading to diminished accountability and rights.

6. Notably, the fragmentation of the workforce has led to a stark decline in the quality of jobs. Despite the purported economic boom, real wage growth has stagnated, resulting in many workers living in relative poverty despite being labeled "employed." This disconnect between economic indicators and the realities of labor contributes to a pervasive sense of burnout and disenfranchisement among the workforce.

7. However, there are examples of companies that buck the trend towards

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exploitative practices, such as Costco and QuikTrip, which prioritize employee welfare and sustainable practices while still achieving impressive financial success. These examples demonstrate that it is both possible and profitable to create work environments that value human contributions and provide job security.

8. Ultimately, the chapter argues for a reevaluation of the relationship between workers and companies. It stresses the urgency of addressing the conditions inflicted by the current capitalist model, advocating for reforms that prioritize worker rights and stable employment. Petersen conveys a call to action for future generations to recognize that while poor working conditions may seem normalized, they are not inevitable; meaningful change is possible and necessary.

In essence, Chapter 5 critiques the transformation of work in America, outlining systemic issues and advocating for a return to more humane employment practices that benefit both workers and businesses.

Key Points	Details
Evolution of Precarious Work	Temporary work emerged in the 1970s as a flexible solution for companies, leading to the precariat—a workforce lacking job security and rights.
Characteristics of the Precariat	Instability and economic fragility dominate, with many educated individuals struggling against the promises of the American Dream, resulting in anxiety and exhaustion.
Market	Free-market policies dismantled unions and protections, prioritizing

Key Points	Details
Ideology Shifts	shareholder profits over employee welfare.
Corporate Restructuring	Consultancy roles led to downsizing and outsourcing, creating a fissured workplace with poor worker conditions due to a focus on short-term profits.
Decline in Job Quality	Despite an economic boom, real wages stagnated, leaving many workers in poverty while contributing to burnout and disenfranchisement.
Positive Company Examples	Companies like Costco and QuikTrip highlight the possibility of valuing worker welfare while achieving financial success.
Call for Action	The chapter advocates for a reevaluation of the worker-company relationship, urging reforms that emphasize worker rights and stability.
Conclusion	Critiques the transformation of work and stresses the need for humane employment practices that benefit both workers and businesses.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Workers can advocate for better employment conditions and rights

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing up for yourself and your fellow workers, refusing to accept the precarity that has become the norm. Inspired by Petersen's examination of the 'precariat,' you recognize that meaningful change is not only achievable but necessary. Every time you express your need for stability, fair compensation, and respect in the workplace, you are challenging the status quo. You feel empowered as you join with others, creating a chorus of voices demanding reform, educating those around you about the importance of welfare and dignity in the workplace. This movement isn't just about immediate improvement; it's a commitment to future generations, ensuring they inherit a work environment that values human contributions and fosters security, rather than one that thrives on instability and anxiety.



chapter 6: How Work Stays So Shitty

The narrative of work culture today reflects a stark reality shaped by unsustainable expectations, pervasive surveillance, and the allure of freelancing. In a disheartening testimony, Nina, a software designer, shares her journey from grappling with personal challenges to sinking into the demanding grind of startup culture. Despite the financial relief her job initially provided, she realized the toxic nature of her work environment, prompting a profound reassessment of her worth beyond long hours. Kay, a freelance costume technician, echoes this sentiment, articulating the anxiety of unpredictable schedules and severe productivity pressures that detracted from her passion for her craft. Similarly, Cate, a freelance film critic, battles isolation while constantly chasing payments in a precarious job market devoid of health benefits.

These personal struggles exemplify broader trends that pervade contemporary employment, reflecting the rise of overwork, normalizing workplace surveillance, and fetishizing freelance flexibility. 1. **The Rise of Overwork:** The American workplace is entrenched in a culture that glorifies overwork, shaped by elite consulting firms. They

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I've learned. Highly recommend!

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chapter 7 Summary: Technology Makes Everything Work

In Chapter 7 of "Can't Even," author Anne Helen Petersen reflects on the overwhelming presence of digital technology in everyday life, particularly for millennials, and its contribution to burnout. The chapter paints a vivid picture of a typical day filled with constant distractions from smartphones and the internet, revealing a troubling cycle of productivity interrupted by the compulsive need to check social media, emails, and news alerts.

1. The Digital Distraction: The chapter opens with a detailed account of the author's daily rituals, where waking up involves not just checking a sleep-tracking app but also a flurry of digital interactions. From Instagram likes to Slack messages, Petersen demonstrates how individuals end up spending more time managing their digital lives rather than engaging with their immediate environment or completing actual work. This pervasive need to stay connected often leads to distraction rather than efficiency.

2. Acknowledging the Addiction: Despite acknowledging that many people dislike their phones, they remain deeply integrated into daily routines. The chapter highlights how the promises of technological convenience often come at the expense of mental clarity and genuine human connections. Petersen points out that while technology aims to enhance productivity, it often leads to burnout and an insatiable cycle of distraction.



3. **The Crush of Comparison:** Social media, particularly Instagram, is framed as a source of continuous comparison, as users curate their lives for broader consumption. Petersen reveals how viewing others' seemingly perfect lives fosters anxiety and self-doubt, driving users to present a fabricated version of their own experiences. This pressure to maintain a particular online persona can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, creating a vicious loop of striving for unattainable ideals.

4. **The Erosion of Leisure and Solitude:** The text warns of the diminishing space for genuine leisure and solitude in our lives. With the constant barrage of notifications and information, meaningful downtime becomes increasingly rare. Petersen laments the disappearance of boredom, which historically allowed for reflection and creativity, replaced instead by the incessant pull of digital distractions.

5. **The News Cycle's Trauma:** The chapter further examines the impact of the frenetic news cycle exacerbated by social media, especially during highly charged political times. Petersen describes how the urgency and chaos of contemporary news reporting leave individuals feeling overwhelmed and confused, hindering their ability to engage thoughtfully with significant issues.

6. **A Complicated Work-Life Blend:** The shift to remote work and tools like Slack complicates the boundaries between professional and personal lives.



While intended to facilitate collaboration, these tools further entrench work into every aspect of life. Petersen asserts that while technology was meant to create efficiency, it instead fosters a sense of constant surveillance and obligation, compelling individuals to feel the need to constantly prove their productivity.

7. The Quest for Balance: Throughout the chapter, Petersen grapples with the challenge of finding balance in a digitally saturated world. She reflects on a personal experience of disconnecting from technology while in nature, realizing how liberating it can be to escape the constant demands of digital life. However, she also acknowledges the daunting task of recalibrating one’s relationship with technology, given its deep entrenchment in modern existence.

