

“Dealing with Professional Burnout”

Researchers who have studied the problem of burnout generally conclude that there are four basic stages of disillusionment that lead to burnout:

1) **Enthusiasm.**

- 1) You have high hopes and a high level of energy to devote to the job.
- 2) You feel as though your job will provide you with everything you need in life.
- 3) You have chosen a helping profession because you truly desire to be of help and service to others.
- 4) At this point, it's easy to believe that all satisfactions and rewards stem from your job-- your excitement over your job, has, however, simply obliterated some of the personal needs and concerns and deficiencies in other aspects of your life.
- 5) While most of this first stage is bliss, a few characteristics begin the road to burnout.
 - i) Your natural enthusiasm and energy may lead you to spend too much time and energy on the joy.
 - ii) You are likely to voluntarily overwork, putting in extra hours out of sheer enjoyment.
 - iii) Before you know what has happened, you are sapped of energy and enthusiasm.
- 6) Another characteristic leads to burnout: you tend to identify too much with the problems and situations of your clients or patients.
 - i) You find yourself “taking your work home.”
 - ii) You are unable to forget the battered wife, the young alcoholic, the small and timid victim of incest.
 - iii) It's extremely easy during this period of enthusiasm, dedication, and high hopes to emotionally take on the problems of others.
- 7) During the period of enthusiasm, your challenge is to walk a fine line between coping with discouragement and losing idealism.
 - i) You need to realize that you can be an effective counselor without making yourself available by phone all hours of the day and night.
 - ii) You need to realize that you can be a tremendous helper without agonizing over every client's pain.

2) **Stagnation.**

- 1) As the stage of enthusiasm wanes, you enter the stage of stagnation.
 - i) Your job has lost some of its thrill.
 - ii) You've lost the burst of hope and desire that kept you going through those hectic periods of enthusiasm.
- 2) One of the initial elements of stagnation is realizing that it's not easy to identify progress in the helping professions.
- 3) During the stage of stagnation, you become bewildered: why isn't the job what it once seemed to be?
- 4) During this stage, all these things combine; enough reality has come through to impress you that it really would be nice after all to have a little leisure time. A little money to spend. A home. A family. Some friends you could do things with away from the job.
- 5) Suddenly, issues like low pay, long working hours, dead-end career situations, casework overload, and low respect on the job become important.

3) **Frustration.**

- 1) You start out meeting others' needs; now you realize you have your own needs.
- 2) Overwhelming feeling during this stage:
 - i) What's the use?
 - ii) Why bother anymore?
 - iii) Why continue to work with people who resist your efforts to help them?
 - iv) Why agonize over the alcoholic's plight when you can't even get him to keep his appointments with you?
 - v) Why expend all this time and energy on other people when you yourself have so many needs?
- 3) It is during this stage of frustration that most of the physical, emotional, and social/behavioral signs and symptoms manifest themselves.
- 4) The stage of frustration provides a pivotal point in the burnout process: your reaction to the frustration determines whether you pull out of the burnout or not.
- 5) Frustration, by its very nature, creates energy. How you use that energy determines the outcome.
 - i) You can use it to take responsibility, confront the issues, and take action that will bring about positive changes, enabling you to keep working within the profession.
 - ii) Or you can use it to become frenzied and hysterical over the perceived shortcomings, eventually letting it defeat you.
 - iii) Or you can use it to completely withdraw from the situation--to avoid clients, to develop dislike or resentment, to foster feelings of despair over your inability to really make an impact, or to become physically exhausted.
- 6) During the stage of frustration, some people lose their idealism, walk away from their jobs, and then become angry and assertive, diving back into the center of things with renewed vigor. Some never muster up that anger and assertion, and they never emotionally return. They lapse into apathy.

4) **Apathy.**

- 1) Apathy is the most natural and common reaction to prolonged frustration.
- 2) It is a state of detachment that progressively results in an emotional withdrawal from the job, even though you keep the job.
 - i) Once you eagerly volunteered extra time; now you scarcely stand to put in the minimum required amount of time.
 - ii) Once you took on new challenges with gusto, now you avoid them.
 - iii) Once you eagerly looked forward to the chance to meet new clients and the chance to help change their lives, now you look for excuses to avoid them.
 - iv) Once you believed that all satisfactions stemmed from you job, now you realize that your job provides you with little or no satisfaction.
 - v) Once you felt as though you had no personal needs, now your personal needs are so overwhelming that you feel defeated by them.
- 3) Apathy is felt as boredom.
 - i) You become almost numb.
 - ii) You emotionally turn yourself off to to her people's needs.
 - iii) You stop caring about others and become preoccupied with preserving you own sanity, health, peace of mind, and very survival.
- 4) It is obvious that at some point, you need to move from the condition where you are

determined to be all things to all people.

