

Burnout: a few perspectives

Katja Abbott

“My young men shall never work. Men who work cannot dream, and wisdom comes in dreams.”

Chief Joseph, Native American Nez Perce Chief

“Burnout is almost entirely a Western, middle-class professional, post industrial, post-war phenomenon. It could be described as mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion resulting from ongoing stress in the workplace, but deeper issues may also be at work. The challenge is to treat it for what it is – a spiritual crisis. Work Pressures have a lot to do with it, and while not denying that these are legitimate problems to be addressed, they are often agents provocateurs rather than the root causes. Burnout is the desperate cry of the soul to break free, to be true to itself in the world and no longer be defined by objective criteria. It is the climactic and exhausting struggle to be engaged in work and relationships that have heartfelt meaning and joy. A spiritual crisis is one of meaning, purpose and connections, as is burnout. Anyone who has experienced burnout, a common occupational hazard among helping professionals, has probably had the feeling of being trapped in a web of necessity and impossible demands. Most treatments for burnout consist of stress reduction or setting boundaries. They overlook the fact that burnout usually indicates a state of spiritual aridity, and the effective treatment may call for spiritual renewal or awakening of the soul.

Spiritual aridity is burnout – this is what happens when the energy we are investing in trying to keep control of our lives, to keep things the same, demands more and more from us. As the energy needed to keep things stable increases, we become increasingly depleted and exhausted with the effort. The greater the exhaustion, the closer we get to almost complete mental, physical, social and spiritual collapse. Burnout is a form of deep human suffering at every level – physical, psychological, social, spiritual – which occurs when old ways of being in the world no longer work and start to disintegrate. Nothing less than a complete transformation in our being is called for and, whether we perceive it consciously, or whether it is bubbling along in the unconscious, this fact can be terrifying. The levels of fear, panic, pain and distress in our lives are often unprecedented.”

Nursing Standard Essential Guide July 27 volume 19 no 46 - 2005

“In our deepest moments of struggle, frustration, fear, and confusion, we are being called upon to reach in and touch our hearts. Then, we will know what to do, what to say, how to be. What is right is always in our deepest heart of hearts. It is from the deepest part of our hearts that we are capable of reaching out and touching another human being.” ***Roberta Sage Hamilton***

Cycles of energy expenditure and renewal

Burnout occurs when there is an energy deficit in the human body. When energy output exceeds the energy resources that are entering the body the result is fatigue and exhaustion on all levels: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. In this context ‘energy’ can be defined as anything that nurtures, feeds and inspires one to operate at one’s fullest potential at all levels.

It is important to balance a prolonged period of being fully engaged with putting all of your resources

into a project with a period of recovery and renewal. To avoid burnout set aside time where you can rest and reenergize yourself for the next project. Most people today short-circuit this necessary recovery period and then find they go into an energy deficit that leaves them feeling tired, irritable, stressed, frustrated, depressed and unenthusiastic. Being aware and making good use of sources of energy can help to avert energy deficits.

Sources of energy:

- good diet: green vegetables, fruit, a healthy protein source (organic meat, pulses or nuts) and grains
- clean unpolluted air and water
- regular exercise, preferably outdoors
- sufficient sleep: ideally eight hours per night
- spending time in nature to re-energize and connect with the larger sense of self
- proper placement in community: a healthy sense of self in relation to one's family and community
 - spending time with friends & family, togetherness
- feeding the ego's need to be valued and be seen
- leisure time for relaxation and to explore interests beyond the realm of one's work
- variety in life
- following your heart's path – living your life's purpose

In the west we have substituted the more elemental sources of energy such as living close to nature and following our heart's path, with food and fulfillment of ego desire to give us energy. We eat highly refined food in vast quantities, we engage in competitive activities, seek fulfillment through material gain and prestige and live in a society full of judgement and expectations.

In order to sustain these sources of 'energy' vast amounts of effort is required – often more is expended than gained. We call this energy leakage.