Ultimately, Chapter 7 underscores a collective struggle: navigating the complexities and challenges posed by digital technology while seeking authenticity, balance, and mental wellness amid the incessant demands of modern life. Petersen calls for a more mindful relationship with technology, one that resists the pressures it imposes and embraces genuine human experiences.

Key Themes	Description
The Digital Distraction	Petersen describes how daily rituals, including checking apps and social media, become distractions that hinder productivity and engagement with real life.

Key Themes	Description
Acknowledging the Addiction	Despite dissatisfaction, technology remains integral to routines, highlighting a paradox where convenience comes at the cost of mental clarity and human connections.
The Crush of Comparison	Social media fosters anxiety through continuous comparison, leading users to present curated and potentially inauthentic versions of their lives.
The Erosion of Leisure and Solitude	The chapter notes the decline of leisure and solitude due to incessant digital distractions, contrasting past boredom with modern over-stimulation.
The News Cycle's Trauma	Petersen discusses how the chaotic nature of the news cycle, amplified by social media, leaves individuals overwhelmed and confused about important issues.
A Complicated Work-Life Blend	Remote work blurs the lines between professional and personal lives, creating feelings of constant surveillance and a need to prove productivity.
The Quest for Balance	Petersen reflects on her experiences disconnecting from technology, emphasizing the challenge of finding balance in a technology-saturated world.



chapter 8 Summary: What Is a Weekend?

In the current landscape of work and leisure, the understanding and experience of leisure have drastically changed. Those once cherished moments of rest and personal time have become tainted by the demand for productivity. This shift has been particularly pronounced among millennials, who grapple with the pervasive mindset that productivity is paramount, leading them to view their "free time" as unproductive or unfulfilling.

1. Changing Perceptions of Leisure: The author recounts her fond childhood memories of leisure, contrasting them with the contemporary reality where leisure is often filled with anxiety over whether time is being "well spent." Modern leisure rarely feels truly restful or self-directed, creating a sense of inefficacy. This devaluation of leisure exacerbates feelings of burnout, as the once-clear boundary between work and leisure has blurred.

2. Pressure to Optimize: The concept of leisure has evolved into another facet of the productivity culture—a battleground for optimization rather than a space for genuine relaxation. The idea that every hour can be converted into work leads many to feel guilty for simply enjoying leisure activities. Instances abound where individuals struggle between engaging in leisure activities out of obligation or habit rather than intrinsic motivation.



3. Impact of Societal Norms: Millennials report feeling that any semblance of leisure must also carry cultural or economic value, significantly undermining their enjoyment. The pressure to monetize every interest or hobby fosters a toxic environment where individuals cannot indulge in activities just for pleasure. Hobbies, which were once a source of relaxation, are often perceived through a lens of ambition, performance, or financial opportunity.

4. Societal Fragmentation: Contributing to this cultural malaise, there has been a notable decline in social cohesion and communal activities. As participation in traditional group activities and organizations diminishes, individuals increasingly experience isolation. The increased pace of life and irregular scheduling complicates efforts to forge connections, leading to a retreat into solitary forms of leisure, often virtual rather than personal.

5. The Productivity Paradox: The incessant drive for productivity is further complicated by the rise of "knowledge work," wherein outcomes are less quantifiable than in traditional jobs. This environment nurtures long working hours with little regard for actual productivity and well-being. Ironically, historical evidence suggests that reducing working hours often correlates with enhanced productivity and job satisfaction.

6. Leisure as Labor: The commodification of leisure has forced many to view their time through a lens of economic value, turning activities into



forms of unpaid labor. For many, the requirement to display cultural literacy—by consuming certain media and engaging in trendy activities—transforms leisure into a competitive sport where self-worth is tied to perceived productivity and social status.

7. Need for Rest: Amidst this chaotic landscape, there is a call for a radical reassessment of our relationship to time, rest, and self-worth. The author emphasizes that the essence of true leisure lies in enjoying life's simple pleasures without obligation toward productivity. This entails a conscious effort to reclaim one's time as sacred and valuable in its own right, thus nurturing the self beyond labor.

8. Cultivating Leisure: By broadening the definition of leisure to include restorative practices that provide pleasure, connections, and personal joy, individuals can begin to disentangle their identities from the demands of a relentless work culture. Achieving this may require unlearning the ingrained ideologies about productivity and re-embracing the value of simply "being."

In conclusion, the pursuit of productivity has infiltrated all aspects of life, redefining leisure as another commodity rather than a restorative necessity. Reasserting the intrinsic value of leisure as an essential component of well-being can counteract the pervasive sense of burnout that so many face today. Redefining leisure could pave the way towards a healthier balance between work and life, encouraging a culture that values time spent in



unproductive joy.

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chapter 9: The Exhausted Millennial Parent

Chapter 9 of "Can't Even" by Anne Helen Petersen presents an intricate exploration of parenting burnout, particularly focusing on the unique struggles faced by mothers amidst modern societal pressures. Petersen highlights how contemporary parents, especially mothers, experience exhaustion not only from the physical demands of raising children but also from societal expectations that dictate what “good parenting” looks like.

1. **The Emotional Toll of Parenting**: Mothers express profound fatigue, often feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. Individuals like Lisa and Lauren relay experiences where minor parenting challenges lead to emotional breakdowns, such as realizing their children need proper shoes or facing the everyday complexities that come with being a primary caregiver. The chronic stress of balancing parenting duties with personal fulfillment leads to a state where holding onto other emotions feels impossible, culminating in resentment towards their partners and fostering the perception of parenting as a solitary struggle.

2. **Historical Context of Parenting Pressures**: Peterson

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chapter 10 Summary: Conclusion: Burn It Down

In this chapter, the narrator reflects on the contemporary decision not to have children, framing this choice in the context of societal burnout and the overwhelming pressures that accompany modern parenthood. As a millennial who has navigated numerous adult milestones later than previous generations, such as stable employment and homeownership, the narrator examines the implications of societal expectations on personal choices regarding parenting.

The decision to not pursue parenthood is underscored by multiple factors, predominantly rooted in the cultural promotion of burnout and exhaustion. The narrator highlights that, like many millennials, they have delayed traditional adult milestones, resulting in significant financial anxiety and a precarious work-life balance. They acknowledge the societal pressures faced by parents, particularly mothers, who are expected to excel in both career and family, often leading to burnout as they juggle responsibilities without adequate support.

Despite their love for children, the narrator articulates the overwhelming nature of contemporary parenting standards, which transform the act of raising children into an exhausting career in itself. The burden of financial considerations and the realities of childcare costs contribute to the reluctance to embrace parenthood. The narrator watches friends struggle with the



demands of parenting, recognizing the relentless work involved in maintaining a household while sustaining a career. This leads to the realization that pursuing parenthood would likely exacerbate their own existing workload and financial struggles.

