

Master's Programme in Collaborative and Industrial Design

Probing Burn-out while Burned-out

An exploration into combining autoethnography and prototyping design probes as a burned-out designer

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Abstract

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to document how I, as a burned-out designer, functioned and operated during a six-week design project to create a prototype design probe with consideration for my health and well-being. Concurrently, throughout the autoethnographic journaling, I observed how journaling can support my work as a designer, the project itself, and my health. The guiding topics of this thesis are burn-out and its recovery, nature therapy, and design probes. The characteristics of burn-out were understood as both an occupational phenomenon and exhaustion; whereby exhaustion can combine with disengagement to work, which can cause health problems. I looked to understand ways of supporting recovery from burn-out and found there are three activity pathways: low-effort, social and physical. Thus, it was fitting to include nature therapy as a topic of inspiration, whereby it presented four helpful therapeutic approaches that fit into these three pathways. These tools for recovery can be useful as activities within a design probe. I then set out to complete a six-week design project where I documented my design activity while also documenting my personal experience through journaling. The outcome of this six-week design project was a prototype design probe that was comprised of three main sections titled ‘introduction’, ‘daily activities’, and ‘outro’; the probe aims to build understanding about an individual’s experience of recovery from burn-out. The empirical findings of the journaling were extracted with thematic coding, sense-making, and content analysis. This produced four thematic categories to classify insights from the journaling: ‘prototype probe’, ‘journaling’, ‘designer’, and ‘well-being’. Overall, the aims of this thesis were met, in that I was able to successfully document the six-week project’s process and learnings relating to my health and professional activity. I ensured my health was prioritised throughout the duration of the thesis. However, two of the thesis objectives were not met, they both revealed the limitations of my health and the scope of this thesis.

Keywords Burn-out, Well-being, Designer, Design Probes, Autoethnography, Research through Design

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Kivenlahti, 15th December 2022
Daud Imran Bin Shamsul Amri

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1. Introduction

1.1. Final Log – 26th November 2022

In the early days of January 2021, as the new year began, I found myself in bed. I was unable to move, a kind of paralysis. I only had enough strength to move my arms to reach for my phone, as my body felt like it weighed a ton. Eventually, I was able to muster the energy to wake and fulfil the basics that a human body needs. Then, the next day, it happened again. Day after day, for almost two weeks, I was locked in my bed. Moving was like wading against a strong current.

This was deep burn-out.

While I had known about burn-out and had experienced it in the past, this was the first time it had utterly incapacitated me. My mind quickly jumped into action and began planning my recovery. Six months of rest, and then I can go back to how I used to do things — full speed. It was not long after these six months of recovery until I found myself again, locked in bed, incapacitated by exhaustion. And then again, four months later. And again, two months later. It wasn't working. My approach to recovery was broken. Not because of what I was doing, but from what I was expecting. Doing the same thing every time and expecting a different outcome. Every part of me was broken, exhausted, and overwhelmed. But it finally hit me.

I now had to do something differently.

I had to find a way to work and rest and manage the limited energy quota my body gave me. At the peak of exhaustion, I was unable to move. As I recovered, I found myself having thirty minutes to an hour a day of productive effort. This grew to a few hours. But it stopped. I could no longer summon the energy I needed to work full days of eight or more hours. And this was a problem. I had a design project to create and execute for my thesis. This very document. I needed to plan, read, research, reflect, synthesise, execute, and write. The topic had been very clear to me from the beginning, 'Design and Healing', and I was to start here — at this topic that had been with me since the summer of 2019. But I was looking for a way to focus it. As I explored Design and Healing, I was searching for how design as a process can support the healing process. I found examples of co-design and health, and many examples of environmental design of the built environment for healing in the form of hospitals, gardens, or landscapes.

I had heard of forest bathing to support the body’s immune system and recovery; there were also programmes in Scotland where doctors were prescribing time in nature (Carrell, 2018; Mason, 2020). I became interested in how forest bathing could support healing. In the end, I discovered that forest bathing was part of a bigger group of nature-based therapies, and the concept of nature therapy seemed more appropriate for this project. By taking a step back and utilising nature therapy, which has been shown to have an individual impact on stress recovery, I was able to have a much wider range of activities available for me to use in the prototype design probe.

How could design be a part of healing?

During an early meeting with my supervisor, the idea of the individual’s experience of healing came up in discussion. This was a thread that I wanted to pull on. At that stage, I had already settled on the idea of using the design probes as a method to conduct research into some combination of healing and forest bathing. I had initially considered using an autoethnographic method, journaling. I was aware of the potential risk of harm to participants in the probe process because of the probe’s intent to explore the experience with recovery. This guided me to be the only participant because while I could guarantee concrete mental health support for myself, I was not able to guarantee or provide it for other participants. But a part of me wanted to “do it properly” and run a full design probe study. Again, the reality of my mind and body brought me back to a completely self-contained process that I could execute by myself.

Probes have been found appropriate for investigating intimate spaces and moments where my presence as a researcher would disrupt that very experience (Mattelmäki, 2006). Probes allow for the participant to share their experiences in a range of ways determined by the designer through various tasks or exercises. The resulting data from a probe study can be novel and interesting when trying to shape or guide the design of a product or system (Mattelmäki, 2006). Ultimately, I saw this design probe as an opportunity to be used as both a research tool and a self-awareness tool for the participant. What I had learned and observed from my own use of journaling was personally very powerful and I thought about how I could translate that experience, so it was replicable for the participant of the probe.

Journaling is very much appropriate for a designer who wants to reflect on their creative process and document their own design activity (Pedgley, 2007). As I wanted to understand my ability and process of work on a design project, while recovering from burn-out, journaling allowed me to become a primary source of data for this thesis. Journaling also facilitated the project itself. It was a research method that was very complimentary for my thesis aims and objectives.

Tell me more about the design project then?

So, with the time I had available to me, I set out to document my experience of creating and executing a design project while also using that documentation as part of the design project. The objective of the design project was to create and test a prototype design probe that investigated my individual experience of burn-out recovery. I had intended to be the only participant to test this probe. This was for two reasons, firstly for me to fully engage in the recruitment, probing, and reviewing of participants required me to access energy and effort that was no longer there because of my burn-out. To conduct interviews and face-to-face research was going to drive me deeper into exhaustion. Secondly, to ensure I applied the best ethics of care, I was realistic with myself about my ability to provide mental health support for participants partaking in the probe study – and I was only able to provide myself with this support and not others. If somethings were to go wrong, I had a way to support myself. However, I did not have the time or resource to ensure a participant would be able to access appropriate and acute mental health support. The need to provide good mental health support to the participant is due to the emotional vulnerability that the probe was encouraging from the participant.

I set aside a six-week window to begin, document, and execute the project, beginning in the final week of September 2022 and ending in the first week of November 2022. I decided to take a gentle approach to my body. My advisor and I discussed the subject of my health before the commencement of the project, ensuring that this thesis and design project didn't contribute further to my own situation with burn-out. I was grateful for this very crucial and wise perspective. I reconsidered all my personal expectations and refocused the project to be kind and considerate to my well-being.

The journaling process allowed me to explore the limitations of my body and mind. I was able to freely express my situation, regardless of my health status. This allowed me to document my good days and bad days, whether I had made progress, or not. All of it was helpful data. I had developed a simple template to guide each of my journal entries. I took note of the entry time, and ask myself a question to start with, finally, I had a small to do list to help me get started with the work. In the end, the journaling facilitated the creation of the prototype probe, specifically by guiding the decision-making process in such a way that there was an awareness and sensitivity for the person that would be taking part in the probe. Now let's get on with the rest of this thesis.

Love you Imran and take time to rest after this <3 - end of log.

1.2. Thesis Aims & Objectives

1.2.1. Thesis Aims

The overall aim of this thesis was to document how I, as a burned-out designer, function and operate during a six-week design project with consideration for my situation with health and well-being. Concurrently, I observed how journaling can support and enrich my work as a design, the project, and my health situation.

1.2.2. Thesis Objectives

The **autoethnography** and **design project** had guiding objectives behind each of them. For **autoethnography** through journaling, there were two objectives, firstly to record one's own design activity; and secondly to record my experience of being a burned-out designer working again and observing the different interactions between my health and my work. The **design project** had three objectives, firstly to prototype a design probe that documented the experience of a person recovering from burn-out; secondly to field test the probe myself; and thirdly to create a set of instructions for how to use or apply the prototype design probe.

1.3. Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into nine chapters and are as follows:

Chapter 1. Introduction: the thesis begins with my final journal entry for the thesis, to give personal background context and discusses the thesis and design project itself. It is then followed by the thesis of the aims and objectives; and finally, the structure of this thesis.