Examples of energy leakage:

- poor diet of refined foods, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, etc. that uses more energy to digest than it provides for the body
- lack of confidence in self – feelings of inadequacy
- trying to live up to expectations imposed on us by others, by society and by ourselves
- lack of clarity: not being clear about what nurtures us and what depletes us in terms of energy (diet, work, lifestyle, the company we keep, etc.)
- not being clear about one's true vocation
- not being able to set boundaries
- reading/watching news/media: this is a big energy leak causing unnecessary fear, worry and anxiety. If you need to hear about something, you will.

In the NGO environment there is very seldom a sense of satisfaction that a job or a project is complete. The problems in environmental and in humanitarian work are ongoing and endless. The sense of fulfillment and satisfaction of having achieved quantifiable goals rarely applies as there is always more to do. This can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed and a feeling of being pressured to keep on going regardless of how depleted one may feel, which leads exhaustion, depression and burnout.

It is imperative for those working in the NGO sector who are experiencing exhaustion and burnout to

explore why they are involved in the work they are doing. Some useful questions to ask are:

- Am I truly passionate about what I am doing?
- Which aspects of the work energize me, and which deplete me?
- Is the energy I receive from doing this work (i.e. satisfaction, enjoyment, reimbursement) in balance with the amount of energy, effort and time I put into the work?
- Am I doing the work out of a sense of guilt or a need to be seen to be doing something 'worthy'?
- Is the work and the environment I work in feeding me on a deeper level?
- Do I feel free to express who I am in my work or am I suppressing parts of myself?

Suppression is a form of blocking the flow of energy in the human system. When one 'edits' the natural flow of expression of who you are by suppressing actions, thoughts and words due to fear of disapproval, societal constraints, lack of confidence, etc. this unexpressed energy builds up and prevents the healthy movement of energy through the body. This impacts on the health of the physical body as well as on emotional/spiritual well-being and can manifest as disease, anxiety, depression, low energy levels or exhaustion.

"Energy needs expression, otherwise the energy will become restless. Energy needs to be creative. Otherwise the same energy, coiled up within you will become diseased, an illness." Osho

Following the heart's path: living one's life purpose

"When you follow your bliss... doors will open where you would not have thought there would be doors, and where there wouldn't be a door for anyone else."

"... if you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in your field of bliss, and they open doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open." Joseph Campbell

When we live according to our heart's path we are a vibrant expression of creative energy. There is a clarity and purpose in our actions and our energy is charged with inspiration, fulfillment and the joy of expressing ourselves and our natural talents. We are in tune with the source of creative energy and thus open to and receiving its energizing flow.

"Nature gives everybody energy which is creative. It becomes destructive only when it is obstructed, when no natural flow is allowed." Osho

When experiencing burnout it is useful to ask oneself:

- What are my dreams?
- What am I passionate about doing?
- When do I feel most energized?
- What is my heart's path?
- Where in my life am I getting waylaid from my heart's path?

"All paths lead nowhere, follow the path with heart." Carlos Castenada

In the end it doesn't matter what kind of work one does. What matters is that you are doing something that allows the expression of your individual energy. What matters is how much heart and how much

presence you bring to your work and how much enjoyment, fulfillment and nurturing you get out of it. The impact on the global energy of a world of content, fulfilled people 'living their bliss' would be profound in terms of the way people treat each other and their environment.

Expectations in NGO organizations

In the Western economic model, productivity is valued and honoured and is seen as more important than the well-being of the individual. The worth of a person is measured by how hard they work and how much they produce. In work situations where people have a low sense of self esteem the need for external affirmation often drives people unconsciously to buy into this heartless dynamic. (I will become a slave to the organisation so that I can feel that I am of some worth to someone.) This might work for a while but at some stage there will be repercussions, disillusionment and a possible soul revolt. Becoming a cog in this machine can be fulfilling for some if they enjoy the work they are doing and are receiving sufficient reimbursement to balance their energy expenditure. However for others becoming part of this 'agreement' can be soul destroying.