Drawing parallels to societal trends, the chapter discusses how various factors contribute to the declining birth rate among millennials, including a focus on career aspirations and the impact of burnout. The narrative connects individual choices to broader societal patterns, illustrating how exhaustion pervades daily life and influences personal decisions. The author recognizes that personal circumstances are deeply intertwined with systemic issues, particularly as they relate to gender dynamics and the structure of work culture.

The chapter takes a global perspective, particularly examining Japan's declining birth rate and the cultural expectations placed on working mothers, which reflect similar issues faced in the U.S. The narrative stresses that when a society ignores or exacerbates themes of burnout and gender imbalance, it risks destabilizing its future. In Japan, women are often burdened with disproportionate domestic responsibilities, revealing a stark reality that resonates across cultures.

As a solution, the narrator suggests the need for collective acknowledgment of burnout and its far-reaching consequences. They argue that societal

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change must come from a grassroots level, urging individuals to unite in resistance against damaging work structures and cultural expectations. The chapter closes with a call to action, encouraging a reevaluation of self-worth that is not tethered to productivity or societal achievement, highlighting the potential for empowerment through shared experiences of struggle. The message is profound: societal reform and personal fulfillment can coexist without the weight of perpetual exhaustion, and collective mobilization is essential for change.

1. Acknowledge the pressures of burnout: The narrator's choice not to have children stems from an awareness of the overwhelming demands of modern parenthood, influenced by societal expectations that exacerbate exhaustion.
2. Recognize the interplay of personal and societal choices: The decision to delay parenthood is framed within broader cultural trends, emphasizing how systemic factors shape individual circumstances and life decisions.
3. Examine global parallels: The chapter draws connections to Japan's declining birth rate, highlighting similarities in expectations for working mothers and the labor disparities in domestic responsibilities.
4. Advocate for collective action: The narrative concludes with a call to reject self-blame for systemic failures and work toward societal changes that alleviate the pressures of burnout, promoting greater balance between work



and personal life.

Through this exploration, the chapter enriches the discourse surrounding motherhood, career, and societal structuring, ultimately advocating for healthier frameworks that allow individuals to thrive without enduring relentless strain.

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Best Quotes from Can't Even by Anne Helen Petersen with Page Numbers

chapter 1 | Quotes from pages 22-36

1. If we're as special, and unique, and important as we were told we were throughout childhood, it's no surprise we refuse to shut up when our lives don't make us feel that way.
2. Boomers were, in many ways, responsible for us, both literally (as our parents, teachers, and coaches) and figuratively (creating the ideologies and economic environment that would shape us).
3. The problem, and why it's often hard to think of them charitably, is their inability to tap that experience in order to empathize with their own children's generation.
4. This criticism emerged forcefully in 2019: the year boomers were projected to cede their status as the largest generation to millennials.
5. The criticisms of boomers can feel like an indictment of a generation determined to take care of their own.
6. To understand millennial burnout, then, we have to understand what shaped—and, in many cases, burnt out—the boomers that made us.
7. It will surprise no one that the tendencies Wolfe described and softly lampooned in his article were actually those of the professional middle class.
8. They helped elect leaders, like President Ronald Reagan, who promised to 'protect' the middle class through tax cuts.
9. The advantages of the Great Compression were not equally distributed; the



protections fought for by unions did not extend to the millions of workers.

10. But the idea of personal responsibility has persisted: If you plan well and start saving when you first started working, theoretically you should be fine.

chapter 2 | Quotes from pages 37-55

1. “As an adult, I’ve realized I get stressed when I’m not doing something.”
2. “I feel guilty just relaxing.”
3. “I didn’t think about the other benefits, such as the discipline to remember to practice, or the importance of learning to play in public.”
4. “I think their focus was on making sure there was a roof over our heads and food on the table.”
5. “I saw from an early age how work can grind you up and spit you back out, as well as the benefits of leisure time.”
6. “One of the reasons I was able to avoid burnout as long as I did can be directly traced to the amount of ‘natural growth’ I experienced.”
7. “The psychological impact of post-divorce downward mobility...is multilayered.”
8. “It is also a broken covenant.”
9. “Most burnt-out millennials I know have arrived at that point of calling those expectations into question.”
10. “I just knew that lawyers and doctors had a lot of money.”

chapter 3 | Quotes from pages 56-71

1. "When teenagers inevitably look at themselves through the prism of our overachiever



culture, they often come to the conclusion that no matter how much they achieve, it v
never be enough."

2. "Just because everyone around you believes in the gospel doesn't mean
it's necessarily true."

3. "The pressure to achieve wouldn't have existed without the notion that
college, no matter the cost, would provide a path to middle-class prosperity
and stability."

4. "If you can just get on the path, that good, stable job is in sight!"

5. "The only route to success involves working to the point of—and then
through—physical pain."

6. "One common refrain I've heard from Gifted and Talented kids is how
none of us really learned how to think."

7. "The idea that underlies contemporary school is that grades, eventually,
turn into money, or if not money, into choice, or what social scientists
sometimes call 'better life outcomes.'"

8. "It's easy to see those resume-building behaviors as destructive when
they're consistently validated."

9. "Ultimately, it's difficult to see how college is meant to be about
education when it's actually about 'jumping class strata.'"

10. "For the vast majority of millennials, getting a degree hasn't yielded the
middle-class stability that was promised... It's just the same thing it always
was: more work."





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chapter 4 | Quotes from pages 72-92

1. "Doing what you love 'exposes its adherents to exploitation, justifying unpaid or underpaid work by throwing workers' motivations back at them."
2. "If you love your job, and it's so fulfilling, it 'makes sense that you'd want to do it all the time."
3. "A good job is one that doesn't exploit you and that you don't hate."
4. "I've always wanted my work to be my whole life, but now I feel like a good job is something that doesn't require me to work more than forty hours on a regular basis."
5. "The reality of the job search lays bare the contradictions, half-truths, and poorly constructed myths that motivated millennials through childhood and college."
6. "When that cool, lovable job doesn't appear, or appears and is unfeasible to maintain for someone who's not independently wealthy, it's easy to see how the shame accumulates."
7. "It makes quitting a job that relentlessly exploited you feel like giving up on yourself, instead of what it really is: advocating, for the first time in a long time, for your own needs."
8. "The rhetoric of 'Do what you love' makes asking to be valued seem like the equivalent of unsportsmanlike conduct."
9. "When everyone in the workplace conceives of themselves as individual contractors in continuous competition, it creates conditions prime for burnout."
10. "Instead, the quest to find and win 'lovable' work created an atmosphere of ruthless competition; feeling personally passionate and fulfilled by work takes precedence over working conditions for the whole."