Chapter 2. Literature Review: introduces themes and topics relevant to this thesis, including design and healing; burn-out and its recovery; nature therapy; and design probes.

Chapter 3. Methodology & Thesis Process: describes the guiding methodology of this thesis: Research through Design and autoethnography – the helpful approaches, methods available for analysis, and addressing the question of ethics. Subsequently, I go through my data gathering process where I outline journaling, and the prototype design probe design project.

Chapter 4. Empirical Findings: with a table, I outline the thematically coded insights from both journaling and provided a summary based on the table.

Chapter 5. Design Outcome: Prototype Probe: is an overview of the prototype probe itself that details the different components of the probe. There is greater detail provided about the prototype design probe's

activities, which are broken down into a table to better understand and outline them. This table shows the stated completion time, activity summary, and rationale behind the design decisions.

Chapter 6. Discussion: is where I review how the thesis held up against my aims and objectives. I also discuss interesting findings, limitations, and opportunities for further investigation.

Chapter 7. Conclusions: a summary and review of this thesis that bring together all of its elements.

Chapter 8. References: The list of all in-text citations that have been used in this thesis.

Chapter 9. Appendix 1: Prototype Probe: is a copy of the prototype design probe outline.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Design & Healing

Inspired by the topic of the 2019 Nordic Design Research Society’s (NORDES) 8th conference — “Who Cares?” (Nordes 2019, 2019), “Design & Healing” was a combination of topics that intrigued me. If design can be considered as a process (Mishra and Sandhu, 2021), and healing is a process of returning to good health, is there an opportunity for one to support the other? In this case design to support healing. While investigating for the specific key words “design and healing” on google scholar, I found that design has been applied in different context, such as healthcare (Daykin et al., 2008, 2008; Jones, 2013; Jussila, 2022), well-being (Ilstedt Hjelm, 2004; Keinonen, Vaajakallio and Honkonen, 2013; Craven et al., 2019), medicine (Birnbaum et al., 2015; Craddock et al., 2021; Mishra and Sandhu, 2021), and the built environment — including hospitals (Becker and Parsons, 2007), clinics (Roush, 2003), and landscapes & gardens (Jackson, 2003; Stigsdotter and Grahn, 2003; Marcus and Sachs, 2014; Fumagalli et al., 2020; Rodriguez Chavez, 2020).

I also found how certain design approaches, methods, and practices have been applied to the above-mentioned contexts of healing. I found that in these contexts researchers and designers apply Human-Centered Design approaches (Samaras and Horst, 2005; Bazzano *et al.*, 2017; Blynn *et al.*, 2021). The human-centered design methods also include co-design (Locock *et al.*, 2014; Springham and Robert, 2015; Ali *et al.*, 2019; Borgstrom and Barclay, 2019; Chamberlain *et al.*, 2019; Coy *et al.*, 2019; Haines *et al.*, 2019; Waroonkun, 2019; Fumagalli *et al.*, 2020; Lihoreau *et al.*, 2020; Lavrencic *et al.*, 2021; Park, 2021; Reid *et al.*, 2021), user-centered design (De Vito Dabbs *et al.*, 2009), participatory design (e.g., Clemensen et al., 2007; Cahill et al., 2017; Thamjamrassri et al., 2021), and service design (e.g., Patrício et al., 2020).

These results supported my idea that there is a potential to apply a human-centered design approach in the context of a healing. Furthermore, the work of Renedo-Illarregi, Alexiou and Zamenopoulos (2022) shows through a conceptual frame that co-design can be considered as — at an individual, systems, and social level — a healing practice.

2.2. Burn-out & its Recovery

Currently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2019, para. 1) classifies burn-out as an “occupational phenomenon” and “not classified as a medical

condition”. As stated in International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (2019, quoted by the World Health Organisation WHO, 2019 para. 4-6), burn-out is defined in the in the following way:

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.

Burn-out is a phenomenon that is an individually experienced and not collectively. The level of burn-out varies person-to-person, based on the emotional stability of the individual and the environmental context in their work and life (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). Burn-out indicates the well-being of a person over a longer term and can be noticed if a person is experiencing elevated levels of “exhaustion and disengagement toward the job” (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014, p. 304). The extended exposure to enduring job demands can potentially exhaust the person, leading to health problems (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). This is especially the case when individuals are not adequately recovering from their daily efforts at work, thus preventing them from having sufficient resources to face the next day of work (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). If this depletion continues, without being addressed, the potential of “long-term chronic health problems such as prolonged fatigue, chronic tensions, and sleep deprivation” (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014) may materialise .

While burn-out is a result of combined and prolonged effort form the individual and environmental demands – without sufficient time for recovery – it can be addressed and resolved. There are three means to recover from burn-out as reviewed by Oerlemans and Bakker (2014) in the form of low-effort activities, social activities, and physical activities.

Low-effort activities: Low-effort activities require little, if any, energy to do. They include activities such as resting, relaxing on the couch, and napping (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). Low-effort activities may be best applied for people experiencing higher levels of burn-out because they allow the person to recharge the physical and mental resources necessary to return to working (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). Low-effort activities are best suited for those who experience higher level of burn-out; whereas those with

lower levels of burn-out may find more value in engaging in the other two means of recovery (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014).

Social activities: time spent outside of work with friends or family can support the recovery of a person experiencing high levels of burn-out, whereby they can potentially engage in conversations that have meaning (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014).

Physical activities: this recovery mode has a positive impact on people experiencing all levels of burn-out. Physical activities can increase “physical vigor [sic], cognitive liveliness, and recovery” (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014, p. 303). However, there is a risk that those with higher levels of burn-out may deplete their resources further if they are starting physical activities with little to no available resources and a high level of exhaustion (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014).

2.3. Nature Therapy

The definition of nature therapy is best stated by Miyazaki, Song, Ikei (2015 quoted by Song, Ikei and Miyazaki, 2016, p. 2) as “a set of practices aimed at achieving ‘preventive medical effects’ through exposure to natural stimuli that render a state of physiological relaxation and boost the weakened immune functions to prevent diseases”.

Through exposure to nature, the aim of nature therapy is for the individual to attain a state of relaxation that supports physical relaxation and immune system healing, along with preventing illness and sustaining and improving health overall (Song, Ikei and Miyazaki, 2016). The empirical research findings show an improvement in blood pressure measurements and documented heart rate, coinciding with participants having an increased sense of relaxation engaging in nature therapy – thus reaffirming the importance of maintaining a connection with nature (Hansen, Jones and Tocchini, 2017). This is further supported by existing literature on the “comprehensive health benefits of exposure to nature and green environments on human systems” (Hansen, Jones and Tocchini, 2017, p. 1).

There is a range of practices that have been outlined and reviewed by Song, Ikei, and Miyazaki (2016) and Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini (2017) to be considered nature therapy, these are forest therapy; urban green space therapy; plant therapy; and wooden material therapy.

Forest therapy: Shinrin-Yoku is a traditional Japanese practice, also known as forest bathing, whereby the individual is immersed in nature through the mindful use of all five senses. It can be as simple as “visiting a forest and breathing its air” (Antonelli, Barbieri and Donelli, 2019, p. 1).

Urban Green Space Therapy includes man-made parks, landscapes, or gardens where an individual spends time, passively or actively. The former, from sitting and observing the space and its natural features; and the latter, through gardening or walking through the space.

Plant Therapy involves observing a living foliage plant or fresh flowers, this therapy utilised both visual and olfactory stimulation.

Wooden Material Therapy is rooted in interactions with wooden materials, though a combination of tactile, visual, and olfactory stimulation.

A notable mention is of General Practitioners of Medicine from Scotland piloting the prescription of time in nature — such as “birdwatching, rambling, and beach walks” (Carrell, 2018, para. 1) — to patients experiencing chronic and debilitating illnesses. This approach was expanded from Shetland, in 2017, to Edinburgh, in 2020 (Mason, 2020).

Despite the ease of accessing nature therapy, the studies so far come with limitations. Primarily, the length of time that individuals are stimulated by nature, the lack of longitudinal data collection, and the sample size being limited (Song, Ikei and Miyazaki, 2016; Hansen, Jones and Tocchini, 2017).

2.4. Design Probes

Design probes are a “design-oriented self-documentation method” (Mattelmäki, Lucero and Lee, 2016, p. 34) that are part of a user-centered approach for gaining a better understanding of human phenomena while also exploring design opportunities (Mattelmäki, 2006). Probes also aim to develop empathic and subjective insights of other participants such as collaborative experts and designers (Mattelmäki, 2008).