- i) You need a healthy detachment to help you become a little more realistic as you settle into the routine.
 - ii) You need a more realistic approach as you determine exactly what you can and cannot do for people.
- 5) The apathy stage exaggerates detachment.
- i) Apathy isn't characterized by that healthy, necessary kind of detachment.
 - ii) It is characterized by severe detachment that compromises your ability to perform your job at all.
- 6) Apathy causes you to stay on the job for one reason: you need it to survive.
- i) You stop caring about your job.
 - ii) You see the problems, but you don't try to change them.
 - iii) You know that by taking a few risks you could regenerate some job satisfaction, but the risks aren't worth it to you.
 - iv) Your goal is not to help other people, but to take care of yourself.
- 7) Of all the stages of burnout, apathy is the most difficult to overcome.
- i) When you are disillusioned or stagnating or frustrated, it is easier to do things to pull out of it.
 - ii) When you enter the stage of apathy, it is difficult to recover.
- 8) It took you a long time to arrive at this point, and the feelings that brought you here are by now deep-seated and settled.
- 9) You have simply stopped caring--only a major upheaval or concerted efforts at intervention can intervene to keep that feeling from lasting forever.
- 5) **Hopelessness.**
- 1) While not recognized as a stage of burnout, hopelessness is the end result of burnout.
 - 2) It is the overwhelming desire to give up. To move on.
 - 3) It is the crushing realization that your dreams, hopes, goals, and idealistic notions about helping will not be realized.
 - 4) Hopelessness convinces you that you are no longer in control. It is the major cause of abandoning your profession.

Intervention

Intervention can take any of countless forms, and it can have a number of results.

- 1) It might mean leaving the profession and going on to something that is more satisfying.
- 2) It might mean changing jobs within the profession.
- 3) It might mean restructuring your own job description to address some of your concerns.
- 4) It might mean expanding your life outside your job.
- 5) It might mean taking a vacation so that you can sort out your frustrations and think of ways to solve them.
- 6) It might mean going back to school to spark your interest your curiosity.

Breaking the Burnout Cycle

- 1) Take the necessary steps to brush up on your knowledge or skills.
- 2) Learn to concentrate on the person who needs help.
 - 1) You only reason you're in the business is for the helpee
 - 2) The reason you become skilled is to help the helpee.
- 3) Develop what has been called **altruistic egoism**.
 - 1) That doesn't mean that you should be primarily selfish or recklessly selfish.
 - 2) What it means is that you maturely accept the fact that no one else will look after your own needs as well as you will.
- 4) Get some variety in your job.
- 5) Make sure that you get plenty of exercise. Choose a sport or activity that you truly enjoy and get involved.
- 6) Develop outside interests.
 - 1) Find a hobby you would enjoy.
 - 2) Take some classes at the community college.
 - 3) Get involved with a group.
 - 4) Make sure that it is not something that is similar to your job.
- 7) Develop some assertiveness skills.
- 8) Learn to appreciate others.
 - 1) You might be so preoccupied with your own frustrations that you fail to see what's going on around you.
 - 2) Start by verbalizing your appreciation.
 - 3) Once you start verbalizing, you'll find that feelings naturally follow.
- 9) Learn to say no. Do it with tact, but do it.
- 10) Get away from your work periodically.
- 11) Take a good look at what is causing you stress on your job.
- 12) Avoid the temptation to do things for other people that they can do for themselves.
- 13) When you take a break or socialize, avoid "shop talk." Instead, talk about other interesting things.
- 14) At the end of the day, remember the positive things of the day.
- 15) Avoid the temptation to put off distasteful or unpleasant tasks.
- 16) Delegate as much as you can; let others take on some of the responsibilities.
- 17) Schedule time during the day that you can be by yourself. Use the time anyway you want to.
- 18) Get plenty of rest.
- 19) When you have time off, make sure that it is truly time off. Make it clear that you will happily respond in cases of dire emergency when it is absolutely necessary but that you do not otherwise want to be called on business matters during your time off.
- 20) Take an interest in those with whom you work; learn about their hobbies, their families, their backgrounds.
- 21) Take a realistic look at your goals.
 - 1) Are they in line?
 - 2) Are they attainable?
 - 3) Realign your goals so that they are workable.
- 22) If you've been suffering from any physical problems, get a good physical checkup and advice from your doctor.
- 23) Make sure you're getting proper nutrition.
- 24) Increase the amount of leisure time you enjoy.

- 1) Learn to play hard.
 - 2) Get involved in recreational activities.
 - 3) Learn to do things for the sheer fun of it.
- 25) Talk to others about your distress.
- 1) Share your concerns with a spouse, loved one, clergyman, or trusted friend.
 - 2) Don't be afraid to admit that you are in trouble, and never be afraid to ask for help.