chapter 5 | Quotes from pages 93-109

1. The precariat is not the vision of the working class held by many Americans.
2. They are angry at and are anxious about the broken promises of the American Dream, but they keep grinding to try to position themselves closer to it.
3. Workers aren't getting lazier, or worse at multitasking. We don't lack grit or ambition.
4. To understand how work got this shitty for so many requires a significant detour into the past.
5. Left to its own devices, capitalism is not benevolent.
6. In the current iteration of capitalism, the vast majority of employees do not benefit, in any way, from the profits that the company creates for its shareholders.
7. It's one thing for companies to declare that sexual harassment is not tolerated at their hotels; it's quite another to actually dedicate the resources to substantiate the claim.
8. According to Zeynep Ton, 'good jobs' are jobs with decent pay, decent benefits, and stable work schedules.
9. Bad jobs are not a necessity to achieve significant profits. They are a strategy, a choice.
10. What Patty is describing is job security and satisfaction—a work scenario that doesn't cause burnout but helps protect against it.

chapter 6 | Quotes from pages 110-132

1. Sometimes I only know my schedule a few weeks in advance.
2. The instability and high pay of the consulting world fed on itself.



3. We tell ourselves all sorts of stories to justify our overwork.
4. No amount of hustle or sleeplessness can permanently bend a broken system to your benefit.
5. Your value as a worker is always unstable.
6. Freelancing is exhausting and anxiety-building enough.
7. The idea that we can build a society on this platform— with no protections— is fanciful.
8. Those people in the 'real world' were lazy anyway.
9. The phenomenon of the gig economy is the always-frantically-seeking-the-next-gig economy.
10. What worries me most is that this is just the beginning.

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chapter 7 | Quotes from pages 133-154

1. We know our phones suck. We even know the apps on them were engineered to be addictive.
2. They compel us to frame experiences, as we are experiencing them, with future captions.
3. Digital detoxes don't fix the problem. The only long-term fix is making the background into foreground.
4. Disengaging from our phone means disengaging from life.
5. What these technologies do best is remind us of what we're not doing.
6. The reality of millennial, internet-ridden life: I need to be an insanely productive writer and be funny on Slack.
7. When we fail to do so, we don't blame the broken tools. We blame ourselves.
8. It's an economy based on taking up residency in the interstitial moments of our lives.
9. The prospect of relearning who I am—and who others are—remains daunting.
10. In short: It makes money. That money comes from manipulating, sustaining, and beguiling our attention.

chapter 8 | Quotes from pages 155-175

1. "Leisure, then, is time you are allowed to do what you'd like, free from the compunction to generate value."
2. "What mattered is that it wasn't done to make yourself a more desirable match, to declare your societal status, or make some extramoney on the side. It was done for pleasure."



3. "It's hard to recover from days spent laboring when your 'time off' feels like work."
4. "Better work is almost always achieved through less work."
5. "Rest doesn't just make workers happier, but makes them more efficient when they're actually on the job."
6. "A reckoning with burnout is so often a reckoning with the fact that the things you fill your day with feel unrecognizable from the sort of life you want to live."
7. "You are not defined by your work; your value exists simply because you are."
8. "Doing nothing—at least nothing that is conceived of as value-making under capitalism—can help restore our sense of self."
9. "Even as leisure became more accessible, our ability to actually enjoy it has eroded."
10. "The best, most alive parts of ourselves are paved over by a ruthless logic of use."

chapter 9 | Quotes from pages 176-202

1. Burnout occurs when the distance between the ideal and the possible lived reality becomes too much to bear.
2. To make that happen, we have to admit that it's not enough to have progressive ideals about parenting.
3. The common denominator amongst millennials, then, is that we've been inculcated with the idea of that failure can be chalked up to simply not trying hard enough.
4. It's exhausting to be stigmatized by society, to navigate social programs intended to



help that mostly shame.

5. Just because women have been liberated from many of the explicit forms of subjugation and sexism that accompanied domestic life, other forms continue to thrive.

6. You can't fix parenting burnout by making time for Bible study or journaling in the morning, or by learning how to fight like an adult.

7. Parenting is never going to be free of worry, or comparison, or stress. But there can be significantly less of all of those things.

8. It breeds resentment and despair—particularly for women who placed stock in the idea of an equal partnership.

9. Instead of offering a legitimate show of community or problem solving, moms almost universally will try to one-up your source of parenting frustration.

10. If you want to feel less exhausted, less resentful, less filled with unspeakable rage, less ground down to the thinnest, least likable version of yourself, then you have to act, vote, and advocate for solutions that will make life better not just for you.

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chapter 10 | Quotes from pages 203-211

1. It doesn't have to be this way.
2. Just because we've reconciled ourselves to our current reality doesn't mean it's right.
3. We shouldn't have to choose between excelling in work and thriving as individuals.
4. Parenting shouldn't be a contest.
5. Leisure shouldn't be this scarce.
6. We shouldn't excuse any of these inexcusable realities in the name of old, broken myths about who we are and what we stand for.
7. We can unite in our resistance to the way things are.
8. We can recognize that it's not enough to try to make things better for ourselves.
9. We can come to the spectacular and radical understanding that we are each valuable simply because we are.
10. Underestimate us at your peril: We have so little left to lose.

Can't Even Discussion Questions

chapter 1 | Our Burnt-Out Parents | Q&A

1.Question:

What is the main argument presented in Chapter 1 regarding the generational conflict between Boomers and Millennials?

The chapter argues that Boomers, while having experienced economic stability, are often critical of Millennials for their perceived complaints about burnout and the state of work. It suggests that Boomers fail to empathize with Millennials' struggles because they are largely unaware of the contradictory pressures that defined their own lives. The chapter frames this critique as rooted in a lack of understanding of shared experiences essentially shaped by the Boomers themselves, pointing out that the very ideologies and economic factors that influenced Millennials were established by Boomers.

2.Question:

How does the chapter characterize the attitudes of Boomers toward work and Millennial dissatisfaction with work?

Boomers tend to view the Millennial complaints about work and burnout as whining, often citing their own experiences of hard work during economic hardships. The chapter highlights the irony in Boomers' criticism, as it was their generation that instilled the belief in the necessity of work satisfaction and the importance of mental health. In contrast, Millennials are depicted as seeking meaningful work and pushing back against traditional work constructs established during Boomers' time, therefore reflecting a fundamental shift in expectations about work-life balance.

3.Question:

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What historical context does the chapter provide to explain the differences in economic experiences between Boomers and Millennials?

The chapter provides a description of economic conditions following the Great Depression and World War II, which led to the expansion of the American middle class—often referred to as the 'Great Compression.'