As summarised by Mattelmäki (2006, p. 58), there are four reasons for probing, (1) inspiration, whereby probes foster and supports the inspiration of the team or designer (Mattelmäki, 2006); (2) information, where probes facilitate the collection of information about the experiences, attitudes, and needs of possible users (Mattelmäki, 2006); (3) participation, as a means to assist the user in the process of design, gathering data and information, and of communicating needs and desires (Mattelmäki, 2006); and (4) dialogue, from the probing process, and probes themselves, there is an opportunity for dialogue to emerge from meetings between user and designer or within a research team (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Design probes are usually deployed in the form of a kit in situations where the presence of the researcher would be problematic (Mattelmäki, 2006). Probe kits are comprised of various tools relating to the topic of investigation by the researcher. These tools may include, but are not limited to, things such as a pen, paper, disposable cameras, task lists for the user, journal pages, and other means to record and document the user’s

observations, feelings, and actions relative to the designer's topic of inquiry (Mattelmäki, Lucero and Lee, 2016).

Mattelmäki (2006) outlines five steps for applying design probes. These steps have been tested and generally accepted for probing that helps guide the overall data collection process (Mattelmäki, 2006). The steps are step one, tuning in; step two, reaching out to the target group; step three, designing the probes; step four, a follow-up of the probe material in an interview; and step five, interpretations, and results.

Step 1: Tuning in – this first step is about familiarisation with the subject area and to help establish who might be best to participate in the probe study (Mattelmäki, 2006). In this step, the designer applying design probes can begin to focus the subject and user-centered perspectives through ideation and discussions with others, such as key people or experts in the area, about existing themes and literature (Mattelmäki, 2006). Alternatively, there is an opportunity through self-assessment of experience and preconceived notions to support the focusing of the design probe (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Step 2: Reaching out to the target group – the designer can begin with one person as there are practical factors due to the nature of the probe's goal in understanding the individual experience (Mattelmäki, 2006). Keeping the group size small will help reduce the amount of time needed for the logistics and execution of later steps for the design probe. An ideal group size in the end is between five and ten, as data from probes are determined by the level of engagement and commitment of the person participating (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Step 3: Designing the probes – the third step can be taken concurrently with the first two steps. In this step, the designer should consider factors and potential problems, including questions and decisions about the nature of the probe; its purpose; properties of tasks within the probe; and the practicalities around the use of the probe kits, such as the process of giving and returning them (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Step 4: A follow-up of the probe material in an interview – depending on the intended use and sufficiency for the designer's application of the data, a personal interview is a well-used method to expand and support insights and points of inspiration from the data itself (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Step 5: Interpretations and results – the collected data and materials can be processed and interpreted as qualitative research by drawing out any threads, commonalities and divergences that give you a better picture of the subject area of inquiry (Mattelmäki, 2006). This is the moment for sense-making, interpretation or defining of the results (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Lee’s (2014) understanding of method-making is very applicable to this thesis, both as a reasoning for using design probes and documenting one’s own design work:

Method-making can be understood as a form of articulated introspection into what the designers already knows, through iterative externalisations of what the designer wants to know in relationship to an instrumental goal. (Lee, 2014, p. 5.10)

The introspection that Lee (2014) mentions above further supports this thesis’ choice of methodology, Research through Design, which I will go into further detail in the following chapter, 3. Methodology & Thesis Process.

3. Methodology & Thesis Process

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Research Through Design

In preparation for this thesis, I began to review different design research methods and their underlying methodologies. I selected the methodology of Research through Design because it most closely resembled a design project but focused on the understanding and knowledge gained from the process and not the final artefact (Feast and Melles, 2010; Godin and Zahedi, 2014; Lee, Koskinen and Whalen, 2020). An artefact created during Research through Design is not completely articulated, thus, allowing the design researcher to learn through conversation with context they are in, allowing for the unpredictability of the design process (Godin and Zahedi, 2014).

On a micro level, Research through Design balances the flow between research interests and design interests thought coupling, allowing the two sets of interests to come together; interweaving, letting these interests influence one another; and finally decoupling, the separation of these sets of interests so that each interest can be properly focused on (Basballe and Halskov, 2012; Godin and Zahedi, 2014).

There are limitations that must be considered and remembered when planning and executing Research through Design, these are summarized by Godin and Zahedi, (2014):

The Knowledge, Not the Product – the making, creating, or designing of an artefact has an embodied knowledge and understanding, and the designer must remember that the goal of Research through Design is the knowledge and understanding (Godin and Zahedi, 2014).

Tacit Knowledge – the nature of designer’s tacit knowledge may become an issue. As tacit knowledge’s intangible nature needs to be kept in mind when it needs to be articulated at a later stage; for example, when teaching or conducting research (Åman, Andersson and Hobday, 2017).

Timeframe – the research project needs to support the design project’s nature to unfold itself – revealing all of its steps, components, decisions, and outcomes – with shorter time spans challenging the impact of the results and limiting the possible knowledge and understanding (Godin and Zahedi, 2014).

3.1.2. Recording One’s Own Design Activity Through Autoethnography

Recording one's own design activity in Research through Design is important as a documentation and process reflection tool (Godin and Zahedi, 2014). Pedgley (2007) discusses many valid approaches and techniques to consistent and rigorous documentation during a design project. For me, exploring autoethnography offered an opportunity to both record my own design activity, while also observing and situating my experience in the wider social and cultural context (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). For example, regarding design projects, burn-out, and my work as a designer; especially how these three aspects interweave with my sociological and economic existence in this time and space, were kept in mind.

What is autoethnography?

Considered a qualitative methodology, autoethnography relies on several established qualitative methodologies, such as autobiography, ethnography, narrative research and arts-based research (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). Having emerged from postmodern philosophy — where different means of knowing and inquiring are considered legitimate in relation to the past forms of traditional science (Wall, 2008) — autoethnography allows, and gives the researcher, an opportunity to voice their own experience. The personal experience is the base unit of analysis (Wall, 2008; Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). A quote that summarises autoethnography that I find very apt for this design thesis is from Carolyn Ellis (2013, p.10):

For most of us, autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses [sic], fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and what we want to be.

As this thesis has sought to review my own work practices objectively in relation to my health, what Ellis (2013) articulates is the underlying reason for applying autoethnography as a tool to record my own design work. Autoethnography also offered an opportunity to structurally document the interactions of many aspects of my existence, while offering a means to critically review what I documented. Ultimately, with the hope to gain an objective insight into the facets of my approach to working during recovery from severe exhaustion from employment-based burn-out.

Where to begin?

Focusing the qualitative research project is greatly helped by defining the question and aim of the autoethnography, keeping in mind that the autoethnography is a kind of cultural analysis (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). In formulating this research aim, you can be guided by such questions raised by Cooper and Lilyea (2022, p. 198) “what is the cultural issue/feature you would like to address, what is it that you want to learn through your study, and what is the aspect of your own lived experience that you are interested in exploring?” As this thesis is documenting the interaction between health and work, the autoethnography had to include how prioritising my health and recovery impacted me as a designer and personally.

Collecting the data

As I was the primary source of data, I had a few ways to collect my own data. I considered the technique of self-observations through ethnographic field notes and jottings, as discussed by Cooper and Lilyea (2022, p. 199) to be appropriate for this design thesis. This created and provided journal entries with “self-reflective data” (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022, p. 199) that both integrated with and supported my work as a designer. Pedgley (2007, p. 473, tbl. 3) recommends seven practices for a designer to consider while keeping a record of your own design activity, these are, (1) chronology, the sequential recounting of how things happened; (2) clarity, ensuring a means to easily review the entries, mainly through clarity of articulation; (3) focus, to keep entries concise; (4) record images, document through still or moving image of your progress if necessary; (5) out of hours, finding a way to note down things that happen outside of working times; (6) diary admin, ensure that all pages or sheets are marked with clear dates and any numbering; (7) modelling admin, to clearly document and label prototypes or models for easy review later.

Analysing data

As articulated by Cooper & Lilyea (2022), autoethnography draws from a few different qualitative research tools, with the analysis techniques also available to be drawn from. I considered the following areas:

General, descriptive qualitative research: This type of research has a descriptive focus, acknowledging subjective meaning-making, and exploring human experience, and can be applied from qualitative research as analytical tools for autoethnographic data (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). Furthermore the analysis can be done through such qualitative coding

methods as thematic coding, descriptive coding, emotion coding, initial coding, and in vivo coding (Saldaña (2010) as cited by Cooper and Lilyea, 2022, p. 201).

