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# **Exhaustion: A History**

Anna K. Schaffner



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Today our fatigue feels chronic; our anxieties, amplified. Proliferating technologies command our attention. Many people complain of burnout, and economic instability and the threat of ecological catastrophe fill us with dread. We look to the past, imagining life to have once been simpler and slower, but extreme mental and physical stress is not a modern syndrome. Beginning in classical antiquity, this book demonstrates how exhaustion has always been with us and helps us evaluate more critically the narratives we tell ourselves about the phenomenon.

Medical, cultural, literary, and biographical sources have cast exhaustion as a biochemical imbalance, a somatic ailment, a viral disease, and a spiritual failing. It has been linked to loss, the alignment of the planets, a perverse desire for death, and social and economic disruption. Pathologized, demonized, sexualized, and even weaponized, exhaustion unites the mind with the body and society in such a way that we attach larger questions of agency, willpower, and well-being to its symptoms. Mapping these political, ideological, and creative currents across centuries of human development, *Exhaustion* finds in our struggle to overcome weariness a more significant effort to master ourselves.

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