During this period, policies were instituted that significantly benefited workers, union memberships flourished, and the economy prospered. In contrast, Millennials are shown to be suffering from economic precarity marked by student debt, wage stagnation, and diminishing job security, indicating a stark difference in the economic landscape they inherited from Boomers.

4.Question:

How does the concept of individualism and self-responsibility come into play in the chapter's analysis?

The chapter discusses the shift toward individualism and personal responsibility that became more pronounced among Boomers, especially in light of economic changes during the late 20th century. This ideology, promoted by leaders such as Ronald Reagan, suggested that the government should not intervene in economic matters and that individuals should bear the risks of unemployment or inadequate retirement savings on their own. This transition contributed to the diminishing safety nets that earlier generations had benefited from, leading to economic vulnerability for Millennials, who now face the consequences of this individualistic mindset.

5.Question:

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What social and cultural shifts does the chapter attribute to the experiences of Boomers in the 1970s and 1980s?

The chapter describes the 1970s as a time when Boomers, facing economic instability, reacted by becoming inward-looking, leading to the rise of Reaganism and a cultural focus on self-fulfillment. This period saw the emergence of yuppies, who prioritized wealth and consumerism over the ideals of activism prevalent in the 1960s. The chapter suggests that this cultural shift, coupled with economic anxiety, led Boomers to lose sight of collective responsibility, fostering a mentality that ultimately placed the burden of success or failure on individuals rather than on societal structures.

chapter 2 | Growing Mini-Adults | Q&A

1.Question:

What contrasting childhood experiences do Caitlin and Stefanie represent in the chapter?

Caitlin, who identifies as biracial and grew up in a suburban environment in Washington, DC, experienced a structured childhood focused on extracurricular activities like dance and theater, driven by her mother's high expectations for academic performance. Conversely, Stefanie, who is white and grew up in rural Idaho, enjoyed a more free-range upbringing where she spent considerable unsupervised time playing outdoors, engaging with family, and participating in less structured activities without the pressure of a rigorous schedule.

2.Question:

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What key sociological research does the chapter reference to analyze parenting styles, and what are the main findings?

The chapter references Annette Lareau's sociological study conducted between 1990 and 1995, where she followed eighty-eight children from diverse economic and racial backgrounds. The findings reveal a divide between 'concerted cultivation' practiced by middle-class families, who actively schedule and oversee their children's activities to prepare them for success, and 'natural growth' practiced by working-class families, which allows children more free time and independence. Lareau argues that these differing approaches yield distinct outcomes in children's preparation for adulthood, with the skills valued in the bourgeois workplace typically cultivated by concerted cultivation.

3.Question:

What impact did the parenting style of concerted cultivation have on millennials according to the chapter?

The impact of concerted cultivation on millennials includes the development of anxiety and burnout. While children raised under this model are equipped with skills like networking and independence, the relentless focus on achievement and overscheduling has led many to experience pressure to maintain high performance levels into adulthood. As a result, millennials often struggle with downtime, question their self-worth when not engaged in productive activities, and face the consequences of a childhood defined by structured, adult-like expectations.

4.Question:

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How does the concept of 'natural growth' contrast with concerted cultivation, and what benefits does it offer according to the chapter?

Natural growth is characterized by a parenting style that allows children to have unsupervised playtime and explore their independence in a less structured environment. Unlike concerted cultivation, where every aspect of a child's schedule is designed for achievement, natural growth provides children the opportunity to develop curiosity, negotiation skills among peers, and a sense of self. The chapter suggests that these children may emerge with a stronger ability to handle failure and develop resilience, as they learn to navigate challenges independently without constant adult intervention.

5.Question:

What broader societal anxieties regarding class and upward mobility does the chapter address in relation to the parenting strategies of millennials?

The chapter discusses how many millennial parents, influenced by their own experiences of economic uncertainty and downward mobility, adopted intense parenting strategies out of fear of falling out of the middle class. This anxiety resulted in an overwhelming emphasis on achievement, where the narrative of success became tightly intertwined with constant busyness and productivity. The pursuit of middle-class status became a driving force behind parenting practices, causing children to internalize the belief that their worth is intrinsically linked to their accomplishments, thus perpetuating stress and fear of failure.



1.Question:

What is the central theme of Chapter 3 in 'Can't Even' by Anne Helen Petersen?

The central theme of Chapter 3 revolves around the pressures and psychological toll millennials face regarding college education in an overachieving culture. The chapter explores how societal expectations have led many young people to view themselves as 'walking resumes', leading to anxiety, burnout, and disillusionment with the promise of higher education as a pathway to financial stability.

2.Question:

How does Anne Helen Petersen describe the evolution of the college application process for millennials?

Petersen describes the college application process for millennials as having evolved significantly over the years, from a time when only a few students aspired to attend college to a culture where nearly all high school seniors aim to do so. She notes that technology played a key role in amplifying competition, allowing students to compare and track their academic achievements and college application statuses online, coupled with a broader societal belief that college is a mandatory step for achieving success.

3.Question:

What impact did the concept of 'human capital' have on millennials, according to Petersen?

The concept of 'human capital' significantly impacted millennials by framing their worth in terms of economic productivity and potential future earnings. This perspective



led to a relentless pursuit of educational credentials and resume-building activities, often sidelining intrinsic interests and causing physical and mental health issues as students internalized the idea that their value was tied solely to their accomplishment and ability to perform well academically.

4.Question:

What are the psychological consequences of the college preparation culture described in Chapter 3?

The psychological consequences of the college preparation culture include heightened anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks, and other stress-related ailments among students. Many individuals reported developing unhealthy coping mechanisms and feeling immense pressure to succeed, leading to a sense of worth being closely tied to academic performance rather than personal fulfillment.

5.Question:

How does Petersen illustrate the discrepancy between expectations and reality post-college for millennials?

Petersen illustrates the discrepancy by highlighting personal anecdotes from millennials who entered college expecting it to lead to middle-class stability and fulfilling careers but instead faced underemployment, crippling student debt, and persistent economic anxiety. Despite the sacrifices made in pursuit of higher education, many found that the reality of their post-college lives did not match the promises made to them about the benefits of obtaining a degree.





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chapter 4 | Do What You Love and You'll Still Work Every Day for the Rest of Your Life | Q&A

1.Question:

What is the primary argument Anne Helen Petersen makes in Chapter 4 regarding millennials' views on work?

In Chapter 4 of "Can't Even," Anne Helen Petersen argues that millennials have internalized a belief that work must be both a source of passion and provide financial stability, stemming from the concerted cultivation parenting style they experienced. This approach emphasized the value of children's futures as an asset to enhance the family's middle-class status. Consequently, many millennials face the conflicting pressure to seek 'cool' jobs that are both impressive to peers and fulfilling to personal passions, leading to unrealistic expectations about job availability and salary. Petersen highlights how this mindset has resulted in significant disillusionment among millennials as they navigate a difficult job market, often leading to burnout and dissatisfaction.