Ethnographic research: this type of research provides analytical tools from ethnography such as content analysis, key events, crystallization, various types of visual representations, pattern recognition and triangulation that can be applied (Fetterman (2020) as cited by Cooper and Lilyea, 2022, p. 202).

Narrative inquiry: sense-making is an important part of narrative inquiry, whereby the analysis focuses on the story telling that is taking place in the writing allowing for a way to interpret the experiences (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). The clarity of resolution in the story telling does not have to be forced, having tension is also an opportunity for insights (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022).

Arts-based qualitative research: autobiographic research can place the researcher close to their own data (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). Arts-based research offers practices and processes, such as poetry, dramatic reading, photography, dance, or collage to create distance between researcher and data (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022).

While it's possible to use data in several form during an autoethnographic study, this added complexity can be beneficial to the research findings. The findings can both be enriched and triangulated if needed, in order to help keep things on track, while helping to maintaining a good level of quality (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022).

3.2. Ethics of Care

Cooper and Lilyea (2022, p. 204) state that “both a relational ethic and an ethic of personal care are important throughout the autoethnographic process including the design, development, and sharing of the research.” To ensure both a personal and relational ethics of care, I created a thesis that was ‘self-contained’ — in that I was both designer and primary participant.

To ensure personal ethics of care, I established regular sessions of talk therapy to support my mental health before the commencement of the thesis, and continued throughout. Allowing me to freely explore the process of journaling and re-entering the design project space with the knowing that help was regularly, and easily accessible.

To ensure relational ethics of care, the raw data from journals, notes, sketches will not be published. It was important to protect both those closest to me, family, friends, and the readers of this thesis. For those closest to me, I did not want their private experiences to be shared publicly; and for the readers of this thesis, due to the topics raised in the data, there is a risk of

harm psychologically. Managing this harm would require me to establish a clear pathway to mental health support for the reader to ensure their safety. Alternatively, to ask a reader to agree and accept to the risk in writing before reviewing the data still does not entirely mitigate any harm to the reader.

In my analysis, any terms, phrases, or motifs that were potentially harmful have been filtered out through summarising each week by thematic category.

3.3. Thesis Process

3.3.1. Overview

The thesis had an initial literature collection phase followed by a six-week design project. During these six-weeks, I aimed to design a prototype design probe while documenting my design activity and personal experience through journaling. The final design outcome was a prototype probe in the form of a Microsoft Word document. Subsequently, as part of data analysis, I summarised the journal entries by week and then applied thematic coding to extract the four main themes. The themes were ‘prototype probe’, ‘journaling’, ‘design’, ‘well-being’. Throughout this process, I have been mindful of my health and recovery from burn-out. I made decisions about the work I did with a deep consideration for how my body and mind will be capable of managing the effort. If a part of the work was deemed too negative for my health and well-being, I took note of this limitation and prioritised my health.

3.3.2. Digital Tools

This project relied heavily on software and apps (applications) that are primarily intended for the desktop platform. Apps and software on the mobile phone platform were primarily used as a back-up. Table 1 presents that software I used.

Table 1 Digital tools and their purpose and platform of use

Software	Purpose		Platform	
	Journaling	Probe	Computer	Mobile Phone
<i>Microsoft OneNote</i>	Yes, primarily	Yes	Yes, primarily	No
<i>Microsoft Word</i>	No	Yes	Yes, primarily	No
<i>Telegram Application</i>	Yes, occasionally	No	Yes, data retrieval only	Yes, primarily
<i>Google Mail Application</i>	Yes, occasionally	No	Yes, data retrieval only	Yes, primarily
<i>Adobe InDesign</i>	No	Yes	Yes	No

3.3.3. Journaling

I applied journaling to support the process of documenting my design activity during the six-week design project. I also utilised the reflective nature of

journaling as an added tool as a designer, and human being recovering from burn-out. To help prompt my journal entries, I created and iterated a template that was used as a default “new page” in OneNote. In total I iterated five versions of this template with the aim of guiding my writing and getting the most out of me with minimal effort. While I tried to journal in one software, I had to improvise when I was not able to access my main computer. In this scenarios, I reverted to telegram and google mail on my mobile phone to write a note or journal entry.

From the beginning, I wanted to keep my journaling consistent. So, if needed, I could easily analyse the data. I mainly journaled at the beginning of every working session, with only a few occasions when I journaled during or after a session. Some days I would only have energy to journal, and I did not follow-up immediately, or later, with a work session. In those instances, I did not make any progress on the prototype design probe, or any research related to the prototype probe.

I journaled before each work session to empty my mind and help process recent experiences, emotions, and thoughts. On a few occasions, my journal entries were used as a tool to document decisions during a work session. If I had any remaining energy, the journal was a space for me to debrief after a work session. This process of debriefing allowed me to process thoughts, ideas, or feelings that surfaced during the work itself. It was during debriefing that reflections around how I approached work, how I felt about work, and what I noticed about myself – my body, my emotions, and my mental state – began to surface.

In total, there were 20 individual journal logs, beginning from the 27th of September 2022 to the 25th of November 2022. The logs were organised and collated into six different weeks to help keep track of time and progress. The most number of entries in one week was four logs in weeks two and six, with the lowest being three logs in weeks one, three, four and five. In total there were 11853 words written over 33 pages of journal logs.

3.3.4. Prototype Design Probe

The prototype design probe sought to follow the set of five steps articulated by Mattelmäki, (2006) and discussed in section 2.4 Design Probes. However, with consideration to my health and limited capabilities to conduct the full five steps, I only used the first three steps during the design project. I intended to consider steps four and five as part of the potential guide for how to use the prototype probe.

Throughout the design project, I focused my energy on tuning in (step 1) and designing the probes (step 3); with the thesis being self-contained, reaching out to the target group (step 2) had been decided before the design project began. To some degree, as part of tuning in, I combined step 1 & 3 as

I journaled. Subsequently, my experiences of burn-out that were articulated in the journaling, guided some of my decisions when designing the probe. I had the objective to design a complete probe kit with instructions as part of the design project. However, this final objective did not come into fruition, and I did not include steps 4 & 5 as desired, nor complete the probe kit and instructions.

Overall, my process was not linear, because after completing a part of the work, I would return to the journal before continuing with the work. Depending on my energy levels, I did my best to follow where I found inspiration, or motivation, to work. One day I would be motivated to work on the text of the probe. While other days, I was drawn towards a more visual approach to working. I did not force myself to work in a linear pattern but allowed the various pieces of information I had gathered and reflected on, to be internally processed and synthesised, until they were ready to be articulated.

Step 1. Tuning In / Probe Outline

I tuned in through journaling. I was able to come to a few realisations about the way I work and function after living in a burned-out state. A few key examples were that reading text triggered a heightened level of stress in my body; I realised that I had a greater sensitivity to certain words and concepts, which would have a stressful effect on me; and I had initially written my journal with an audience – specifically a medical professional – in mind. These, along with a few other experiences, inspired me to create activities for the probe. I was able to create an outline with five different activities and the list of tools I would need for the probe kit. The five activities that I outlined were:

1. **Journaling from different perspectives:** This task was derived from my realisation about how I was writing in my journal. That I had been writing with the mindset that I would need to show this or describe my experience to a doctor or an audience. After I realised that having an audience was both limiting but also freeing, I was inspired to create a task that asked the participant to shortly write about their healing journey to different audiences. My intention was to facilitate an understanding and awareness for the participant, specifically about the limitations they may be putting on their own narrative and healing experience.
2. **Mapping stress levels:** I noticed that my stress levels rose after any reading task and session. This awareness helped me to identify a problem area in my life and reconsider it. The intention of this task is to help the participant take a step back and review their daily activities and become aware of the stress profile of their day. Are there certain

events or activities that cause more, or less, stress than others? Once a person has such awareness, it is possible for them to reflect on the event and its positive or negative consequences on their well-being.

