

What Missionaries Need to Know About Burnout

Work used to be exciting and you used to look forward to what you did with people, but now it takes a great deal of effort to get motivated. Could you be suffering from burnout?
by Jonathan Ward

You've lost the passion you once had for serving others and being available to meet their needs. Work used to be exciting and you used to look forward to what you did with people, but now it takes a great deal of effort to get motivated. You wonder what is wrong. Could it be that you are suffering from burnout? Could a really committed missionary burn out? You may only be in your first term—certainly, you couldn't burn out in such a short time, could you? Anyway, wouldn't God keep you from burning out? What about that old Gospel song that says, "Let me burn out for thee, dear Lord?"

What is burnout?

Burnout is a state of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment brought on by the strain of responding extensively to the needs of others, often without adequately responding to one's own need for replenishment.

Burnout happens most often to those in the helping and caring professions, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, counsellors, pastors and missionaries.

Burnout will include most, if not all, of the following symptoms:

- Demoralization: the belief that one is no longer effective.
- Depersonalization: treating others in an impersonal way.
- Detachment: withdrawing from responsibilities and avoiding new ones.
- Distancing: avoidance of social and interpersonal contacts.
- Defeatism: feeling like a failure, feeling defeated, and wanting to give up.
- Disillusionment: frustrated, angry and disenchanted.

How do I know if I'm burning out?

Although feeling tired and not wanting to go to work may be a part of burnout, there is more to it than that. Three major characteristics of burnout are:

1. Emotional exhaustion

The exhaustion is more than physical, it is emotional. You feel drained, used up, nothing left to give. You're tired of having to be constantly available, of having to be attentive to so many needs, of juggling the responsibilities of family and ministry, and of fitting



unexpected last-minute demands into an already busy existence. Above all, you feel saturated from dealing with people and their needs. "Compassion fatigue" has set in, and you wish you could escape to a deserted island for a while. But that just makes you feel guilty. So you struggle on, feeling more and more overwhelmed. It is not that you don't want to help; you just don't have what it takes to help any more.

2. Depersonalization

To shield yourself, you begin to reduce your involvement with others. You begin not to notice those who need help. You ignore their requests. You begin to be discourteous to the very people you came to serve. You start to become tough, hard and cynical, putting others down. You view people as obstacles to be avoided rather than individuals to be served.

3. Reduced personal accomplishment

Whether or not you actually become ineffective, you feel ineffective, and you sense that you are no longer accomplishing what you felt God called you to do.

Is it burnout or stress?

- Burnout is a defence characterized by disengagement. Stress is characterized by over-engagement.
- Burnout is the result of continual stress over a long period of time, rather than great stress over a short period.
- In burnout, the emotions become blunted. With stress, the emotions become over-reactive.
- The exhaustion of burnout affects motivation, passion and drive. The exhaustion of stress affects physical energy.
- Burnout produces demoralization. Stress produces disintegration.
- Burnout produces a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Stress produces a sense of urgency and hyperactivity.
- Burnout may never kill you, but your life may not seem worth living. Stress may kill you prematurely because of its impact on the body.

Burnout does not happen overnight, but it creeps up on you without your realizing it. Other missionaries usually notice it long before you do, but if you check yourself periodically you can detect it. It is not a psychiatric disorder, but is a phenomenon that will greatly reduce your effectiveness as a missionary in addition to the damage it will do to you and your family.

Is it burnout or depression?

Although burnout and depression are not the same thing, the symptoms may be similar. In many cases, burnout may lead to severe depression. Also, depression will often be a symptom of burnout.

What causes burnout?

There are three major sources of burnout, and whether or not burnout occurs depends on all three. Knowing these can alert you to the causes and help you evaluate whether you are at risk for burnout.

You may be a source of burnout yourself.

Social: You can't be a missionary without being involved with people, and that involvement can be a source of burnout. The "problem people" require much more of your attention than do the "pleasant people." As a result, you may begin to see even good people as problem people. You are expected to be polite, tactful and caring, so you feel like you cannot express the disappointment and frustration that you feel down inside. In addition, there are multiple expectations you may feel you need to fulfill. Some are realistic, others are not. You and your family are on display and expected to be the perfect example in all things. You are expected to be super-spiritual and constantly available to meet the demands of others. Any problems or weakness must be carefully concealed.