2.Question:

How does Petersen describe the impact of the 'Do What You Love' philosophy on millennials' perceptions of work?

Petersen critiques the 'Do What You Love' (DWYL) philosophy, suggesting that it sets workers up for exploitation by framing labor in terms of passion, which ultimately commodifies their dedication. This rhetoric creates a narrative where workers are led to believe that if they are not succeeding or fulfilled, it is due to personal shortcomings rather than systemic issues, contributing to feelings of shame and guilt. The persistent

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belief that passion should drive work overlooks the needs for fair compensation and reasonable working conditions, leading to a cycle of overwork and burnout as individuals prioritize finding meaningful employment over protecting their own well-being.

3.Question:

What specific examples does Petersen provide to illustrate the harsh realities faced by millennials in the job market?

Petersen cites multiple examples throughout Chapter 4 to illustrate millennials' struggles, such as Elizabeth's experience with the Disney College Program, where she felt pressured to accept a low-paying job simply because it was associated with a well-known brand. She also mentions Stephanie, who applied for over 150 jobs after graduation yet still struggled to find meaningful employment, ultimately resorting to unpaid work to build her portfolio. These anecdotes highlight the systemic barriers millennials face, such as student debt and the competitive nature of the job market, which often trap them in poorly compensated roles despite their educational achievements.

4.Question:

How does Petersen link the success narratives surrounding 'lovable' jobs to the broader economic landscape faced by millennials?

Petersen connects the appeal of 'lovable' jobs to the broader economic conditions that have reshaped millennials' expectations. She notes that economic downturns have resulted in fewer opportunities, causing a high



supply of overqualified candidates competing for limited desirable positions. By emphasizing the desirability of jobs that are perceived as passion-driven, employers can justify maintaining low wages and poor working conditions, exploiting the eagerness of job seekers who are willing to accept subpar offers for the sake of working in a field they love. This environment fosters competition among workers at the expense of collective bargaining and solidarity.

5.Question:

What shift in mentality regarding work does Petersen identify among millennials as a consequence of their experiences?

Petersen identifies a notable shift in mentality among millennials, from adhering to the ideal of finding a ‘cool job’ to advocating for fair treatment in the workplace and recognizing the value of stable employment. Many millennials are recalibrating their definitions of success to prioritize jobs that allow economic stability and personal boundaries over those that demand personal sacrifice in the name of passion. This adjustment shows a growing awareness of the systemic issues in the labor market and a collective push toward redefining what a ‘good job’ should be, moving away from romanticized notions of work to a more pragmatic approach to employment.

chapter 5 | How Work Got So Shitty | Q&A

1.Question:

What is the primary argument made in Chapter 5 regarding the nature of



temporary work and the precariat?

Chapter 5 argues that temporary work, historically viewed as a source of flexibility and quick solutions for companies, has evolved into a systematic exploitation of workers within the precariat class. The chapter explains that jobs traditionally filled by full-time employees—particularly in industries like retail and services—have been replaced by temporary and contract roles, which lack job security, benefits, and any sense of workplace belonging. This shift has resulted in workers, many of whom are college-educated, living in precarious economic conditions, constantly at risk of falling into poverty. The changing landscape of work categorized by temporary contracts, gig jobs, and independent contracting exemplifies the loss of traditional employment rights and the growing disconnection between workers and their companies.

2.Question:

How does the chapter explain the shift from stable employment to the precariat and what historical factors contributed to this change?

The chapter traces the shift from stable employment to the precariat back to economic disruptions such as stagflation in the 1970s and recessions in the 1980s. It discusses how these hardships drove companies to embrace a free-market ideology that prized flexibility and short-term profits over long-term stability for employees. This led to the massive rollbacks of union protections and deregulation, allowing corporations to restructure their workforces, routinely downsizing full-time employees in favor of temporary

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workers who do not receive the same benefits or job security. This transformation was facilitated by consultants who emphasized 'lean' company structures, prioritizing profit margins over the welfare of employees, thereby creating a new class of labor characterized by insecurity and instability.

3.Question:

What role do consultants and private equity firms play in perpetuating the conditions of the precariat as outlined in this chapter?

Consultants and private equity firms play a critical role in perpetuating the precariat by advocating for business practices that prioritize short-term profit over the well-being of employees. Consultants assess and recommend cutting costs and shedding jobs through downsizing and outsourcing non-essential functions. Private equity firms acquire businesses to maximize profits for themselves and their investors, often loading companies with debt and cutting jobs to improve stock performances. This dynamic creates an environment where labor is treated as a disposable resource rather than an integral part of a company, further entrenching workers within the precarious conditions of the gig economy and temporary employment.

4.Question:

What does the chapter reveal about the perception of temp work and how it relates to societal attitudes towards workers in the precariat?

The chapter discusses how societal narratives have historically portrayed temp work as a voluntary, light-duty option, often viewed as 'extra pocket



money' for those not in dire financial need. This perception trivializes the reality that many workers in the precariat are forced into these roles due to economic necessity rather than choice. The narrative surrounding temp work fosters an attitude of stigma and dismissal towards these workers, suggesting that their struggle is less legitimate, feeding into a cultural belief that all workers should be grateful for whatever jobs they can get. This cognitive dissonance prevents a broader acknowledgment of the exploitation and marginalization experienced by those in precarious employment.

5.Question:

According to the chapter, what can be done to challenge the prevailing conditions faced by workers in the precariat, and what examples does it provide?

To challenge the prevailing poor conditions faced by workers in the precariat, the chapter emphasizes the importance of unions, government regulations, and the existence of companies that treat employees well. It cites examples of companies like Costco, QuikTrip, and Trader Joe's that manage to provide good jobs with decent pay and benefits while still achieving profitability. By prioritizing their workers' needs and well-being, these companies demonstrate that it is possible to maintain successful business models without sacrificing employee rights or dignity. The chapter advocates for a reevaluation of workplace structures and a push for policies that ensure fair labor practices, ultimately asserting that work does not have to be characterized by exploitation and instability.



1.Question:

What major transitions did Nina experience in her career, and how did these changes impact her relationship with work?

Nina's career transitioned dramatically from a period of instability in 2007, when she broke her lease and couchsurfing in a state of mental fog, to joining a startup as a designer in 2009. This shift brought about immediate financial relief, letting her address past life problems that had plagued her. However, despite this newfound success, she remained in a toxic relationship and later discovered that she was undervalued at work, being the only one without stock options, and working under intense pressure of 60-hour weeks. This experience led her to confront the ingrained belief that overworking was the only way to prove her worth in the workplace, ultimately motivating her to try to limit her working hours to a healthier 35 hours a week, though she found it challenging to unlearn her past conditioning.