3. **Nature therapy:** As nature therapy is a positive activity for stress recovery, I wanted to incorporate it into the probe. This task was inspired by initial reading into forest bathing and nature therapy. From Hansen, Jones and Tocchini (2017) I saw that nature therapy comes in many forms. Therefore, I considered that by proposing diverse options for nature therapy activities, the probe could accommodate differing availability of time and of transportation a participant might have. For example, observing a living plant may be quite an easy task to do, as it could be done at home, a friend's home, in a hardware store, or even in a public space, such as a café or restaurant. A trip to a forest can also be a good option if the participant has the means, access, and weather appropriate clothing. The idea was that providing options would make it smoother and easier for the participant to use the probe.
4. **Photographing the nature therapy:** After the participant completed a nature therapy activity, such as a trip to the forest, they are asked to take a photo, or — something that came to me later — drawing an image, along with a short-written description of the image. Images are a helpful prompts for the designer when interviewing after the probe kit has been returned, and very much support “Step 4: A follow-up of the probe material in an interview” (Mattelmäki, 2006, p. 86). Images accompanied by text are also helpful during the interpretation of results as they serve the purpose of prompting deeper questions in the follow-up interview, while also being another data point to analyse on its own.
5. **Body scanning exercise:** During week 4, my lower back had suffered severe pain and tightness that was heavily restricting my movement. This feeling of intense pain and the recovery from it reminded me of a body awareness technique I had tried years ago. And this was further reminded when I visited a massage therapist and had to very articulate about where I am experiencing tension or pain in my body. Being aware of the tension in my body inspired a guided meditation on “body scanning” for the participant to experience. This was followed by asking the participant to mark down, or draw, any sensations that they felt in their body. Again, I had the later steps of design probes in mind. While this data provides a great opportunity for discussion during the later steps of probing, it also allows the participant to develop an awareness of their body, its signals, and experiences. Potentially supporting the participant to identify any changes in their state due to stress. This compliments the mapping

stress levels activity and might be reflected in a change of engagement in the activities on the following days of the probe.

Along with these tasks, I outlined the supporting tools needed for the probe kit. They were:

- **A booklet** with the tasks where all the tasks would be and for the participant to fill out. I considered multiple booklets for each day, but decided a single booklet is most likely easier to manage, as less items are better.
- **An instant camera** with film, for example, Fuji Instax camera for the photographing of nature. I also thought this would be a lovely participant gift as they can use it to capture moments of joy in their life – such instructions would have been included.
- **A pen** to help participants write in the exercise book. Redundancy would be good, so multiple pens in the kit is ideal. I was considering at least one pen with two or four colours.
- **Extra space to write** because, at this initial outline stage I had not decided or considered if this should be in the form of an extra booklet, or extra pages within the main activity booklet.
- **An envelope or container** to contain all the items for the duration of the probe, and a means to return critical items, such as the booklet.

Step 3: Designing the Probe

A. Draft the Design Probe

At this stage, I began to organise the design probe and visually map out its pages. I planned how the pages would look, including their layout and order, along with the overall structure, flow of the booklet, and the items required in the probe kit. I did it using pen and text input in Microsoft OneNote. I listed the five tasks of the process. Then I made thumbnails of each page drawing how I wanted each page to be laid out. To help organise the chaos, I colour coded the sections, because I felt that they were thematically different and distinct from one another. I highlighted the journaling and mapping stress levels activities with green, the nature therapy and its documentation activity with purple, and the body scanning activity with yellow. I visualised all the pages and how they would flow because it would support making layouts in Adobe InDesign for finalising the visual design. I wanted to save myself some cognitive effort because visualising a draft before moving to software helps reduce my mental workload.

B. Finalising the Outline of Design Probe Booklet

In this stage, I reworked the probe outline while being mindful of tone and choice of words; I finalised the text to be ready for pasting into the Adobe InDesign at the visual layout stage. I also noted how to visualise certain aspects of the text. At this point, I realised that the terms and words in I was using in the probe could be stressful to the participant. I wanted to remove any stress that the booklet and probe activities could cause the participant, as they may already be trying their best to manage stress. This meant, I was doing my best to be mindful of the participant’s stress level while shaping and designing the probe. The outcome from being mindful of the participant’s stress level was a change of wording and general style of writing. For example, I changed “tasks” into “activities” and was mindful in how I wrote my introduction and activity texts.

As with my journaling, I viewed not attempting an activity to be as interesting as attempting the activity. This was also integrated into how I set-up the design probe in the introduction of the booklet. Hopefully, this perspective regarding attempting an activity will offer the designer an opportunity to dig deeper in the post-interview step of probing.

To expand on the decision to shift from the term “task” to “activity”, this was based on the realisation that the term “task” implies a requirement for the participant to “complete the task.” In comparison, to “attempt the activity” was written with consideration for the participant’s health situation and the intent to facilitate their autonomy to engage with any of the activities as they saw fit for their situation. I did not want the participant to feel obligated, and therefore make the process of participant in the design probe an additionally stressful process in their life.

Along with these two changes, I prioritised the activities in the probe so if it became overwhelming, they could engage with it as they felt comfortable to do so. I had decided to guide the participant to complete or attempt each activity a certain number of times. For each activity, these were:

- Section 1: Storytelling – daily;
- Section 2: Stress Level Review – daily;
- Section 3: A moment with nature – at least three times OR daily
- Section 4: Body Scanning – try at least once OR daily
- Section 5: Extra pages – as and when needed

C. Adobe InDesign Visual Layout

I attempted but did not complete this objective because I ran out of time and energy to translate the prototype design probe outline into a printed booklet layout. The only progress I made was to define the parameters of the document in InDesign, working on the paragraph style of the text and begin

to structure the base layout template of the document. At the beginning of the process, I had intended to streamline the layout work, by creating a master template for each day of activities. With the intent of easily applying the template to the different days with minor adjustments to the title text of each day.

Overall, I found this stage to be difficult and full of fear. The fear was grounded in my experience of working with InDesign, or most any design software; where I can disappear into four- or five-hour continuous working sessions without taking any breaks. Knowing my body now, a long work session without regular and frequent breaks, would leave me exhausted for more than one or two days. Reflecting on my style of working with visual layouts, surfaced a basic question about my capabilities to function as a designer in the future.

3.3.5. Analysis

I summarised the raw data, from my journal entries, by week and then analysed it by applying methods from narrative inquiry, ethnographic and general qualitative research approaches. I found that thematic coding allowed me to extract four main categories to group my insights from each week of journaling. Extracting my insights from the data was supported by sense-making, content analysis, and exploring the human experience, which allowed me to better understand the expression of the story telling and sort the data by category. The results of this process are expressed in Chapter 4. Empirical Findings.

4. Empirical Findings

From the analysis four thematic categories arose. The first category was ‘prototype probe’ which included key moments during the outlined probing steps, which includes decisions and their source of inspiration. The second category was ‘journaling’ which included learnings and understanding that arose specifically around journaling. The third category was ‘designer’ which included insights into how I work as a designer, such as workflow and time management, overcoming hurdles, and work-life balance. The fourth and final category was ‘well-being’ which included insights and realisations about my body, health, and overall well-being. The insights are presented in Table 2 by week and category.

A summary of the insights based on Table 2,

Prototype probe: looking at the numbers of this category shows that there was a total of 11 insights, totalling 157 words, over a 5-week period (no entries in week 1). The activities in the prototype probe were influenced and guided from my journaling and in what I learned from documenting my well-being. The probe’s participant centric viewpoint was supported by my experience of burn-out. This made me wonder if it’s possible to have a depth of consideration for people with burn-out without having experienced burn-out myself.

Journaling: looking at the numbers of this category shows that there was a total of 10 insights, totalling 185 words, over a 5-week period (no entries in week 3). At the beginning of the process, I was focusing on how to improve journaling to make the process efficient and less cognitively demanding. This was done by developing journal templates. There were also technical hurdles that had to be overcome, which were much harder to resolve since I had located my journaling in OneNote. A software for journaling that can be used on a computer and mobile platform is important to decide early on. It was interesting to note that journaling frequency was a reflection on my well-being.

Designer: looking at the numbers of this category shows that there was a total of 14 insights, totalling 274 words, over a 6-week period. I have a lot of fear related to various work tasks and goals, but I am trying different strategies to facilitate the work. For example, how and when I journal can mitigate the fear and focus me for a work session and move me through the fear. I also find that journaling has been used in a good way to support my work, as does taking time to rest. Both rest and journaling inspire ideas and improves my ability to engage in creative work. In the end, I can produce something, even if it’s not at the resolution I had hoped for.

Well-being: looking at the numbers of this category shows that there was a total of 17 insights, totalling 253 words, over a 6-week period. In Well-

being there is a clear theme around self-awareness and how I’m focusing on my overall health. I’m finding the boundaries of my limits, along with uncovering the root cause of the stress I’m experiencing during the project. It’s not so much the work that is causing the stress, but the managing of stress triggers along with the work itself. I can no longer energetically manage work and stress triggers; I can only do one of these at a time. My priorities have shifted, deciding to manage stress triggers before work. This positively affects both areas, with work a little worse off relative to well-being – as not all objectives were reached and completed.

