

When More is not Enough

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There is a unique group of people that constitute a noble profession. A calling, if you will, to care for others in body, mind, and spirit. They are on duty 24/7 if the need arises and often find that even that effort is not enough. First-responders to the difficulties, challenges, and emergencies life thrusts upon us all, they are the pastors, chaplains, physicians, police and fire personnel, counselors and healthcare professionals we count on when we need help.

They are burning out and dying from self-directed violence at twice the normal rate for society in the United States. If you are in a helping profession, you are a member of this group. And, if you are a pastor your risk is even greater because the nature of your service keeps you largely out of public view, otherwise invisible when you are not in the pulpit.

Burnout is an outcome of stress, compassion fatigue, depression and anxiety, and can result in complete physiological and psychological collapse. It is a moral injury that destroys our image of self and worldview that is difficult to rebuild. It can also lead to a despair and hopelessness that invites suicide. For every successful suicide in this country, thirty attempts were made by others that were unsuccessful. The only way you can avoid becoming a statistic is to be prepared. I hope this arrests your attention.

Burnout is a spectrum disorder. It is a process potentially ending in a crisis and not simply an event. The process begins invisibly with life events.

It is easy to assume this means negative life events: your congregation isn't growing, your elders and deacons are critical of your performance, finances are deteriorating, there is not enough time in the day to counsel and encourage all the people who need your help, and you feel you are falling down on the job, and not living up to your calling. However, positive events have stress associated with them as well: a wonderful vacation, a family celebration, moving into a new home, receiving a promotion, or dinner out with friends. Everything we engage in takes thought and effort whether alone or with others and involves stress.

Too much stress over a long period of time begins to break us down. Sleep disturbance, constant fatigue, discouragement and depression, fear and anxiety, irritation and frustration become more and more part of our experience. Hypoglycemia, diabetes, shingles, headaches, stomach aches, ulcers, muscle aches, and fibromyalgia are just a few of the physical symptoms associated with burnout. There actually may be no visible symptoms beyond a growing sense of powerlessness to be or do enough.

Since this condition develops slowly it can take us by surprise when we notice the pattern, or someone around us notices the pattern and says something to us. We need to be mindful of our work/life environment if we are to avoid being caught up in compassion fatigue. This includes a number of steps.

- Get the rest you need. The nice thing about sleep is what you miss can be made up, but try to maintain a regular habit of retiring at an appropriate hour and getting up after approximately eight hours of rest.

- Eat nutritious meals, avoid too much sugar and too many carbohydrates (which your body turns into sugar). Bread, rice, pasta, and alcohol are loaded with carbohydrates. Don't drink a lot of coffee, tea or sodas.
- Exercise regularly, even if it is just walking.
- Fill your mind with other-than-work things that are encouraging and don't spend mindless hours in front of the television.
- Spend time in conversation with others that has no agenda; be present, connect authentically.
- Spend time in bible study, your devotional time, and prayer that is not associated with ministry responsibilities. This is your time of spiritual refreshment, not preparation for the next meeting, sermon, or event.
- Give yourself a mental health check-up periodically. Are you taking responsibility for things not your responsibility? Are you finding yourself attempting to control more and more outcomes in your relationships and work? Would you benefit from coaching or mentoring in this regard?
- Learn to balance stretching experiences with nourishing ones. Stress is cumulative and doesn't go away on its own.

Eventually, too much stress begins to wear on your disposition. A usually positive person can become slowly very negative in their outlook. There is a specific criteria for a positive versus negative mindset made up of nine bi-polar conditions illustrated below. All of us share elements of both sets to

Mindset

| Negative | Positive |
|---|---|
| Decreased motivation | Increased motivation |
| Sense of withdrawal and isolation | Deeper sense of meaning and purpose |
| Avoidance in life and relationships | Engagement with life and people |
| Strive for emotional survival | Strive for our potential |
| Narrow range of thoughts and actions | Broad range of thoughts and actions |
| Little hope or imagination | More thoughtful about possibilities |
| Does not profit from experience | Constantly risking and learning |
| Prone to anxiety and depression | Little anxiety or depression |
| Copes by pursuing pleasure or avoiding pain | Copes by pursuing meaningful work and relationships |

some degree most of the time. If more of the negative conditions characterize our mindset than the positive for a period of more than a week, or consistently recur over the period of three months, we have a negative mindset that can lead to further difficulty.

A consistently negative disposition erodes motivation. At this stage you are well on the pathway to burnout and the signs are more visible, but mostly to others who experience you differently. Often the individual is too caught up in their work to notice. Prevention will involve a number of activities.

- Taking advantage of appropriate opportunities to manage strong emotions and reign in impulse control that is resulting in unhealthy compensating behaviors.
- Periodic personal retreats and education regarding managing stress.
- Reminders regarding conflict resolution, effective interpersonal relationships, work/life balance.
- Utilizing a life coach or mentor becomes more important at this point. Getting a baseline well-being assessment may be the wake-up call someone needs.
- Find and join a peer fellowship group that isn't a think-tank or focused on work or ministry related content. People who share similar responsibilities, whether ministry related or not, and like to hang-out together can help you process your stress. No, it's not a place to complain or wear your problems on your sleeve. When we are around people we enjoy and trust there is a processing effect on the stress we bear that dissipates its impact. It doesn't even have to be a topic of conversation for this to happen.
- Knowing what to look for and taking action when it shows up. Motivation is energy we direct toward something we perceive as a need. If we are not conscious of a need to back off an unhealthy lifestyle we will not direct any energy toward our self-care. This is easy to fall into since our mission is the care of others, placing ourselves last in this consideration.

Eventually a crisis occurs if nothing is done to resolve the process of burnout. A crisis includes mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, emerging personality disorders, and self-directed violence. There may be associated medical conditions as well. Acting out irrationally, rage and anger, physical collapse, suicidal ideation, or strong feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness signal the crisis. Treatment will involve counseling and possibly medication management. Hospitalization may be involved. Since it can take as long to recover from burnout as it did to create the condition, a recovery plan will be necessary.

Like dominoes falling, life event stress unaddressed can lead to a change in mindset, erosion of motivation to do anything about it, and an eventual crisis that will sideline you in ministry or eliminate you from ministry altogether. After graduating from Edinburgh University at 14 in 1827, Robert McCheyne went on to lead a congregation of over one-thousand by age 23. Before dying at age 29 he wrote, "God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message."

The Prophet Isaiah, like us, needed this reminder. "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary" Isaiah 40.28-31.

We are not helpless, we are not hopeless, and we are not worthless. Christ gave his life for us that we might give ourselves to others through a long lifetime of ministry. Let us be stewards of that calling when it comes to our health just as we are with our pastoral work.

About the Author: Jeff Jernigan is an ordained pastor and board certified psychologist. As missionary, minister, and healthcare professional, Jeff has served in faith-based ministry including churches, para-church organizations, hospitals and health systems since 1983. He is recognized nationally and internationally for leading-edge programming focused on the prevention of burnout and self-directed violence associated with the helping professions.