Work: Your job setting may be a source of burnout. Language school was so frustrating. When you arrived on the field, things seemed even more overwhelming. So many people to get to know, so much to do, and so little time to do it. The needs are so great that there is no time for breaks or vacations. Your co-workers are supposed to be an encouragement, but they are often critical and every compliment seems to end with "but ... " There are plans, policies and procedures to follow, and so much red tape before a project can get underway. There is the pressure to obtain satisfactory results and send encouraging reports back home.

Self: You may be a source of burnout yourself. If you lack self-confidence or have low self-esteem, you are a candidate for burnout. If you are unassertive, submissive, passive, anxious and blame yourself for failure, you are at risk. If your needs for achievement, approval and affection are too high, you are a candidate. If you are driven, impatient, irritable and competitive (Type A personality), you are at risk. If you do not know how to handle anger and conflict, you are also a candidate.

Can a really committed missionary burn out?

Not only can committed missionaries burn out, but the more committed they are, the more likely they are to burn out. It is the truly dedicated ones who are most likely to burn out, especially if they have high expectations, because they tend to push themselves beyond their reasonable limits.

What are the effects of burnout?

Many people pay the price when missionaries burn out. It affects everyone who comes into contact with them.

Personal: In addition to the emotional and physical exhaustion, one may experience disturbed sleep, nightmares, illness, depression and sometimes resort to drugs or alcohol.

Family and other missionaries: Missionaries burning out begin to expect perfection from others. This leads to impatience, bickering, and fighting at home and in the office. They are no longer available to meet the needs of others, not even of their own families and fellow missionaries.

Nationals: In addition to being rude, thoughtless and treating others as objects (depersonalization), missionaries burning out may begin to miss more days at work, move to educating others, ask to work with work teams, or move to administration. All of this is to avoid contact with nationals, but this motive may not be conscious.

Can burnout be treated?

Yes, if caught in time. Missionaries who burn out to the point that they actually leave the field are unlikely to return. Such people recover from their burnout, but they typically move into some other type of work. Therefore, it is important to detect burnout as soon as possible and take steps to prevent it from becoming any worse.

When burnout is far along, you will likely know that you are burning out, but you are not likely to notice it in the early stages. The best early warning system is not yourself, but others who are willing to point out symptoms of burnout in you. In turn, you can be their best early detection system, so check up on each other regularly.

Why should I take care of myself?

In a word, *stewardship*. You need to take care of your own physical, emotional and spiritual needs so that you can maximize your effectiveness in meeting the needs of others. Taking care of your own needs is not an act of selfishness—it is an act of good stewardship.

Christ encountered many needy people and dealt constantly with demands on his time. However, he was careful to ensure that he did not become so physically, emotionally and spiritually depleted that he could no longer function. This implied making wise choices concerning the use of his time and energy. Sometimes he intentionally withdrew from people in order to replenish himself, inevitably leaving certain people's needs unmet. If he did, why can't we?

How did Jesus take care of Himself?

Jesus would often spend time alone, away from the demanding crowds of needy people, especially after intense times of ministry. During these cherished moments, He would spend time with His heavenly Father and replenish His spiritual and emotional energy. In order to accomplish this, He had to make Himself deliberately unavailable. Here are some examples:

- When His reputation as a healer began to spread, He intentionally withdrew, despite the needs and demands of the people. "Yet the news about Him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus *often withdrew* (italics mine) to lonely places and prayed" (*Luke 5:15-16*).
- After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus withdrew from people in order to be alone. "After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone" (*Matthew 14:23*).
- Sometimes He would withdraw with a small group of close friends "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone" (*Mark 9:2*).
- After stressful events, such as when He heard the news of the death of His cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus gave Himself time to grieve and recuperate. "When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (*Matthew 14:13*).
- When He withdrew, people would sometimes get upset and try to make Him feel guilty for not being available. "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed. Simon and His companions went to look for Him, and when they found Him, they exclaimed, 'Everyone is looking for you!'" (*Mark 1:35-37*). Sound familiar? When we set legitimate boundaries, people may get upset with us because we are not available to respond to their needs.
- After a heated exchange with the Pharisees in which Jesus had to respond to their criticisms, His immediate response was to seek a change of environment and 'just get away from it all'. "Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon" (*Matthew 15:21*).
- Jesus was also careful to safeguard His disciples by getting them to take time out from doing ministry. "Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, He went up on a mountainside to pray" (*Mark 6:45-46*).
- He mentored and supervised His disciples so that they would not become exhausted and He encouraged them to seek solitude. "The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place" (*Mark 6:30-32*). Note the three elements involved: (a) a change of environment; (b) a change of activity; and (c) for a certain period of time.
- On another occasion, after the stress and excitement of completing an assignment that involved intensive outreach and ministry, Jesus gave His disciples a chance to debrief and retreat. "When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then He took them with Him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida" (*Luke 9:10*).

Can burnout be prevented?

Yes! You can do many things that will prevent burnout. The following are some suggestions:

... your accomplishments will never be enough to satisfy your compulsive need to prove your own worth.

1) Understand that your identity as a person is not determined by what you can accomplish for God; it is determined by who you are as His child. Nothing can change that, so learn to rest secure in that truth. If you try to determine your worth and identity based on what you do, you will set yourself up for feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction because your accomplishments will never be enough to satisfy your compulsive need to prove your own worth. Furthermore, if the success of your accomplishments depends on factors that are beyond your ability or your right to control, they will be blocked and undermined, causing disappointment and frustration. This will lead to burnout.

2) Ensure that you are not trying to fulfill God's role in the building of His kingdom. Assess to what extent you may have bought into the belief (which may be promoted by your background, church, mission or supporters) that it is all or mostly up to you to make the kingdom of God happen. Without a balanced perspective on your role versus God's role (i.e. who is responsible for doing what), you will become driven by the burden to accomplish things that God never intended you to accomplish. The price you will pay is exhaustion and burnout. Worse, you may pressure others to the point of exhaustion if you place unrealistic demands on them.

3) Remember that there is more to fulfillment in ministry than achieving visible results. You may need to reassess your belief about what ultimately constitutes success in ministry. Most of Jeremiah's ministry was a failure in terms of tangible results, yet he was faithful in accomplishing the task to which he was called. Success in ministry ought to be measured in terms of obedience and faithfulness, not results. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour" (*1 Corinthians 3:6-8*).

4) Be aware that one of Satan's ploys is to burn you out by giving you more work than you can handle. He will do this very subtly by ensuring that your life becomes flooded by the legitimate demands of well-meaning people. He will also trap you into believing that you are indispensable, that ministry needs take priority over family needs and personal needs, and that you must never say 'no' to anyone who asks you to help them.

5) Develop a personal mission statement for yourself which articulates clearly and specifically the things that you want to accomplish in life. This will give your life and ministry two essential ingredients: parameters and focus. Having a personal mission statement will help you decide which demands you should respond to and which ones you should not.

6) **Have a clear job description for yourself.** With those whom you serve, have you managed to clarify your role and negotiate reasonable expectations for yourself? Your ability to say 'no' may depend on having as clear a job description as possible. If your job description has not been clearly defined, you need to seek clarification about what is expected of you (or what you can reasonably expect of yourself).

7) **Be discriminating in your use of the gifts that God has given you.** That's what stewardship is all about. You may be gifted in all sorts of ways, but learning to say 'no' may be your greatest asset. Accept your limits and set appropriate boundaries to what you will do. When you want to say 'no', say 'no'. When you really want to say 'yes', say 'yes'.

8) **Don't allow yourself to feel victimized by your role.** In ministry, there is often a tendency (accompanied by a significant amount of frustration) to blame one's ills on others, on the ministry or on the church. In response to this, it is vital that you come to see yourself as someone with choices rather than being helplessly stuck like a cog in some machine. Understand that you are not a powerless victim of other people's demands and expectations. By taking responsibility for your own emotional well-being, social needs, spiritual growth and professional development, you can do a lot toward creating a more positive ministry experience and a happier personal life for yourself and for your family.