By week: overall we can see an ebb and flow to my workflow if we look at the numbers by week. With peaks of insights in week 2 (11 insights), and week 5 (13 insights). The troughs took place directly after the peaks with week 3 and week 6 both only having 6 insights each. The word count also follows this trend.

Table 2 Key insights from journaling

Wk.	Prototype Probe	Journaling	Designer	Well-being
1.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structuring entries around a template made it easier to begin writing. Integrating short “to-do lists” helped to support doing work. Technical difficulties need to be sorted before starting to journal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journaling before beginning work sessions helped ease into work session. This mitigated the growing fear and anxiety about postponing the start of a working session. Journaling after a work session helped to decompress and leave the working session without guilt. One or two item to-do lists were powerful in focusing my work efforts if there was a lot of mental background noise from anxiety and fear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening to my body’s signals. Awareness around what I’m experiencing physically, and emotionally. Began to treat myself with gentleness around goals and expectations.
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First two weeks considered as “tuning in” step of designing a probe. Journal was helpful to “think aloud” and document ideas about the probe design. Inspiration to add an activity around storytelling to different audiences to the probe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A week of intense and longer journal entries. Short or no logs represent difficult health days. “Who is the audience when writing my journals?” was a key question to surface – this allowed me to journal with more honesty, rawness, and unfiltered-ness. Journal log beginning with a prompt to review the past 24 to 48 hours helped to unload recurring thoughts, anxieties, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorter, task-oriented journaling was supportive to work sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising victories or successes – small or large, progress is progress. Awareness around the limitations of my body is stronger – not pushing the body and mind when it has found a limit. Awareness around how I spend my time in my life on different areas.



	and fears. Easier to refocus the mind on the work and tasks at hand.		
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stress logging activity was based on my awareness around stress from reading. Finding inspiration for probe activities from nature therapy, literature on design probes, and my realisations from journaling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing journal entries help to inspire ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding space for others is incredibly energy intensive – there is a toll on the body. My batter for such things is non-existent these days. Beginning to discern the difference between my stress levels and what change them. Reading academic text caused a spike in stress. Seeing a hierarchy of energy usage – what is most important to spend your energy on first?
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situation with lower back pain helped to inspire the use of an awareness tool as an activity – body scanning via a guided meditation. With the time and energy available, I needed to be pragmatic about the visual design of the probe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not being able to sit/stand at a desk meant I had to revert to journaling on my phone. I used e-mail and a messaging app to record my thoughts. Consider a software that is multi-platform. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having not been able to sit or stand at a desk for three days meant I spent time resting and recovering. The more I rest, the more creative inspiration comes back to me. Considered including a mandated 3-hour “do nothing” break after work sessions. Sudden lower back pain reminded me about being “embodied” or being present in my body, as I had to be aware of every movement. Awareness about my body’s safety and boundaries increased. Stress responses of today are grounded in stressful experiences of the past.
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe is being looked at with a lens of participant’s experience during editing and refining. Less is more and focus to be put into the text over the visual design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult, or low energy, to change or improve from the journaling platform being used. The journaling process feels successful regardless of the “right” way to do it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visually drafting the prototype probe supports the more detailed articulation in text, a good way of working for me. Using my journaling to take a step back and place myself in Am excited by completing a project but must balance that with physiological and mental capabilities. Preparing for a trip to visit home and reviewing how that



<ul style="list-style-type: none">• My decisions are grounded in my own experience of burn-out	<p>the shoes of the probe participant.</p>	<p>will balance with my work progress.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Even small steps are big steps. Progress is progress, and work is building on this.• Going back to using design software (Adobe InDesign) is terrifying but manageable in the end.• Journaling has been very helpful to my design process• From journal: "Honestly, if I had not been through it, I'm not sure if I would have been able to design for it or to consider it in my approach and lens. Did I have to live through it to be empathetic of it?"	
<p>6.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A text outline is enough for a prototype probe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No journaling was done during this week in the main platform, two short notes in a messaging app.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• While my goals were not all met, I did end up with a prototype probe, showing that I am able to generate an outcome alongside my current health.• I struggled to manage personal life and work life. In the end prioritising my health and body first.• Spent this final week considering the "success" or "failure" of my project. The reality being that my measurement of success is harsh on myself.• Naming the fear helps to face the fear.

5. Design Outcome: Prototype Probe

The design outcome from the six-week project was a prototype probe that outlines the scope, intent, and use of the probe along with the activities that participants will be able to complete. It is broken down into an introduction section, outline of the activities that will be available for participants to attempt each day, and an outro to conclude the final experience with some instructions. Below is a summary of each section of the probe, with the full prototype probe available in Chapter 9. Appendix 1: Probe Prototype.

5.1 Introduction

The initial sections outline the key information related to the process, including key information about me, the designer of the probe kit and the main person who will be processing and reviewing the data. That is followed by outlining the context of the probe prototype and its purpose, the probe’s aim, and its contents. I then introduce what a probe kit is and how to use it. Importantly, I outline the variation and options for each activity – which participants can then choose from based on their level of energy and time. The introduction includes a reminder about expectations for and from the participant, with a request for them to prioritise their health and well-being. Finally, the introduction concludes with a note of gratitude and a sign off from me, the probe’s designer.

5.2 Daily Activities

The daily activities are outlined in five sections under a general “day #”. This indicates that the section is to be applied to each day section when visually designing and publishing the probe booklet. Each section is listed in Table 3, with an explanation of the completion aim – if it is every day, three or more times, one or more times; an activity summary; a rationale behind my decisions with selecting and designing the activity.

5.3 Outro

This is where I thanked the participants for their participation and included instructions on how to return the booklet, along with letting them know that the instant camera in the kit, along with all other materials was for them to keep as a gift.

Table 3 List of sections under daily activities

Section	Completion Aim	Activity Summary	Rationale
1. Storytelling	Daily	They are invited to write a story about their burn-out recovery journey with a different reader in mind each day. It begins (day 1) and ends (day 5) with telling a story to themselves, with days 2 to 4 is told to a different person.	The purpose of writing to yourself in the first and last day of the probe, is to help the participant reflect and notice if there is any change in their story telling after having to narrate it to a third person. “Storytelling” was chosen because, from my personal experience of journaling, it can be considered a burdensome task. Telling a story means you must think about your audience, hopefully guiding you to be mindful of how your think about your experience.
2. Stress Level Review	Daily	This task asked them to list out three to five items that they have done in the past 24 hours, and rate them from 1 to 10. 1 being the most relaxed and easy, and 10 being the most stressful and difficult.	“Review” was selected because I wanted to evoke a sense of reflection. “Mapping”, while functionally accurate, is just that, a little too functional. While mapping can be a helpful activity to build awareness, reviewing fit the gentler tone I was intending. This task is linked to a realisation that came to me when I had to do a task and I felt my stress levels suddenly and intensely elevate. Understanding this helped me to see all my other tasks from this perspective of stress and effort.
3. A moment with nature	To be completed at least 3 times or daily depending on the period that the participant had selected for the probe.	This task asked them to select from a “menu” of nature therapies, but in such a way that it situated them in the task by using a prompt of “I want to...” then followed by the item, “...Walk amongst trees in a park or a trail near me.” They were also asked to select an intended amount of time, before being asked to note down the starting and finishing time and starting and finishing stress levels. Followed by a request to take a photo or draw their nature therapy. The participants are invited to write openly and honestly about their thoughts on the activity.	Nature therapy was selected as a task because it has been shown to have individual impact on relieving stress. The activity of taking a photo or drawing the nature therapy and describing it was integrated into this section, as they naturally happen together.



4. Body Scanning	To be attempted once, or daily depending on the period they've selected for the probe.	They are given a QR code or link to an audio recording of a guided meditation for scanning your body. It is complimented with an outline of the human form, front and back, to mark down any sensations that they have experienced.	This activity came about after I had experienced an attack of lower back pain during week three and four. I noticed my body deeply and how it hurt when I moved, meaning I had to pay attention to how I moved my body. This bodily awareness is something I have cultivated through activities such as body scanning.
5. Extra pages	As needed	These were extra pages with ruled lines for writing if the provided spaces on each activity were insufficient.	A decision was made to keep the extra pages at the end of each day because it would be easier to keep the data closer to the context, helping the participant to be prompted while also helping with any data analysis later.

6. Discussion

6.1. Aims

Aims of the thesis:

The overall aim of this thesis was to document how I, as a burned-out designer, function and operate during a six-week design project with consideration for my situation with health and well-being. Concurrently, I observed how journaling can support and enrich my work as a design, the project, and my health situation.

