



**PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH BURNOUT AT ALL LEVELS OF  
INTERVENTION**

**By: Jerry Jo Gilham**

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## **Preventing and Dealing with Burnout at all Levels of Intervention**

Most social workers are likely to agree that their choice of social work as a vocation is due to their desire to help others and make a difference in the world. For many of those workers, their faith is instrumental in that decision, as they feel called to helping and serving. The satisfaction that one receives from helping others has been labeled compassion satisfaction (Stamm, 1999). Stamm says compassion satisfaction is a result of experiencing pleasure from a job well done. When workers are able to achieve their goals they feel successful, experience a sense of power and control, and have feelings of high morale (Figley, 2002).

Helping others is difficult work and it is replete with stress (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002). Figley (1995) acknowledged this when he stated that there is a cost of caring. Stress from helping others can test one's personal coping abilities, and negative stress ensues when staff find that they are not able to cope with the pressures of the job and are not meeting their own aspirations (Blom, 2012; Brody & Nair, 2003). The disparity between the demands of one's job and the resources available to meet them leads to a problematic condition known as burnout (Beheshtifar & Omidvar, 2013; Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). Burnout involves a process that develops over time (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) because of excessive and prolonged levels of job stress (Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Several studies have found that social workers, mental health professionals and health care workers are most likely to experience burnout (Acker, 1999; Baker, Demerouti, Taris, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003; ACA, 2010; Um & Harrison, 1998; Wright, 2003).

Herbert Freudenberger initially coined the term burnout.

He described burnout as a debilitating psychological condition brought about by unrelieved work stress, resulting in: depleted energy and emotional exhaustion; lowered resistance to illness; increased depersonalization in interpersonal relationships; increased dissatisfaction and pessimism; and increased absenteeism and work inefficiency (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). One of the most widely used definitions of burnout was derived soon after by Maslach and Jackson (1981). They identified 3 elements of burnout including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Burnout produces feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Espeland, 2006) and workers can lose interest and motivation in their job (Wilcockson, 2011).

### **Explaining Burnout**

Numerous explanations for burnout have been examined and many studies have elucidated the factors associated with burnout. Typically, these factors relate to either the personality or demographic characteristics of workers, or organizational and situational factors.

From an organizational perspective, burnout is a process in which an employee who was previously committed disengages from his or her work due to the stress and strain of the job (Conrad and Kellar-Guenther 2006). The organizational approach addresses the lack of fit between the person and their job setting from the perspective of the institution. Maslach and Goldberg (1998) cite conflict, between workers and administration, or between work demands, as factors that explain

burnout. In addition, they discuss the negative consequences of work overload and cuts in job benefits and wages as determinants of burnout. Professionals may struggle with the integration of their personal and professional belief systems (Harr, 2013). A plethora of additional organizational factors that affect workers are outlined in the literature. They include: lack of control over one's work (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998), insufficient reward, breakdown of community in the work environment (Winnubst, 1993), absence of a sense of fairness (Maslach & Leiter, 2008), role ambiguity (Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Lloyd et al, 2002), inadequate staffing (Potter et al, 2010); contradictory expectations (Winnubst, 1993), poor preparation by worker or agency (Schaufeli et al, 1993); unreasonable self-expectations (Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009); an atmosphere of turf battles (Winnubst, 1993), and poor match between staff members and their jobs (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Various personality and demographic characteristics have been associated with burnout. Maslach et al (2001) identified five important individual factors in potential burnout: hardiness, locus of control, coping styles, personality type and attitude. They found that individuals with low levels of hardiness or a sense of control over events and openness to change have higher burnout scores. In terms of locus of control, burnout is higher among individuals who have an external locus of control. As for coping, active and effective coping is associated with less burnout. Type A personalities tend to have higher exhaustion scores on burnout scales, and finally, an attitude of high expectations leads to working too hard, which is ultimately related to exhaustion and cynicism. Additional individual factors that previously have been examined and shown to have some relationship to burnout are: perfectionism (Sherman, 2004), a pessimistic view of the world and oneself, the need to be in control and reluctance or refusal to delegate (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), a need to please others, work as a substitute for social life (Blom, 2012), over-involvement with clients (Sherman, 2004), and feeling irreplaceable.

### **Client Factors and Burnout**

Beheshtifar and Omidvar (2013) point out that while some research has linked burnout to demographic variables, other studies have not found significant relationships between these variables and burnout. For example, personality characteristics were found a major determinant of job burnout by Chen, Wu & Wei (2012) while Lloyd, King & Chenoweth (2002) revealed that demographic variables did not appear to be significantly related to stress and burnout.

The needs and problems of clients have also been shown to contribute to burnout. Social workers are frequently dealing with the trauma and tragedies of clients (Harr, 2013), and the chronicity and complexity of client problems can tax workers beyond their capabilities, leading to burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Working with difficult or unpleasant patients has been shared by practitioners as emotionally stressful (Schaufeli et al, 1993) and working with vulnerable populations is attributed to burnout (Dombo & Gray, 2013). Further research in this area is clearly indicated.