A note for employers and managers on expectation

- Examine what expectations you have of your staff.
- Are your expectations reasonable?
- Do you have a right to have expectations of others?
- What underlying dynamics does having expectations of others put in place? (Resentment? Judgement? Undermining of confidence? Playing into guilt?)
- Examine your reaction to and behaviour towards people/staff you believe are not living up to your expectations.
- Are these reactions helpful in your relationship with your staff and do they improve productivity in the long run?

Due to the fact that most NGO work is funded, there can be the expectation for NGO staff to work long hours for less than average pay, for 'the good of the cause'. This is often a situation that is bought into by both the employee and employer. Due to lack of sufficient funding to employ staff, people in NGOs often end up doing work that is not part of their heart's path or natural skill bank, for example a community field worker, who's strengths lie in working with people and community processes may also be required to do a lot of time-consuming admin work. This is often very counter productive as people tend to burn out from the stress of trying to fulfill too many roles and the energy drain of doing work that they are not naturally proficient at. There are people who enjoy and work well with people and others who really enjoy organizing and have good admin skills. Ultimately it is more cost effective and energy efficient to have admin staff in place to support field workers. It is also the responsibility of the staff to set boundaries and the responsibility of organisations to respect those boundaries and be aware of unreasonable expectations.

A basic strategy to ensure the sustainability of human capital

This entails setting strict boundaries and sticking to them – in many employer/employee situations, boundaries are not respected and, in some cases, are never even set. Working within the boundaries of working hours can ensure that people have time to do things that feed other aspects of their being: time with loved ones and time for other activities that add to their enjoyment of life. When all aspects of people's personalities can be expressed and nurtured the result is balance and fulfillment. However,

setting boundaries is not going to solve the problem of burnout and depletion that is due to doing work that is not in accordance with your heart's path or life purpose.

- Have set work hours and stick to them
- Have a set place to work and do not work elsewhere.
- Do not eat and work at the same time. Take a break to eat and give your body 15 minutes after eating to rest and digest before continuing work.
- Do not go to sleep immediately after working. Have some relaxation time before sleeping so you don't take your work into your dreams.
- Avoid stimulants. They are a short-term energy boost fix, that deplete energy in the long run.
- Have two whole days a week off.
- Work for eight hours a day, have eight hours leisure, sleep for eight hours.
- Don't take life too seriously
- Do things that make you laugh – often!

Accessing energy from the source: reconnecting to the dreamtime

I am wondering when last you lay in a forest with your back on the earth looking up at the clouds through the leaves – just being. When last did you slip into that nurturing earthy dream space to experience the deep internal stillness that comes when you allow yourself to ride on the beauty of the moment? It is from these spaces that wisdom and inner knowing emerges effortlessly. It is here that we can access the energy and inspiration to fuel our dreams.

In our Western focus of living from our rational cognitive mind, we live our lives focusing mainly on everyday reality, ignoring the non-verbal sensations and the subtle murmurings of our intuition that come directly from the primal source of energy, the creative force. Indigenous people from all over the world acknowledge the mysterious power of this energy that can guide us in our actions if we are aware of it. There are many names for this primal force: to the Australian Aboriginals it is the Dreamtime, the Taoists call it 'the Tao that cannot be spoken', to Native Americans it is 'Great Spirit, Tantric meditators refer to it as the 'Void' and to quantum physicists it is the 'Quantum Potential'.

I would like to suggest that it is our disconnection from our non-rational pre-cognitive dreaming selves – to our primal source of energy – that is a major cause of disillusionment, depression, energy depletion and burnout. There are many ways of reconnecting to this place of mystery and our unique potentiality. For each person it may be different. It may be through meditation, creating art, spending time in nature, becoming an observer of everyday reality, exercise, singing, etc. The voices of our soul speak to us when we move our awareness from the surface experience of our everyday existence to the still creative centre of our being, the source of our instinctual wisdom and intuitive knowledge.

“To become a true human, one must become conscious of listening and hearing the voice of the Great Mystery speaking through everything, through the sound of a tree, or the bird flying overhead, or the wind in the room, or someone breathing, or someone talking, or a moment of silence. It is simply through listening that one finds the guidance of the great mystery along the path of life.”
Beautiful Painted Arrow – Joseph Rael, Native America Pueblo Indian