This thesis was very illuminating for me as a designer. For the first time in my career as a designer, I consciously documented my own design activity through journaling. More so, it was more than just documenting my own design activity, it was contextualised by documenting my mental health and physical health concurrently. The insights relating to the theme “designer” reiterate to me that there have been many learnings through this approach. Being considerate of my health has helped me to find a balance between burn-out and a need to continue doing work. If anything, this has shown me a new way of working that better harmonises my health situation with the tasks I have at hand. However, going forward, things such as fixed delivery time scales may be problematic when trying to work with consideration and consciousness of my health.

The thesis has also raised the question of my role in the design project as both the ‘designer’ and ‘user’ [participant]. While being both may not present me with the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with an external user and therefore expand my learning from outside of my own experience; the journaling may have taken that place during the method-making phase and facilitated learning of new knowledge based on reflective insights. Interestingly, the probes themselves support and activate inner dialogue (Mattelmäki, 2006), and because I have been applying my experience — both as a designer and a burned-out human — to understand my ‘user’ [myself], I have been intertwining this betterment of understanding the user with the development of design empathy through the journaling. The insights gained from journaling both helped me deepen my awareness of myself as a user, but also as a person. The insights also were crucial to the method-making phase of the probe, that allowed me to co-design with myself a better awareness of my recovery experience, and overall awareness of my health.

6.2. Objectives

Objectives of the thesis:

The **autoethnography** and **design project** had guiding objectives behind each of them. For **autoethnography** through journaling, there were two objectives, firstly to record one’s own design activity; and secondly to record my experience of being a burned-out designer working again and observing the different interactions between my health and my work. The **design project** had three objectives, firstly to prototype a design probe that documented the experience of a person recovering from burn-out; secondly to field test the probe myself; and thirdly to create a set of instructions for how to use or apply the prototype design probe.

6.2.1. Autoethnography

Autoethnography through journaling method has been a helpful tool for self-reflection and documentation of design work. Journaling has been a self-reflective tool that has allowed me to unload what is on my mind to clear it for the work session. While journaling before a work session was helpful, journaling after was also helpful. Because by allowing me to review my design activity, I was able to better process, reflect, and take a step back from the work. By writing down what I have done with my reflections, has supported the resting period that comes after working, thus supporting my health.

The process of journaling was a learning curve, but I quickly found a good approach. Including prompts to the journal template greatly helped guide how I used the journals and subsequently helped how I worked. For example, the short to-do lists were helpful in distilling the most urgent and highest priority task for me to work on, giving my mind ease to focus and not be overly concerned with other tasks.

While autoethnography offers many analysis methods, I did not fully explore all the potential options, specifically arts-based qualitative research. While an interesting option to explore, within the time and scope of thesis writing, arts-based data analysis was not feasible for me to conduct. I have been reflection on the question of, “is the design probe prototype arts-based in and of itself?” From my understanding of what has been outlined by Cooper and Lilyea (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022), the prototype probe does not fall into any of the examples they provided – poetry, dramatic reading, photography, dance, or collage. However, from these examples, dramatic reading and collage may be the most accessible. But how do I manage relational and individual ethics of care if I were to use my raw data? Maybe though randomisation and anonymisation it may be possible. From an initial reflection, the very nature of the journal logs may fit dramatic reading quite

well, as the journal logs were written with some narrative reader in mine — whether it was a medical professional at the beginning, or, later, myself.

6.2.2. Design Project

With the first objective of the design project met, the creation of a prototype design probe, the second and third were not. Simply put, the thesis aims of considering my well-being throughout was the predominant factor behind not meeting the second and third objective. For me to complete a field test of the design probe kit, it would have required transforming the prototype probe into a fully designed probe kit. Unfortunately, I had run out of time and energy to do so within the six-week project.

The prototype design probe was not tested, and, therefore, I could not evaluate the success of the design decisions and considerations. For example, I currently lack insights from testing and receiving participant feedback on the probe. However, having combined the journaling process into the design process, has helped me to translate my personal experience from my burn-out into the probe through, for example, the choice of activities and language. A question that arose during journaling and method-making was,

Honestly, if I had not been through it, I'm not sure if I would have been able to design for it or to consider it in my approach and lens. Did I have to live through it to be empathetic of it?

This specific question speaks about the nature of human-centered design and the role of the designer. While I had initially thought that applying the design probe method in the thesis' design project was a “probe-as-recipe” approach (Lee, 2014, p. 5.3), what I have done in this thesis is engage in the method-making phase (Lee, 2014). In this method-making phase, I have been able to apply my [designer's] process of reflective sense-making through journaling and re-examination of my journal entries. Moreover, in the process of trying to fulfil the third objective, I discovered that the creation of the instructions required additional time and considering, which, on reflection, may not have been within the scope of this thesis at all. As the question of designers having awareness of sensitivity in method-making and method-in-action cannot be guaranteed, it might be more appropriate for another designer to start from the beginning and situate the development of a similar probe from their own design-led and local approach (Lee, 2014).

6.3. Limitations & Opportunities for Further Investigation

My research indicated the following questions that discuss limitations and opportunities for further research:

Does the prototype probe understand the experience of people recovering from burn-out?

This is a question that I was not able to answer because of prioritising and balancing my health and well-being throughout the thesis process and design project. While it may be tested at a future date with the right supporting documents and mental health specialists, the scope of this thesis explored the method-making phase of applying and customising design probes. With that said, a comparative study might be an option to explore. Whereby I compare my data of completing the prototype design probe myself, with that of other people completing the prototype design probe. Furthermore, to conduct another six-week design project with autoethnography, where the prototype probe is co-designed with a few relevant participants might generate data that can be used to compare with the previously proposed data set.

Are you trying to prove how effective nature therapy is?

While this thesis has recognised nature therapy as a recovery pathway, the thesis does not seek to prove or measure the effectiveness of nature therapy. There is an assumption made from the cited literature that nature therapy is, indeed, an effective means of stress reduction and generally supportive to an individual's immune system and well-being.

7. Conclusion

This thesis begins with a final journal entry that outlines the depth of burn-out I have experienced and am recovering from. The entry pondered on the recovery process and the possibility of design being a part of recovery. It also introduced the six-week design project process I have undertaken to prototype a design probe while applying an autoethnographic approach of journaling.

The topic of design & healing was the main inspiration for this work, with many examples of design being a part of healthcare and medicine in the form of co-design, user-centered design, participatory, and service design. My experience of burn-out and its recovery has also played a role in the selection of topics in this thesis, such as burn-out and nature therapy. Burn-out is individually experienced by people, and the level of burn-out varies, by person-to-person, based on the emotional stability and environmental context in work and life (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2014). Nature therapy relies upon stimuli from nature, which are aimed to support physiological relation and improve the immune system (Song, Ikei and Miyazaki, 2016). These stimuli from nature include being in the forest, urban green spaces, observing foliage plants or fresh flowers, and interacting with natural wooden materials. Design probes were considered a good intersection between the topics at hand, in that it allowed the application of a design process while trying to understand an individual’s experience of burn-out recovery. The method of design probes was suitable for a six-week design project as it has a well-articulated guide in applying and executing the method. The thesis focused on the method-making (Lee, 2014) phase of design probes which also offers an interesting opportunity for dialogue between the designer [me] and user [me].

One of the critical elements in this project was the use of autoethnography in the form of journaling. The use of autoethnography complimented the methodology of Research through Design, which guided the use of design probes; while supporting the documentation of my own design work — this is an important component of Research through Design. Personal and relational ethics of care have been applied. I have done this by firstly making the design-project and thesis a ‘self-contained’ process that was supported by regular attendance to talk therapy. The findings and empirical data were depersonalised to ensure that relational ethics of care have been applied. I did this by only presenting a table of key insights and its summary, along with the prototype probe outline. The empirical findings were analysed through thematic coding, sense-making, and content analysis, helping to finalise and contextualise the key insights learned from journaling into the four categories of, ‘prototype probe’, ‘journaling’, ‘designer’, and ‘well-being’. I summarised the prototype design probe into its core structure

of ‘introduction’, ‘daily activities’, and ‘outro’. The daily activities are best described through three categories of ‘completion aim’, ‘activity summary’ and the ‘rationale behind each activity’.

The ‘prototype probe’ category included insights about the process of prototyping which allowed me to see how my reflections from journaling supported my decision making, while also being reflective of that design process. The ‘journaling category’ held insights about the journaling process when applied in the context of design work while burned-out. The insights from category of ‘designer’ were looking at my professional experience, observations, and realisations relating to working as a designer. Finally, insights in the ‘well-being’ category indicated how the work was impacting on my body and mind, and vice versa – these insights also showed how my understanding and awareness of my health developed over the six-week design project.