### **Indicators and Consequences of Burnout**

The consequences of burnout are potentially detrimental for staff (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998), clients and the larger institutions in which workers are employed

(Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Workers may experience negative attitudes or emotions regarding their work such as a lack of feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 1997); frustration, which can breed cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 1997); feelings of resentment as well as powerlessness (Espeland, 2006); feelings of anger at the system, increased consumption of drugs including alcohol (Maslach & Jackson, 1981); and arriving to work late most days. Decline in the quality of work is a common consequence (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 1997). How workers perceive clients may be affected by burnout (Figley, 2002; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Puig et al 2012; Schaufeli et al, 1993). Burnout has also been associated with various forms of negative responses to the job including job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, absenteeism, low morale, intention to leave the job and job turnover (Acker, 2011; Beheshtifar & Omidvar, 2013; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Job dissatisfaction is closely linked to high turnover rates, low productivity and poor job performance in social service agencies (Koeske et al, 1994).

### **Individual Strategies for Dealing with Burnout**

Dealing with burnout, whether through prevention or remediation, is a challenge for individuals as well as organizations. Harr (2013) suggests that agencies, educators and professionals must address the personal costs to workers so that professionals can achieve a balance between the risks and benefits of serving and helping others.

A review of the literature on burnout reveals that there are many things individuals can do, which include: goal setting and time management (Demir et al, 2003; Espeland, 2006); positive thinking and avoidance of negative thinking (Espeland, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 1997); using relaxation techniques, employing humor and participating in outside activities, especially pleasurable and leisure activities (Demir et al, 2003; Puig et al, 2012); having a variety of experiences or tasks at work (Leiter & Maslach, 1997); building and maintaining support networks (Demir et al 2003; Espeland, 2006; Thomas & Lankau, 2009; Um & Harrison, 1998); changing one's response to or adapting to distressing events (Espeland, 2006); and self monitoring one's stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

### **What can Supervisors Do?**

Several authors have explained that understanding the process of burnout is essential for alleviating it (Beheshtifar & Omidvar, 2013; Demir et al, 2003; Espeland 2006; Lee & Ashforth, 1993). There are many strategies and techniques that supervisors can utilize to combat burnout. These include efforts at the mezzo and macro levels.

Supervisors should promote self-care for themselves and their staff, including good nutrition, quality sleep and exercise. Staff should limit caffeine and nicotine intake as well (Puig et al, 2012; Stamm, 1999, 2002). Supervisors and administrators should encourage positive social support among staff and encourage staff to count on their colleagues for help and peer supervision (Acker, 2003; Um & Harrison, 1998). Supervisors should encourage staff to disengage from their work, to encourage balance in a worker's life, and resist the urge to have workers put in overtime unless absolutely necessary (Blom, 2012). Similarly, supervisors should

discourage staff from trying to solve the problems of friends and family when not at work, regardless of how much others depend on them. Supervisors can encourage staff to look for and be satisfied with small improvements that clients might make and celebrate these improvements. Additionally, it can be helpful for staff to arrange time to discuss their successes, which can help put things in perspective (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther 2006; Slocum-Gori, Hemsworth, Carson, & Kazanjian, 2011). Staff should use humor and laughter to combat stress, and supervisors should foster a climate where staff can have fun and be light-hearted at times, which can enhance positivity. Supervisors must recognize the potential for stress and set limits with workers when they seem stressed, and particularly with women who typically focus more on others and may be at higher risk of burnout (Davidson & Forrester, 1995; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009). For staff members who are stressed, supervisors should encourage time off including the use of vacation days or 'mental health' days. Supervisors should provide opportunities for new learning and support staff going to trainings, which could mitigate burnout (Shapiro, Burkey, Dorman, & Welker, 1996). Supervisors must promote client empowerment, which promotes client self-reliance and alleviates pressure on staff (Smith, 2009). Supervisors should involve staff in discussion related to reducing frustration by improving work conditions and services to clients (Lewandowski, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2000). Supervisors should monitor case assignments and avoid giving clients with more serious problems to the same workers and transfer cases when staff objectivity is or is likely to be compromised (Acker, 2011; Harr, 2013; Jacobson, 2012). Supervisors must ensure adequate support for workers, which can be achieved through regular and frequent supervision, which is perceived as safe, as well as the development of peer support groups. These efforts can help alleviate staff stress and consequently staff burnout (Jacobson, 2012; Lloyd et al, 2002; Thomas & Lankau, 2009). Several researchers have found that positive experiences with supervisors and positive social support from co-workers are related to reduced role stress and lower feelings of burnout (Acker, 2003; Collings & Murray, 1996; Lloyd et al, 2004; Thomas & Lankau, 2009; Um & Harrison; Zunz, 1998).

Because a lack of fairness in the worksite setting can be associated with strong negative feelings and even burnout, supervisors should focus on creating an environment that promotes fairness and equity (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). It behooves supervisors to make job expectations clear and realistic, and establish clear channels of communication (Thomas & Lankau, 2009). Managers should seek to understand employees' experiences and model and share their own efforts to manage stress (Thomas & Lankau). Supervisors can offer opportunities for variety and creativity, which can lead to greater job satisfaction (Shields, 2007). Supervisors can help workers build confidence related to their performance and increase their sense of mastery through praise and encouragement (Espeland, 2006; Harr, 2013).

