

# Burnout: Helping the Helpers

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*Burnout is characterized as a syndrome of exhaustion resulting from negative self-concept, negative job attitudes, and loss of concern for clients. This state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion is usually caused by long-term exposure to demanding work situations.*

Burnout is the cumulative result of stress. Rosenberg & Pace (2006) described burnout as generally a process, rather than the experience of isolated symptoms. As such, one has to study this phenomena in all its entirety.

Recent research mentions burnout's multidimensional nature and explores intra-individual, interpersonal, and organizational aspects. Examples of these may be unrealistic therapeutic goals and expectations; long exposure and working with a particular category of 'challenging' clients (those presenting with chronic illness, severe problems, etc.). Moreover, clients who are resistant to change, those who seek involuntary help, and those have high expectations of their helpers, impose huge demands, notwithstanding risks, on physicians. As to job-related factors, the job setting, long work hours, sizeable caseloads, administrative 'red tape', and budgeting concerns, all can lead to a stressful life, easily leading to burnout.

## **Symptoms of Burnout**

Basically, burnout can present itself through various signs and symptoms, mainly through behavioral, physical, interpersonal and attitudinal signs. Behavioral symptoms are often shown through reduced work efficiency, substance abuse, other addictions, absenteeism, abnormal use of medications, increase of complaints, risks taking, accident proneness, and even suicide ideations and attempts. Physical symptoms may be chronic fatigue, lower resistance, colds, poor coordination, insomnia, muscular tension, hyperactivity, over/under eating, injuries, etc. Interpersonal symptoms may include: withdrawal (from family, friends, and other social activities normal to your lifestyle), immature interactions, loneliness, increased anger & mistrust. Finally, attitudinal symptoms may involve: depression, cynicism, compulsiveness, obsessive behavior, guilt, grandiosity, perfectionism, etc.

The following is a clear check list of the warning signs of burnout. Remember the main signs and symptoms that usually accompany a burnout state. Be true to yourself and check whether you can identify with any of the following:

- Wounded ideals
- Cynicism
- Feeling unappreciated or betrayed by own group
- Loss of spirit

- Grandiose belief about own importance
- Heroic but reckless behavior
- Neglecting personal safety & needs
- Mistrust of others
- Antisocial behaviors
- Excessive tiredness
- Inability to concentrate
- Symptoms of illness/disease
- Sleep problems
- Inefficiency
- Abuse of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco

## **A Practical Strategy against Burnout**

You can overcome burnout. But first you have to acknowledge it and understand what caused it. Burnout can result from:

- **Lack of control.** Perhaps you're unable to influence decisions that affect your job, such as which hours you'll work or which assignments you get. Perhaps you're unable to control the amount of work that comes in.
- **Unclear job expectations.** Examples include uncertainty over what degree of authority you have and not having the necessary resources to do your work.
- **Dysfunctional workplace dynamics.** Examples are working with an office bully, being undermined by colleagues or having a boss who micromanages your work.
- **Mismatch in values.** If your values differ from the way your company does business or handles employee grievances, it will wear on you.
- **Poor job fit.** Working in a job that poorly aligns with your interests and skills is certain to become more and more stressful over time.
- **Extremes of activity.** When a job is always monotonous or chaotic, you'll need constant energy to remain focused. Over time this energy drain can lead to burnout.

## **Is it time to take action?**

If you are a health care professional, and find yourself immersed so much in work that you lose any balance in life, striving to be everything to everyone, and your routine job becomes too monotonous and hard, you better start to slow down and seek

help, before it's too late. Like stress, burnout can have significant health consequences including fatigue, insomnia, weight gain or loss. It has the potential to put some people at increased risk of depression, anxiety and other emotional difficulties. And working in an environment that negatively affects your physical and mental health, can affect your personal life as well as your social one. After all, you cannot separate yourself from what you experience within you, from what goes on around you!

### **Caring for the needs of Helpers: Create supportive environment**

Recovery from burnout is possible, but it may require changes, adjustment, and time. Do not expect a quick fix. Keep an open mind and consider all your options. Do not let a demanding job affect your health. According to Bruce, Conaglen & Conaglen (2005), most respondents in their study favored one-to-one support system, in their struggle against burnout. This study highlighted the need to develop a preventative support system for the protection of physicians and the patients in their care. This is mainly due to the ever-increasingly demanding nature of their work. Besides the one-to-one approach, every place of work should be sensitive enough and practical as to offer multi-modal support services to its workers, keeping in mind that individuals differ in their likes, needs, and stress-tolerance. Availing of a multi-support system enhances more support and a sense of belonging within a place of work, while diminishing the likelihood of individualism or withdrawal. Places of work need to start, from the administration downwards, to provide a support network against burnout. An open and sharing organizational culture helps indeed. This may be backed up by frequent and regular staff meetings, in which respect be given for confidentiality issues.

A most useful and helpful target is the creation of a peer support system. Here, peers can offer support both informally and formally, through regular meetings in which, all members should ideally attend. A member acts as the facilitator, on a rotating and alternative system, so that all will have a chance. Group members may request input from peers on key problems.

### **Self-Help techniques**

Many individuals, particularly helping professionals, usually strive to face their own challenges by themselves. Like everything, this may be a two-edged sword. To be on the safe side, here are some self-help techniques, recommended by the International Red Cross, that may be wise to follow:

- Remember that your reactions are normal & unavoidable
- Be aware of your tension & try purposely to relax
- Talk to someone you trust if you cannot relax/sleep. Describe your feelings & thinking
- Use a healthy outlet: art, physical exercise, etc.
- Listen to what others close to you say about the work/experience at stake
- Take good – really good – care of yourself
- Continue to work on routine tasks, if it's too hard to do demanding tasks

- Do not self-medicate
- Go easy on yourself. Beware of perfectionism and grandiose self-ideas.
- Seek help if after few days/weeks, things remain the same or get worse.
- Seeking help is not a sign of weakness, but of courage and self-care.

### **Burnout Test**

Ask yourself these questions to see if you're experiencing signs and symptoms of burnout:

- Do you find yourself being more cynical, critical and sarcastic at work?
- Have you lost the ability to experience joy?
- Do you drag yourself into work and have trouble getting started once you arrive?
- Are you more irritable and less patient with co-workers, customers or clients?
- Do you feel that you face insurmountable barriers at work?
- Do you feel that you lack the energy to be consistently productive?
- Do you no longer feel satisfaction from your achievements?
- Do you have a hard time laughing at yourself?
- Are you tired of your co-workers asking if "you're OK"?
- Do you feel disillusioned about your job?
- Are you self-medicating — using food, drugs/alcohol — to get better or be numb?
- Have your sleep habits or appetite changed?
- Are you troubled by headaches, neck pain or lower back pain?

If you answered 'yes' to four or more of these questions, you may be experiencing burnout. You may also be depressed.

### **References & Further Reading**

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