The design outcome was summarised so that I could articulate it easier for smoother understanding and cleaner visual presentation. The three main sections of ‘introduction’, ‘daily activities’, and ‘outro’ helped me to outline the characteristics of each section. The first section of introduction was about clearly articulating to the participant how the probe sought to respect the boundaries of their health and my responsibilities as the designer. The second section of daily activities broke down the five sections into a table that articulates the completion aim, activity summary, and rationale. With the final section, outro, I was thanking the participants and then guiding them on how to proceed with the end of the kit and returning the materials.

Overall, the aims of this thesis were met. In that I was able to successfully document the six-week project’s process and learnings relating to my health and professional activity – while also prioritising my health. The three objectives of the thesis were not all met, primarily because I met the aim of considering my health throughout the thesis process. The first objective of creating a prototype probe was met, the subsequent objectives of testing the probe and writing instructions were not completed. In addition to this, the instructions were not deemed within the scope of this thesis.

In the end, the journaling was a beneficial process to managing my health as a design practitioner and helpful in supporting the design activity I had engaged in. The prototype design probe was also an articulation of the culmination of autoethnography and Research through Design. Whereby the design of the prototype integrated the knowledge and understandings gained from journaling.

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9. Appendix 1: Prototype Probe

Title Page:

Burn-out Recovery Journey Design Probe Kit

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Introduction Section:

Hello and welcome!

Thank you for taking part of my study! This design probe is being developed as part of my master's thesis in the Collaborative & Industrial Design programme at Aalto University.

What is a design probe you ask? A design probe kit is a tool used by design researchers to gain insights into how you experience different aspects of a product, service, process, or environment that they are researching. (Check definition).

This specific design probe kit is interested in learning more about your recovery journey with burn-out, with an emphasis how you experience nature therapy.

The design probe kit is designed to be completed in five sequential days to your best ability.

As this probe kit may be an addition to your daily life, it is understandable if not all activities can be completed each day, or any day at all. Please know that an attempt is sufficient, even if it's as simple as saying "I did not have the energy to complete this activity today".

Option if you need more time....:

This design probe can be completed over a longer period, say two weeks or one month. Please make a note of the date you started each day on the Day number page, a place has been made for this! Also, as you will have more time, I suggest completing all activities for each day.

I will now break down the contents and the activities of this probe kit:

This design probe kit comes with a few things, including this booklet, these are:

- Design Probe task booklet
- Extra A4 papers that include:
 - the consent form,
 - explanation and overview of the research project
 - Instructions on how to use and return the probe kit
- 3 Pens
- Instax Instant Camera
- 10 Pack of Instax Instant Film
- Extra strips double-sided tape
- ~~Mini stapler~~
- Glue stick
- Paid return envelope
- Probe kit delivery & storage box

In this booklet there are four activities,

Two are for completing daily

One is for completing at least 3 times*

One is to be attempted once*

**Or daily for those who choose to complete the probe over a longer period, two to four weeks*

The book is broken down into five days, with all four activities being outlined for each day. There are extra pages at the end of each day if you need more space to write/draw/express.

Please do as much as you feel comfortable doing over the next five days.

Remember that not completing something is also interesting and helpful data for my research! If you did not get a chance to do a task, and you do have some

mental space and energy remaining, please write a short note about your situation and why you were not able to complete the task. If you find any part of this probe confusing, please make a note of it, and complete an activity to your best understanding and interpretation.

Finally, this design probe kit is free from judgement and shame. You are not being evaluated on your ability to complete any of these activities. They are here as a window into your experience, both for me and you. I have intended this probe to be a safe space for you to momentarily engage in your vulnerability at a level you are happy to explore and share, while also being a mirror for you to support your growing awareness about your own journey.

Thank you taking part and I'm looking forward to seeing you at the end of the booklet!

With love,
Imran

Day No. #

Section 1: Storytelling (Daily)

I'd really like to hear a story! Please write about your burn-out recovery journey. You can write about the journey so far and how it's going, or just how it's been today.

There is a twist with this activity, I will ask you to write for a different reader each time. The purpose of this is to see and understand what aspects you share when talking about your journey, and how you express it in each context.

Today's reader...

(Day 1) ... is you! Please write this entry for yourself, without any filters or self-restriction, feel free to express yourself as best you can!

(Day 2) ... is a doctor or medical professional. Please write this entry as if you were describing your experience to a doctor or medical professional. You don't need to identify who this person is, just keep them in mind while you write.

(Day 3) ... is a trusted/close person. Please write this entry as if you are describing your experience with someone you deeply trust. You don't need to identify who this person is, just keep them in mind while you write.

(Day 4) ... is a complete stranger or group of strangers. Please write this entry as if you were describing your experience to a total stranger or group of strangers.

(Day 5) ... is you! Please write this entry for yourself, without any filters or self-restriction, feel free to express yourself as best you can!

If you run out of space there are extra pages at the end of this day, or if you prefer to type, you can type this up and print it out – you can glue or tape it to this page or the pages at the end.

Activity:

- Write

Visual items:

- Dotted ruled lines (grey or faded black to be light on the page)

Section 2: Stress Level Review (Daily)

I'd really like to understand how your stress levels have been over the past 24 hours. Specifically, I'd like you to recall at least three to five activities/tasks/processes/errands/jobs/work items you've engaged with in that time and rate them with the scale below.

The stress scale goes from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most relaxed and easy, and 10 being the most stressful and difficult.

Activity:

- Item:
- Rating ___/10

Visual items:

- Item
- Rating out of 10, gradient? 1 to 10?

Section 3: A moment with nature (at least 3 times or daily depending on the time period you've selected for the design probe)

Nature therapy has become a very good means for supporting your recovery from stress. I'm really interested in how you experience nature therapy and that's why I'm asking you to try one from the list below. I know time is precious, so please also pick an amount of time that you will try to dedicate to your selected nature therapy, you can take into consideration the travel time required for one of the therapy options.

Today I want to...

- Walk amongst trees in a park or a trail near me
- Find a forest and sit/walk there
- Observe a living plant
- Walk beside a large body of water (lake/pond/ocean/sea)
- Visit a botanical garden

Amount of time:

- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes
- 60 minutes
- 90 minutes
- 120 minutes
- ___ minutes

Activity:

- Time started: ___
- Please note down your stress level between 1-10 at the beginning of the task
- Time ended: ___
- Please note down your stress level between 1-10 at the end of the task
- Please draw or take a photo of you chosen nature therapy.
- Please write a short description of what you chose and what you did. Feel free to include any thoughts that come to mind. There is no filter here and you are invited to be as open as you'd like!

Visual items:

- Time represented as circles/clocks
- Stress level scale 1 to 10
- Time started
- Time ended
- Graphics for each activity?
- Place to put the photo with double sided tape
- Box for photo/drawing

- Ruled line for writing

Section 4: Body Scanning (try this at least once or Daily depending on the time period you’ve selected for the design probe)

Body scanning is a way to review and understand how your body is feeling. A guided meditation is one way of helping you to “scan” your body and see if you are experiencing any sensations in any specific or general areas! If this is a practice you are familiar with, please feel free to follow the method you feel most comfortable with

Once you have, you have completed the body scanning, try to recall any sensations or specific points of awareness that you noticed. Please draw or mark these on the figures below.

There is space at the end if you feel comfortable expanding on any points, parts, or aspects that body scanning brought to your attention.

Activity:

- Listen to guided meditation on body scanning
- Draw on the figure where you feel any sensations, or where your awareness is drawn to

- Visual Items:

- QR Code link to guided meditation
- Human figures to draw on (Front/Back/Left/Right
 - Dotted lines for text

Section 5: Extra pages

Visual Items

- Extra pages to write on/draw.
- Dotted ruled lines
- Half page of dotted rules lines/half empty

Day 1 / Day 2 / Day 3 / Day 4 / Day 5

Sections 1 to 5

Visual items:

- Include blank date DD/MM/YYYY

Outro: Thank You!

THANK YOU!

Wonderful, you have reached the end of the design probe process! These past five days have been an opportunity for you to share a snapshot of your journey and experience during your recovery journey. This is an invaluable insight and hopefully it has provided you with a few opportunities to tune-in and reflect on your own journey – helping to grow your awareness.

With the enclosed pre-paid envelope, I please ask that you return this booklet via mail, along with any extra pages that you have used write/draw/express your experience during this design probe.

As a small thank you gift for participating, please keep the Fuji Instax camera for your own use! The supporting stationery is also yours to keep and use as you need.

Thank you again and wishing you the very best along this journey of recovery!

With Love,
Imran