9) **Adjust what you do to fit who you are.** Ensure that your responsibilities match your areas of gifting and competence, and function within them as much as possible. This will minimize the stress of having to accomplish tasks for which you feel inadequate. Assess whether your current ministry role or position matches your interests, personality, strengths, gifts, skills and knowledge. Are you clear about what your gifts really are? The use of personality testing to assess your personal strengths and profile may be helpful.

10) **Set specific, realistic goals so that you can measure what you have achieved.** This will give you a sense of direction and accomplishment. Also, don't compete when you don't have to.

11) **Work on improving the following three areas:**

- (a) managing your time
- (b) setting priorities
- (c) delegating tasks

Poor time management is frequently a source of frustration and guilt. As a Christian worker, learn to delegate tasks to those who can fulfill them. Remember that every time you take over an area of ministry that someone else could be doing, you may be robbing someone of an opportunity for ministry and growth. In addition, examine your motives for accepting to fulfill certain tasks that really ought to be declined.

Be accountable ...

12) **Take opportunities for periodic training (courses, workshops, seminars) to broaden your effectiveness and expertise.** Taking responsibility for your own professional development will greatly enhance your ability to minister to others.

13) **Be accountable, have people in your life who can encourage you, and ensure that you are receiving clear, regular, constructive feedback.** Feedback is the yardstick for measuring performance. It tells us how close we are to achieving our goals. Working without feedback is much like an athlete training for a race without the use of a timing device. Since feedback is the cornerstone of quality supervision, you may need to request it, thus providing the opportunity for you to receive encouragement and direction. It will also provide a forum for you to express frustration over unreasonable expectations, fatigue or discouragement.

14) **Don't take things too personally.** You are not responsible for everything that goes wrong.

15) **Take good care of your physical needs and be sure to take breaks.** This includes coffee breaks, lunch breaks (don't catch up on work during that time), and Sabbath breaks. Leave town if you have to. And don't forget holidays—you can't keep going all year, year after year, without a proper rest. In addition, are you getting enough exercise and eating balanced meals? Feeling better physically is often the first step toward replenishing one's emotions. It can also provide the initiative and strength to begin making other changes.

16) **Leave your work at work.** When you come home to your family, enjoy them. Try to separate ministry time from family time. For example, avoid jumping up to answer the telephone during meal times or family devotions. Get an answering machine.

17) **Involve yourself in activities that replenish you emotionally.** Are you taking time to enhance relationships with friends and family, allowing you to laugh and relax with people with whom you feel comfortable? Fostering creative relationships based on personal factors, not professional ones, is an important source from which to draw energy, especially for extroverts. Introverts, on the other hand, drain their batteries by being with people. They need to get alone, enjoy a good book, go for a quiet walk, listen to music, etc.

18) **Have a life of your own.** Engage yourself in the pursuit of a hobby or favorite pastime to relax.

19) **Don't get in a rut.** Vary the way you do things so that they do not become routine.

20) **Learn to laugh at yourself.** Christians who take themselves too seriously put unnecessary pressure on themselves to be strong, competent and super-spiritual.

21) **Manage your stress level.** Familiarize yourself with helpful stress management techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation.

22) **Manage tendencies toward perfectionism.** Ask yourself whether there are perfectionist tendencies that you need to address in order to free yourself from the tyranny of self-imposed demands and expectations. Get someone (spouse, friend or counselor) to think this issue through with you.

23) **Take care of yourself spiritually and cultivate your relationship with God.** Do not neglect the spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, worship, biblical meditation, solitude, silence, simplicity) which are vital if one is to renew one's strength.

24) **Keep a clean slate.** When needed, be prompt in applying 1 John 1:9 to your life: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

25) **Learn how to recognize, acknowledge, understand and handle your anger.** Don't internalize it, leading to depression and psychosomatic problems. Learn to express your negative feelings to God (see the Psalms for inspiration) and confide in a trusted friend.

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