Other ideas identified by this author based on years of clinical and supervisory experience are added here. Supervisory staff should be decisive, and advocate for and make organizational change as indicated to reduce the frustrations of staff that often result in burnout. Minimizing frustration might involve reducing paperwork when possible, and assisting staff in managing the multitude of tasks they generally have day to day. The latter might be accomplished in various ways, but especially in

other staff providing assistance and encouraging staff to work in teams. In addition, supervisors and managers should help staff to identify and manage conflicts between their personal and professional values. Again, these conflicts can produce strong emotional responses and workers may feel disconnected from their work setting.

### **What Organizations Can Do**

Unfortunately, organizations are frequently reluctant to address the burnout issue. There is a tendency to believe that it is not an organizational issue, but rather an individual problem (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). In addition administrators might be ignorant of the impact that burnout has on the organization let alone the consequences for clients/consumers. It is also possible that administrators are unaware of how they can effectively prevent and address burnout (Maslach & Leiter). Tackling and eliminating burnout is critical to the effectiveness of the organization as a whole (Lee & Ashforth, 1993).

Some researchers have asserted that burnout is due more to problematic organizational structures and processes than the fault of the individual employee (Leiter & Maslach, 2001). The work conditions in an organization are shaped by the institution since the organization determines workload, level of control, rewards, sense of community, fairness and values (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), all of which can influence the employee-agency fit. Maslach and Goldberg (1998) assert that organizations have minimized the importance of the worksite in burnout prevention efforts and they conclude that we must approach the problem from the person-in-environment perspective. Organizational level interventions that enhance the functioning of the work setting can better facilitate job engagement (Maslach & Leiter), and subsequently reduce burnout. A word of caution from Schaufeli et al (1993) indicates that macro aspects are less easy to change and to improve.

Strategies must include creating a climate of cohesion and support where the latter is direct and frequent. Employees can be aided in building and maintaining support networks as a defense against burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Um & Harrison, 1998). Agencies must seek solutions to problems without assigning blame and use resources wisely and efficiently. Agencies must have clear policies and procedures for staff and implement them fairly (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Administrators must act with a sense of fairness, as problems with fairness and favoritism have been associated with burnout over time (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Agencies must have mechanisms for identifying individuals who are experiencing stress and assist them in self-care (Puig et al, 2012). Additionally, agencies should have strict policies against substance abuse, which is often the result of burnout. Ultimately, administrative personnel must promote a climate and structure that maximizes employees' fit within the organization and minimizes stress.

### **Spirituality and Burnout**

It is essential to discuss the specific spiritual or religious approaches that can be employed to address burnout. Many people identify religion as a resource in times of stress (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). This seems especially vital when one considers that burnout may prevent workers from perceiving inner goodness in clients (Dombo & Gray, 2013). Furthermore, workers may face doubt regarding their faith due to a sense of discouragement they face in their work (Harr, 2013).

From an individual perspective, alleviating the stress that leads to burnout has been recommended by many researchers, and spiritual practices specifically are seen as a mechanism for self-care that can reduce burnout (Dombo & Gray), although many clinicians reportedly have had little or no training on self-care (Killian, 2008). For individuals of faith, a relationship with an Ultimate Being has been linked to enhanced coping, a sense of mission and purpose, and hope for the future. Prayer is often a source of strength, and the evidence from individuals in distress reveals prayer has helped them overcome physical and psychological suffering (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Other religious rituals can serve as vehicles for dealing with stress as they have demonstrated their efficacy in easing anxiety and dread, promoting a sense of security and alleviating isolation (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Levin, 1994), feelings that are commonly associated with burnout. These rituals may include attending religious services, scripture reading, spiritual meditation, Holy Communion, reconciliation, and any others that an individual finds meaningful. From the mezzo and macro levels, a sense of community is a method for promoting support and preventing and minimizing burnout. Sharing faith in the organizational environment can enhance teamwork and offer camaraderie. Dombo and Gray (2013) recommend spiritual collaboration, or spiritual practice done with others, as means for releasing energy of professional work and helping workers to regain meaning in their work. Participation in faith-based communities has been associated with increased empowerment, coping ability and a sense of belonging. Supervisors and administrators should model an attitude and approach that honors the dignity and uniqueness of each client, one that is undergirded by Christian ideals and values. These Christian values coincide with the core social work values that should guide our ethical service to all in need. Finally, administrators should create a climate that renews both the personal call to help others and the satisfaction related to serving (Harr, 2013). This could inspire a newfound motivation and enthusiasm for workers in their ministry, and enhance compassion satisfaction, mitigating the negative consequences of burnout. For Catholic social workers, all of these efforts align with the Catholic Social Teaching principles of participation, solidarity, and stewardship.

Professional burnout, like so many problems, is multi-factored. Interventions to prevent and reduce burnout must occur at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. These interventions must include spiritual strategies, as they have particular value and benefit for workers and ultimately clients.

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