Burnout, Part 2 – Avoiding Burnout, and How to Recover from Burnout

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In Part 1, we discussed what burnout is (and isn't), and its causes. This week, we'll discuss how to avoid burnout, and how to feel better and improve symptoms if you're experiencing burnout.

The secret to the prevention of and recovery from burnout lies in our ability to recognize and maintain healthy internal and external boundaries.

Our internal boundaries involve our thoughts and beliefs, and our external boundaries involve our actions in response to stressors.

Internal Boundaries: Healthy Thoughts and Beliefs

There is a direct connection between our thoughts and our feelings. Our thoughts drive our feelings the way the steering wheel in a car dictates which direction the wheels turn. What we think affects what we feel—much more so than the other way around. Believing the myth that we can't help how we feel is what causes the most stress in people's lives—it contributes to burnout, and sadly, it is self-imposed. We shouldn't believe everything we think.

If we operate primarily in any one of the 4 belief-systems below, the result will be increased, self-imposed stress that leads to burnout.

Unhealthy Belief Systems
- Perfectionism – The feeling that everything has to be perfect—all the time—can be paralyzing and overwhelming.
- Excessive Control – People with the need for lots of control feel like they're responsible for "all the things," and that others can't be trusted to handle responsibilities.
- People-pleasing – The desire to please and be liked by everyone can be deeply entrenched in our identities. People-pleasers tend to say yes to too much, and try to please everyone…but themselves.
- Doubting Your Competence – Sometimes called "imposter syndrome," you constantly feel that every move, every decision and every action are in question, and you're not up to the challenge.

Instead, we can work to shift our thought patterns to **healthier belief systems.**
- Mistakes happen and usually nothing terrible results
- I am not always competent but will strive for it
- Life and work are not always just and fair
- It's OK to feel out of control once in a while
- I can't anticipate everything
- If I go without encouragement for a while, I'll be OK
- I will not judge myself by my successes or failures

While we can't always control our environment, we can control our response to it, and our thoughts are key. If someone believes none of these thought processes will help or work, they are much more stressed than they probably realize. Oftentimes burnout victims feel like just that – victims. They believe they are helpless, and feel helpless and hopeless as a result.

It's no coincidence that when you stop looking for ways to control your situation, you stop finding them.

External Boundaries: Reducing Stress & Increasing Support

An obvious solution to externally caused stress is to change the source. In most cases, however, we do not have much power to decrease external stressors. What we *can* do is look at how we manage that stress. Often there are small but effective measures we can take to reduce our stress levels, or at least increase our "coping reserves," so that we don't end up feeling burned out. Following are some ways to do this.

- **Examine your ability to set healthy limits.** How often do you fail to say "no" when it is perfectly appropriate to do so? Do you take lunch breaks? Do you answer work emails and calls even on your days off? Do you have friends outside of work, or do you constantly surround yourself with your job, never taking any down time?

  Take a close look at times when you should be setting more appropriate limits for the sake of your health. Many people feel that this will make them less productive, but in fact the opposite is true. If you ignore the signs of burnout, you may eventually find yourself impaired in your ability to work.

  If setting better boundaries is hard for you, start small. A good technique to use when you are confronted with an opportunity to set better limits is to picture the people in your life that you care the most about. Imagine how excited they'll be when you have more time and energy for them because you set limits elsewhere.

- **Clarify your priorities.** What is most important in your life? Identify the most important roles you have, and what things only *you* can do, and then start prioritizing. Being organized—looking ahead and planning your life and time a week or so at a time—can also help with feelings of overwhelm, and reduce time wasting activities.

  Also, in addition to making a to-do list, make a "don't do" list. Think about things on your to-do list, or other responsibilities you have, and ask some questions:
    o   Does this really need to be done? Why?
    o   Do I want to do it? Why?
    o   Can someone else do it? Who?
    o   Is it important for *me* to do it? Why?
    o   What is the worst thing that can happen if it doesn't get done?
    o   If I do choose to do it, who can help?
    o   Can I pay someone else to do it? Who, and how much?
    o   How much time will I save if I hire someone else?

  These questions can help you focus your attention and time—the most valuable of resources—on what matters most. It can also reduce feelings of indecision and procrastination, which can really contribute to feelings of burnout… "nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging of an incomplete task."

- **Surround yourself with positive influences.** Avoid the "water cooler" trap: when you have negative feelings about your job, it's easy to seek out others who feel the same, resulting in gossiping about what's wrong with the place. This just validates your negativity and gives it an environment to thrive in. While it is healthy to vent once in a while, you have to surround yourself with a strong, positive support system. Research shows that people with strong social support tend to be healthier and live longer. At work, this social support system should be made up of people you view as optimistic and who are good problem solvers, not just people you can complain with.

- **Create your own rewards.** Sometimes burnout results from working hard and not feeling like you have received the recognition you deserve. You can do some things to reward yourself for a job well done. Finding satisfaction in your work, and setting and reaching your own career goals, can go a lot farther than a certificate or plaque. If you tend look to others to offer praise or evaluate your performance, start looking inward instead.

- **Take care of your own basic needs.** This is related to the first bullet point—setting healthy limits. The first way to practice this is by creating a daily schedule that makes your own health a top priority. You will not be able to function at your best if you are not eating healthy, getting enough rest, and engaging in regular physical activity.

  In order to do these things, you have to prioritize them like you would the other items on your daily agenda. Schedule exercise and down time just like you would an appointment. Make it your goal to eat, at the very least, one healthy meal a day, and avoid too much caffeine and alcohol. Remember that burnout is caused in part by a depletion of energy reserves.

- **Seek balance in your life.** We've all heard the cliché "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and it's true. If your life is out of balance because work takes up all of your free time, you won't be able to provide for your own needs, much less for the needs of others.

  A simple way to start doing this is to take a lunch break every day, and leave your work station or the workplace itself. During your lunch break, eat a healthy meal and think about things you want to do after work or on the weekend. You'll find that these small breaks will actually improve your creativity and energy level, and you'll be more productive than if you worked through your lunch break.

  Prioritize some down time. If taking a full week off sounds daunting or impossible right now, schedule some long weekends.

- **Consider "branching out."** If you feel your burnout is due to feeling stagnated at work, find ways to branch out. That could mean putting in for a transfer to a role that is more challenging, or learning new skill sets to make your job more meaningful. Perhaps you can take a class, get a new certification, or ask for some cross-training opportunities. If you are really at a dead end, and finding another job is not an option, then branch out in your personal life—ramp up the excitement level outside of work by getting started on that list of things you'd like to do "if only," or things you have in the back of your mind that you'd like to try but just haven't taken that first step yet.

Recovering from burnout takes time. You didn't get burned out in a week or two, and so you can't expect to restore yourself to wellness in that time either. Try implementing the ideas above a little at time…. maybe helping you feel, say, 10% better each week for a few weeks.

Also, if you recognize that you are at risk for burnout, implement these strategies to help head it off. It's easier to prevent a problem than it is to fix one!

The Deaconess Employee Assistance Program offers **free, confidential counseling** services (in person or virtual visits) for Deaconess employees and members of their household. Learn more at www.deaconess.com/EAP.

If anyone you know is at risk of harming themselves or is experiencing a mental health crisis, get help immediately. Call 9-1-1, go to the nearest emergency room, call the CARE team at 812-476-7200, or call the National Suicide Hotline at 800-273-8255.
There is no charge for a CARE Team evaluation and all evaluations are 100% confidential.