2.Question:

What can be understood about workplace culture based on Kay's experience in the theater industry, and how does it exemplify broader trends in American labor?

Kay's experience as a freelance costume technician highlights a highly pressured and stress-inducing workplace culture, where performance metrics and constant monitoring dictate working conditions. Specifically, her previous job mandated a quantifiable amount of garments to repair within a strict timeframe, demonstrating a competitive atmosphere where personal needs were disregarded—going to the bathroom was timed and deducted from productivity. This reflects a broader trend in American labor, where



many environments prioritize output and efficiency over employee wellbeing, fostering a culture of overwork and anxiety. It is a microcosm of the labor landscape, underscoring the pressures many workers face across various industries.

3.Question:

How does Cate's experience as a freelance film critic illustrate the challenges of gig work, particularly in relation to mental health?

Cate's pursuit of writing as a freelance film critic is overshadowed by her struggle with loneliness and mental health issues. The instability of freelance work, where schedules are uncertain and income is inconsistent, leads to feelings of depression and social isolation, further complicated by a lack of health insurance. Her experience emphasizes the mental health toll on freelancers who are often left to navigate these challenges alone. Despite the allure of chase freedom and flexibility in freelancing, the reality includes persistent anxiety about securing steady income and a sense of loss regarding social interactions, mirroring larger systemic issues within gig economies.

4.Question:

What does the chapter convey about the glorification of overwork and its implications for workers' mental and physical health?

The chapter critically examines the American culture that glorifies overwork, noting that this ideology has permeated various industries, entrenching a mindset where exhaustion is normalized and productivity is paramount. It explains how this glorification traps workers in a cycle of



burnout, suggesting that relentless work is not just a personal failing but rather a consequence of systemic pressures that prioritize profit over human needs. This can lead to serious implications for workers' mental and physical health, as individuals begin to neglect their well-being—such as sleep—and become conditioned to push through their limits, often leading to chronic stress and dissatisfaction. The narrative suggests that such environments ultimately undermine workers' morale and output, creating a toxic cycle of overwork.

5.Question:

How does the author relate the practices of elite consulting firms and Wall Street banks to the larger context of workers' experiences in the modern labor market?

The author draws parallels between the hyper-competitive culture fostered by elite consulting firms and Wall Street banks and the broader labor market to demonstrate how these environments shape and perpetuate both individual worker experiences and societal views on work. She explains that these firms are known for pushing their employees to the brink to identify and retain only those who can tolerate extreme work conditions, thus setting standards that trickle down through corporate America. The practices born of such environments—like long hours normalized as a measure of commitment—have infiltrated various sectors, influencing workplace expectations and job security. As these consulting strategies become the norm, they contribute to the dismantling of stable employment practices,



leaving many workers vulnerable and leading to conditions where burnout becomes a universal experience.

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chapter 7 | Technology Makes Everything Work | Q&A

1.Question:

What is the primary theme of Chapter 7 in 'Can't Even'?

The primary theme of Chapter 7 is the pervasive and detrimental impact of digital technology, particularly smartphones and social media, on millennials' lives. It discusses how these technologies are designed to be addictive, leading to feelings of burnout, anxiety, and disconnection from real life. The chapter critiques the illusion of productivity and efficiency created by constant connectivity, highlighting the emotional toll of managing digital distractions.

2.Question:

How does the author describe the relationship between millennials and their smartphones?

The author describes the relationship between millennials and their smartphones as one of dependence and exhaustion. Smartphones are presented as extensions of self, integral to organizing life, communicating, and consuming information. While they offer conveniences such as social connectivity and access to tasks, the author notes that they lead to distraction, overwhelm, and a sense of continuous pressure to engage and perform, contributing to burnout.

3.Question:

What evidence does the author provide to support the idea that phones have a negative impact on mental health?

The author references studies indicating that millennials check their phones



excessively—an average of 150 times a day, with many rigorously engaging in social media to the detriment of their attention spans and emotional health. The text mentions how this compulsive behavior leads to a dopamine-driven cycle of seeking validation through likes and comments, which ultimately left individuals feeling depleted and regretful rather than fulfilled.

4.Question:

How does the chapter link digital technology to feelings of burnout?

The chapter argues that digital technology exacerbates burnout by fostering a culture of multitasking and constant engagement with distractions. The author explains that technologies like Slack and social media spread work into personal life, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between work and leisure. This incessant connectivity coupled with the pressure to always be 'on' contributes to a heightened sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction, leading to burnout.

5.Question:

What solutions or coping mechanisms does the author suggest for dealing with digital burnout?

While the author acknowledges the challenge of moderating our relationship with technology, they suggest that the solution lies not in detoxes or digital breaks, but rather in recognizing and calling out the ways digital technologies have infiltrated our lives. This involves confronting the unrealistic expectations set by these tools and understanding that disengaging from them doesn't equate to disengaging from life. A more



mindful approach to technology use is encouraged, aiming to prioritize real-life connections and experiences over digital validation.

chapter 8 | What Is a Weekend? | Q&A

1.Question:

What shifts in perception about leisure does the author describe in this chapter, especially concerning millennials?

The author explains that millennials have fundamentally altered perceptions of leisure, transitioning from seeing it as a well-deserved break to viewing it as a potential opportunity for productivity. They experience guilt when engaged in activities that aren't directly beneficial or monetizable. Leisure time, instead of being restorative, often feels like an obligation to make the most efficient use of time, driven by internalized societal pressures to optimize every aspect of life. This has resulted in a significant burnout mentality, wherein leisure is fraught with anxiety about productivity and progress.

2.Question:

How does the historical context of leisure relate to current societal perceptions according to the author?

Historically, leisure was predominantly enjoyed by the aristocracy, being a time for personal fulfilment, creativity, and relaxation without any pressure for productivity. In contrast, the current societal perception, especially among millennials, has shifted towards viewing leisure through a capitalist lens, where each hour is expected to yield tangible benefits or outcomes. The author notes that even though there was a time when



work hours decreased due to productivity increases, this has not sustained into modern times, creating a culture where rest and leisure are undervalued and often filled with anxiety.

3.Question:

What role does the concept of 'monetizing hobbies' play in the discussion of leisure?

The author discusses how many millennials have a compulsion to monetize their hobbies, which transforms them from activities of pure pleasure into secondary jobs. This pressure to turn enjoyable pastimes into potential sources of income fosters a culture where even leisure time becomes competitive and stressful, as people feel obligated to utilize every moment for self-improvement or social status rather than simple enjoyment. This results in hobbies being marked by perfectionism, compounding the cultural anxiety surrounding leisure.

