

## ADVICE



By Randy Bates, CAA

A career in high school athletic administration can be a very rewarding experience. Our profession is filled with those who truly have a passion for fostering sound values in young people through athletic opportunities in our schools.

In my 25-year career, I have noticed something happening to far too many of my colleagues. Some suffer, at times, with a feeling of what I call “**The Boiled Frog Syndrome.**” Perhaps, you have heard about how to cook a frog. It goes like this: place a frog in a large pot of warm water on a cold stove – frogs like water. Next, light the flame and adjust it gradually. As the temperature gradually rises, the frog hardly notices. The frog boils to death without even realizing that it is in danger.

Burnout is very similar. It comes on so gradually that a person may not recognize what has happened. But with awareness and action, we may be able to rebound.

### What is Burnout?

Burnout can be defined by the appearance of several symptoms, including irritability, anger, fatigue, anxiety and apathy. Unlike stress, burnout is not necessarily caused by having too much to do. Having a great deal to do is the nature of athletic administration. Rather, burnout is a result of an accumulation of demands combined with many unsuccessful attempts to resolve the demands. The prolonged stress and unrelenting fatigue lead to exhaustion, detachment from our work and cynicism toward activities and people. Over time, passion begins to wane, commitment lessens and work is no longer as rewarding as it once was.

Burnout happens to highly passionate and successful individuals who are committed to achievement and meaningful work, but who have encountered numerous obstacles that

simply outmatch their resources. The life of today’s athletic administrator is filled with countless checklists, fund-raising projects, parental complaints and liability issues to address. It is no wonder we find burnout among our ranks. However, with some understanding of the signs and conditions of burnout, one can help dispel the myth that it happens only to people who lack enthusiasm and commitment. Burnout affects people who are highly motivated, intelligent, hard-working and idealistic.

### Stages of Burnout

Burnout occurs in progressive and prolonged stages over time. There are three definable stages of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Not all persons will experience all of the stages at one time.

**Emotional Exhaustion:** Burnout is marked by accumulated fatigue. A warning sign of exhaustion is the inability to get a good night’s sleep. Some will resort to sleeping aids. Those who continually wake up feeling tired and find that additional rest and relaxation do not leave them feeling restored may be experiencing an early stage of burnout.

**Depersonalization:** In this second stage, people react by distancing themselves from their work and others. They may experience feeling of anxiety and tension. Their pleasure in life diminishes and they feel overwhelmed. Often times, they have less patience to face obstacles that they successfully overcame in the past. Sometimes, people in this stage can recuperate if given a prolonged time for rest combined with activities that help them reconnect with passions, goals and dreams. Unfortunately, for athletic administrators, such prolonged rest periods

rarely occur. Lunch breaks may be filled with solving problems. Evenings are spent supervising events every night of the week. Summer vacations consist of preparing for the next sport seasons, in addition to doing household chores, making neglected home repairs and keeping postponed medical appointments. The lack of restorative rest, along with increasing demands, can lead to the last stage of burnout.

**Reduced Personal Accomplishment:** Those in the third stage of burnout show specific behavioral changes. Individuals in this stage withdraw from social situations and express more negative feelings than in the past. They no longer care. Comments may become overly critical and cynical. Productivity and accomplishments decline, often along with self-esteem. Persons in this stage of burnout may feel disconnected from their work and the world in general. They feel paralyzed by an apparent lack of options. This is not a pleasant stage for them and those around them. Athletic administrators in this stage are perceived as negative and generalize about “kids these days” or “parents these days.” These individuals were not always negative in their viewpoints, they felt great passion and hope, but they now feel overwhelmed, unappreciated, discouraged and perhaps even trapped. During this stage of burnout, many athletic administrators resign, retire or develop health problems.

### Strategies to Fight Back

Burnout is a progressive condition that worsens over time. If a person is in any stage of burnout, it is wise to take action quickly. By following several tips, one can begin to restore the passion and hope destroyed by burnout.

**Revisit Your Goals.** Does the way you spend your time and energy reflect your true goals and values? We often find ourselves reacting to a series of seemingly urgent situations. To maintain perspective, you need regular reflection time. Although daily reflection may not be realistic, schedule monthly appointments with yourself, away from the office, to revisit your goals and evaluate how you are spending your time and energy.

**Plan Time for Professional Development.** Burnout created seemingly insurmountable challenges, but continuous growth and development can provide additional skills and tools to meet those situations. One of the best methods to combat burnout is participation in the NIAAA Leadership Training courses provided at state and national conferences. The LTCs have proven tools one can use to overcome many of the challenges we all face. Just the realization that one has new tools to work with can give a feeling of hope.

**Recognize Impossibilities.** Athletic administrators are educators who are trained to believe they can make a difference, that all things are possible and that our leadership is vital to their school's success. We as educators do need vision and dedication, but we also need to know the limits of our abilities. It is impossible to make every coach and parent

happy. It is impossible to reason with unreasonable people. It is impossible to have the perfect response to every situation. Possibilities emerge when people recognize what they can control and change. Steven Covey calls this working in our sphere of influence.

**Have Limits.** Athletic administrators report increased challenges when dealing with conflict and difficult people. Being a public servant does not mean that you must endure verbal abuse. Although our rights are limited, we should extend and receive basic courtesies. When dealing with conflict, refuse to revisit issues that you have previously addressed. Don't let pride or fear prevent you from setting limits.

**Keep a Positive Attitude.** Attitude is everything. Remaining positive in the face of shrinking budgets, unrealistic expectations and hounding parents can be very challenging. Who are the most positive people you know at your school? Surround yourself with these people. Get out of the office and visit practices. Talk to coaches about the good things that are happening on their teams. Limit your time with people or situations that seem to drain you. In formal meetings that may result in frustration, try to sit by someone who makes you feel happy. Spend some time each day focusing on what is good and positive. Read uplifting literature, watch humorous movies, choose your friends wisely, and find some time for fun.

**Take Time for Yourself.** We all know that good nutrition, rest and exercise are essential. Nonetheless, we often neglect ourselves because we are constantly attending to others. Ask yourself, how much sleep do I need and how much am I getting? Am I skipping meals or dining from the concession stand? Everyone needs occasional breaks. Take a stroll around your campus or school neighborhood. Get some fresh air and sunshine. Learn deep-breathing techniques. Take an occasional afternoon off. Vacations and extended weekends can help you gain a new perspective. Learn to delegate some duties to make it happen.

“Boiled Frog” symptoms sneak up on you. By becoming aware of the symptoms of burnout and by applying some of these strategies suggested, perhaps you can avoid becoming a boiled frog. **IAA**

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