

# Burnout



## *Reading and Responding to the Signs*

*by Reg Alderman*

The very sound of the word burnout depicts exhaustion and fatigue, and in a very simple way, it is just that. To fully understand burnout, however, one must begin to see its many dimensions and how it affects every part of one's being.

Stress is the leading cause of burnout. The more stress a person is under, the more likely he or she is to experience burnout. If stress continues to increase, it leads to burnout. Some have compared a stressed person to a rubber band that is being stretched. When the pressure is released, the rubber band returns to normal. If stress continues, the rubber band eventually breaks. It is at this breaking point that burnout happens. If stress is reduced at any point, the process can be slowly reversed. If the stressors are not relieved and circumstances do not change, the result is burnout.

Depression is very common in burnout. People become depressed for a number of reasons, but one cannot experience full-blown

burnout and not be depressed. As depression sets in, it affects the body in a way that does not allow the brain to function as it should normally. Therefore, in full-blown burnout, a simple day off will not be sufficient in allowing recovery to occur. It often takes months to begin to reverse the process and sometimes years to learn to adjust one's schedule to begin a more healthy lifestyle.

Here are some warning signs to look for if you think you or someone else is experiencing over stress or potential burnout:

- Exhaustion
- Withdrawal
- Boredom and cynicism
- Increased impatience and irritability
- Change of work style
- Paranoia
- Physical complaints
- Depression
- Suicidal thinking

Each person will not have all of these warning signs. However, without some kind of change or intervention, things usually worsen. Because burnout involves

three major areas of life— physical, emotional and spiritual—one must concentrate on these areas so that burnout does not occur again.

**Physically**, one must begin an exercise program. It is always good to check with your doctor before starting any new exercise program, but exercise at least three days a week is usually helpful.

Eating a well-balanced diet and getting adequate sleep is imperative. Everyone requires a different amount of sleep, but most doctors recommend that at least eight hours per night is healthy. Even a few minutes of total relaxation in the middle of the day can be helpful.

**Emotionally**, there may be things that would be helped in counseling to surface any unrecognized emotions, or even uncover problems from childhood days or other incidents that may need healing. On a practical level, however, it is good to learn to laugh again. As simple as this may sound, it is extremely helpful and very biblical. The book of

Proverbs says "A wise man once compared a cheerful heart to good medicine" (Pr.17:22).

We must also keep check of how we give and receive information. How positive have we been? Are we continuing to hear things that are always negative, and are we always communicating negatively?

It is also helpful to live in the present. Because the experience of burnout is an emotionally traumatic time, there is much regret for what has happened up to this point. Therefore, the past sometimes is hard to forgive and we feel very guilty. At the same time, the future looks very bleak, hopeless, and helpless. Sometimes this vicious cycle can keep us from living in the joys of the present.

**Spiritually**, we must come again and crawl up in our heavenly Father's lap and let Him hold us and comfort us with His presence in a new and refreshing way. A clearly defined time for devotions and prayer is extremely

important, not only for dealing with what has happened through this emotionally traumatic time but also because all of us need the spiritual care that comes from reading God's Word and praying together. It often helps to involve others, a close friend, or several friends that can meet with you weekly for prayer and fellowship.

It is also helpful to find good Christian music. Music is wonderful for lifting the spirit and refocusing the mind. Music may be old hymns or new contemporary Christian songs that have enthusiastic beats and encouraging words.

Burnout is a physical, emotional, and spiritual experience. Be careful to see the warning signs of burnout and begin immediately trying to reverse the process. If you have not experienced burnout, be aware that it can affect anyone. If you have a friend who is going through a difficult time in his or her life, be an extension of the Holy Spirit to support them and walk with them, not against

them, and to encourage them during this time of crisis.

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