4.Question:

Can you explain how the concept of productivity impacts millennials' social interactions and relationships?

The drive for productivity has extended into social interactions, making the coordination of social activities and engagements feel burdensome and logistic-ridden. The chapter highlights how relationships often fall victim to the hectic pace of life, leading individuals to avoid planning meet-ups because of their exhausting schedules. Many millennials find themselves prioritizing efficiency and screen interactions over genuine, face-to-face



connections, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and burnout.

5.Question:

What solutions or responses regarding leisure and productivity does the author suggest?

The author encourages a reevaluation of what constitutes value in leisure, advocating for engaging in activities simply for pleasure rather than for external validation or productivity metrics. They promote the idea of reclaiming the authentic self beyond work, emphasizing the importance of resting and nurturing personal interests without the pressure to display them publicly or tie them to professional success. This re-commitment to self can help alleviate burnout, positioning individuals not just as workers, but as deserving beings with inherent value.

chapter 9 | The Exhausted Millennial Parent | Q&A

1.Question:

What key factors contribute to parenting burnout according to the chapter?

The chapter identifies several key factors contributing to parenting burnout, including societal expectations of parenting, the unequal distribution of domestic labor, and economic insecurity. It discusses how modern ideals of 'good parenting' are often unrealistic and place immense pressure on parents, especially mothers, to achieve a perfect balance between work and home life. It also highlights the mental load that women bear, where they are responsible not just for physical childcare but also for managing the entire household's schedule, emotions, and well-being. Furthermore,

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financial pressures exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, creating a challenging environment for parents.

2.Question:

How does the chapter address the impact of societal expectations on mothers?

The chapter details the societal expectations placed on mothers, emphasizing that they are expected to excel at both their careers and parenting. This results in 'mom guilt,' where mothers feel inadequate if they cannot meet these high expectations. The chapter notes that while there have been advancements in women entering the workforce, the expectations for how they manage their home life have not decreased, leading to a relentless cycle of exhaustion and self-doubt. It criticizes the notion that achieving a balance is solely the mother's responsibility, highlighting that this belief is further enforced by peer pressure and societal judgments.

3.Question:

What role does economic insecurity play in parenting burnout?

Economic insecurity is described as a significant factor that amplifies parenting burnout. The chapter notes that parents are often consumed with financial concerns, such as affording childcare, school-related expenses, and maintaining their household, which distracts from their ability to engage fully with their children. It illustrates how socioeconomic status influences parental anxiety, noting that families who are struggling financially cannot afford to provide the same opportunities to their children as more affluent



families, adding to the stress and feelings of inadequacy among parents.

4.Question:

How does the chapter critique contemporary parenting culture?

The chapter critiques contemporary parenting culture by highlighting how it enforces unrealistic, often contradictory ideals about what it means to be a good parent. It points out the paradox of having more parenting resources and information than ever before while simultaneously increasing feelings of inadequacy among parents. Social media is highlighted as exacerbating this issue, as parents feel the need to present an idealized version of their family life while struggling behind the scenes. Moreover, the chapter stresses that these cultural pressures do not just affect individual families; they perpetuate a system that favors certain social classes and discriminates against others, specifically in contexts of race and economic status.

5.Question:

What solutions does the chapter propose to alleviate parenting burnout?

The chapter proposes that alleviating parenting burnout requires systemic change rather than just individual solutions. It calls for comprehensive social policies, such as affordable childcare, paid parental leave, and support systems that validate the labor of caregiving, aiming for a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities between parents. The chapter argues that these structural changes are essential to reduce the burden on mothers and enable both parents to share the workload effectively, ultimately improving family life and reducing societal pressure that contributes to



burnout.

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chapter 10 | Conclusion: Burn It Down | Q&A

1.Question:

What are the primary reasons the author chose not to have children, according to Chapter 10?

The author, Anne Helen Petersen, outlines multiple reasons for her decision not to have children, all of which stem from the overwhelming sense of burnout and societal expectations around parenting. She highlights financial instability, with significant student loan obligations and unsustainable living costs in New York as contributing factors. Moreover, she expresses concerns about the strenuous nature of contemporary parenting, which includes not just the emotional labor of raising children but also the additional logistical and financial burdens. She observes that while her friends managed to make parenting work, it required immense effort and sacrifice, further exacerbating their burnout. Petersen also notes the added pressure of maintaining a career in a precarious job market and her desire to avoid jeopardizing the stability she has worked hard to achieve.

2.Question:

How does the author connect the concept of burnout to the broader societal expectations of parenting?

Petersen connects burnout to societal expectations by discussing how contemporary parenting is laden with pressures and demands that require constant work and effort. She argues that children today are viewed as projects or challenges that further complicate adult life, rather than simply being sources of love and joy. The author illustrates that for millennials, like herself, the combination of financial pressures, job

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insecurities, and the demands of raising children create an overwhelming sense of burnout. It is this cultural environment that leads her to question whether they can adequately handle the responsibilities of parenting without sacrificing their mental health or professional aspirations.

3.Question:

What does the author suggest about the generational differences in perspectives on family and career?

The author suggests that millennials face unique challenges compared to previous generations regarding family planning and career ambitions. While older generations might have assumed that family planning could accompany career development, millennials are encountering a different reality characterized by job precarity and financial instability. Petersen highlights how societal structures have shifted away from cushioning families and toward enforcing rigorous work expectations. Additionally, millennials often do not see the same clear path to balancing professional and personal lives as earlier generations did, which influences their choices about marriage and parenthood.

4.Question:

In relation to the author's experience, what does she reveal about the societal narratives surrounding work and parenting?

Petersen reveals that societal narratives around work and parenting are deeply flawed, as they suggest that individuals can 'make it work' through sheer determination despite the lack of structural support. She critiques the



romanticization of parenthood, where advice often ignores the emotional and physical toll it takes, especially on women. Her observations indicate that these narratives make it difficult for individuals to recognize the systemic issues at play. Instead of focusing on personal failures, the author calls for a re-evaluation of how society supports or fails parents, particularly in terms of work-life balance, childcare affordability, and gender equality in domestic labor.

5.Question:

What implications does the author draw regarding the future of parenting for millennials, based on her arguments in Chapter 10?

Petersen implies that the trends she observes might lead to fewer millennials choosing to have children due to overwhelming societal pressures and expectations that do not support healthy family dynamics. She notes a significant decline in birth rates among millennials, attributing it to burnout and an inability to envision sustainable family life alongside demanding careers. The future of parenting for this generation may involve more individuals considering child-free lifestyles as a legitimate choice, challenging traditional narratives that define success in terms of family structure. This shift could lead to broader societal changes as young people push back against the inequalities and sacrifices that contemporary parenting demands.